Grupo Acontecimiento

The Affirmation of an Other Politics of Emancipation

We would like to take the upcoming legislative elections [in Argentina in 2009] as an opportunity to draw attention to something that, for now, we will call a “difficulty.” Although in the world of institutionalized politics (so-called democracy) this difficulty is taken simply as the norm, for us it is the problematic field of a crucial battle. To pose this issue as a question: How do we operate within a space where there is both the desire to invent a new political radicalism in the here and now—rupturing the given order—and where we are simultaneously forced to remain exterior to the political options that are presented to us on a daily basis? From a general theoretical point of view, the question receives a plausible answer: anything seeking to reshape the foundations of the established system (not only in politics but also in science, art, etc.) never emerges with the support of the clamoring majority, because that majority sustains the very reality that will be subverted. The history of “ruptures” provides us with overwhelming evidence that transformations have always grown on the peripheries and been decentered regarding official time. While we agree with this persuasive argument, we also

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see that it sustains us in a particular place but does not set us in motion. Moreover, if we remain wedded to this conviction alone, it may become a good excuse to escape this world. That is, we accept the need to be temporarily out of place, but we want our being out of place to be productive rather than merely speculative or contemplative. Let’s get to work.

While we want to share our ideas and problems with anyone and everyone, we would like to enter into dialogue specifically with those people who, like us, have not abandoned the conviction that it is both possible and necessary to reassert an emancipatory political thinking-doing. We seek dialogue with those who, like us, recognize that we must place this project on new tracks, given the way in which we find ourselves situated after the late twentieth-century exhaustion of the socialist project. Placing the project on new tracks implies putting forth an idea of emancipation that starts from the principle of equality, while at the same time rescuing politics from the representative system, political parties, and those social movements that exhaust themselves in partial struggles while seeking to reaffirm their identity and particular interests. Finally, and importantly, such a project also requires maintaining distance from the state and questioning the traditional taking of power as the ultimate goal and key to any transformation.

These ideas and principles, among others, form a nebulous territory shared by many who, for the first time, seek a new political experience and by others who recognize the impotence of remaining within the old political dispositifs (including the Left that languishes in the manuals of Marxism-Leninism and various populisms). We include ourselves in this nebula, which is assembled from a multiplicity of experiences and thoughts, including new forms of organization, struggles, and declarations that we see proliferating not only in our own country but in multiple places around the world. Within this nebula we detect a critical fissure that gives us the capacity to produce a break regarding how we respond to the options presented to us by constituted power.

This nebula puts into play our capacity to create a new present political reality. We call this reality a conjuncture, using the term in a weak and general sense. We use it to mean those different moments when the prevailing order (that is, political democracy coupled with the global capitalist system, which we will refer to, following Sheldon S. Wolin, as “Democracy Inc.”) forces us to choose among their limited offerings, which are all offspring of the same dominant dispositif. In each of these moments there are three possibilities: choose among the options, reject them altogether, or
reject these options while proposing and doing other things. With respect to unleashing a new present, we might say these options sketch a scale of intensities—which ranges from indefinite postponement to effective creation—and that this spectrum could well serve to measure the internal conditions of the aforementioned nebula. We, as Grupo Acontecimiento, believe that we are transitioning from the second to the third possibility.

**Indefinite Postponement**

At its core, the option of “indefinite postponement” works within a linear vision of time, as though ascending from a nonexistent, or at least very precarious, point to a crowning moment (raising the question: does this vision genuinely seek an Other politics [Otra política] or simply another politics [otra política]?). In this way a circular movement is constructed that produces sterility, by which we mean the capacity that this perspective has to impede the effective existence of a new emancipatory politics (in a state of rupture with the old). Let us see why.

The principal assumptions of this perspective are that the new is always yet to come and that its presence is faint. Consequently, we must recognize that the overwhelming reality imposed by the given order creates successive conjunctures, and to each of these, we must respond by selecting whichever option offers the most resistance to the worst elements of the system. Of course, this argument offers nothing more than a left-wing variant of the reactionary paradigm (which now circulates as dogma) that takes the fundamental ethical lesson of the twentieth century to be the notion that there will not be anything but horror and disaster (evil) for humanity. Accordingly, there is no use in trying to propose any idea of radical transformation in even a libertarian vein, and the immediate lesson for us is that the only remaining, attainable good is to struggle to avoid evil. This neoconservatism calls itself postmodern, skeptical, and relativist, and it cynically declares that the sole purpose of an election, while not having an intrinsic significance beyond an ephemeral and conjectural one, is simply to avoid the worst. The slogan that summarizes this position states: there is no other remedy than that of “choosing the lesser evil.”

The left-wing variant of this reactionary view adds its own particular twist in believing that supporting the lesser evil tends to facilitate the development of a new political possibility that, it claims, for the time being, is nonexistent. Adherents to this position contend that if the option of the lesser evil gains strength, it weakens the greater evil, and as a result of this
mathematical operation of addition and subtraction, we arrive at a situation that is more amenable to the flourishing of the new. Their argument consists of two parts: it begins by supporting the lesser evil, especially in its demonization of the greater evil, and argues that in this political conjuncture, the consideration of any other option would be playing into the hands of the extreme Right. And yet, they will immediately clarify (to whom? to themselves?) that we should expect nothing from those whom we just supported, nor should we delude ourselves into thinking that they will carry out an authentic emancipatory politics. Such a strategy highlights the opportunistic nature of their conduct, given that they never “lose.” That is, in the face of the eventual (and almost certain) defection of the option that they gambled on, they will return to their original rhetoric stating they never actually trusted those whom they supported.3 . . .

Their basic premise is built on a belief in the nonexistence of a new political radicalism. They assume instead that such radicalism will flourish only in the space that they will have opened in the dominant system between the greater and the lesser evil (even as the latter is openly acknowledged as sterile in itself). We say that it is this outlook that is sterile because it is incapable of forcing a present (with all the consequent risks) that is separate from the political state-time of Democracy Inc. They are convinced that the new will germinate in the shell of the old. We, on the other hand, position ourselves on a trajectory that disrupts those pathways delineated by power. If what the poet says is true, “Wanderer, there is no road, the road is made by walking,” then the proponents of indefinite postponement can be said to never decide to make their road by walking.4 Rather, they always raise the excuse that it is more realistic to take the beaten path because, as the lesser evil, it might bring us closer to the true path. But this can be understood only if we assume that the path has already been made and that it has simply been covered over by the foliage of the system.

The idea of profiting from the internal or secondary struggles of a society is quite old. It is put forward by those who boast of being realists and contrast themselves to contemplative theoreticians. So as not to confuse things, we must clarify whom it is we categorize as adherents to this position of indefinite postponement. They should not be confused with those who strongly believe that the lesser evil is actually a choice that should be decisively supported and fortified to gather strength sufficient to defeat the system. Adherents to indefinite postponement are also not concerned with making a final tally of the support they have offered. Rather they are trying to demonstrate that this decision has created—as expressed in the
central argument they put forth—more favorable conditions for developing new emancipatory politics. Ultimately, those who take this position—and accuse others who distance themselves from such conflicts of being pure theoreticians who “isolate” themselves from reality—do nothing more than surreptitiously engage in that very practice, masked by the veneer of “contact” with the people that they dream of serving. In the moment, they give their word of support, but their declarations do not commit them in any way to real militant tasks, because their position is quite different from those who received their circumstantial devotion. And so they return to their theorizing, arguing that they have no choice but to continue imagining future situations where they would not repeat the same mistakes that led to the socialism of the twentieth century . . .

Finally, this view seeks refuge in the nebulous affirmation (implicit or explicit) of the existence of a “field of the people” [campo popular]. What is this field? We cannot know for sure, but it is based in a global vision, which affirms that every society is split in two. On one side are the rich and powerful who exploit and command and on the other are the oppressed poor who work, are exploited, and must obey. The field of the people is the latter. From this segmentation (which acknowledges internal differences but never undoes this essential distinction), every political situation becomes subjected to this binary division, and whatever is at stake becomes either “favorable” or “not” to the field of the people. This division provides those who sustain this view with the material for the illusion that they are always connected to the people (because the people always inhabit the field of the people). But their connection is not one that supports an emancipatory politics among the people themselves; it is instead a connection that supports any position that governments may take in favor of the field of the people. This division is real and no doubt drawn from a socioeconomic perspective. Who can deny that capitalist society and its dominant political form in the West, which we call Democracy Inc., produces this very division? But who, today, could be so close minded so as not to recognize that this reactionary political ideology (“the field of the people”) works systematically to capture any new political experience and dissolve it within this binary confrontation? To prevent any new political emancipation from taking shape, Democracy Inc. will always use the same blackmail: concede a few government measures that improve the living conditions of the exploited without altering that realism imposed by unmet vital needs.

It is another thing altogether when a government is forced to make a given concessionary measure. But this is not the case here, given that
our analysis refers to the position taken by those who claim to support a new politics of emancipation when confronted with the circumstances unleashed within the normal operation of the economic and political life of a country. Our intention here is rather, as stated in the beginning of this essay, to reflect on the problem of constructing a new present when our political projects are emancipatory and do not have an apparent place. The measures taken by sympathetic governments in favor of the poorest sector (we repeat: except when these measures are born in struggle) and that require short-term conjunctural support in return do nothing to respond to the essential question: how can we subvert existing politics in order to release another emancipatory experience? By contrast, the existing power benefits from this arrangement because it is legitimized through the vote. In other words, Democracy Inc. knows that to benefit a certain sector will increase the clientele of its business when it is time to be revalued and resold in that marketplace called elections.

One final question emerges with respect to the field of the people that highlights the existence of a vicious circle within this position. Those who uphold this position often criticize those who refuse to take sides for not perceiving differences and nuances and for always maintaining that “all options are the same.” Following this logic, those who adhere to the position of indefinite postponement counter that theirs is a more subtle position. By articulating what is happening now (i.e., emancipatory politics equals zero) with what might happen (i.e., emancipatory politics in sustained development) and until the final moment of real and effective engagement with the system (i.e., emancipatory politics in full force), they can construct a spectrum of variations and alternatives that they assume to be richer than “all the options are the same.” Then suddenly the virtue of being open to the tally and value of differences is presented as an absolute injunction that imposes a strictly binary choice: either you are with the field of the people or you are helping the oligarchy to win. It’s black and white. This situation is all the more unusual because everything that they do is contrary to what they say, and the irreparable thing is that they do so within a project that is not their own but that of the system.

When Argentine president Cristina F. de Kirchner summons everyone together to demand that in the given political moment people choose between “the government or the oligarchy,” and the future emancipators repeat, “with the government or the oligarchy,” it is true that the future emancipators are noting a difference (Kirchner is not the oligarchy). But the price that they pay is fatal. They disappear as a political alternative; they
cannot contribute anything new to the political situation, except to clean their conscience; and all their words are useless to prove that their long-term strategic plan has nothing to do with the government, that they are not naive, and that they know very well to not expect anything from this government. Unfortunately, we repeat: pure impotence.

Of course, they have one last card up their sleeve. Unfortunately, that card encapsulates the entire problem. They say: if there were a new emancipatory political experience with real effect already taking place, surely we would have done otherwise, of course! Why do we say that this encapsulates the problem? Because the question is precisely how we conduct ourselves at the founding of something radically different and not only how we use its absence to justify having no alternative but to give in to the politics that the system offers on a daily basis. Here we must decide: either a new emancipatory politics, with its plurality of alternatives, is founded on its own affirmation in the present, and therefore we must devote ourselves to thinking and doing things adequate to that politics, or we make its inexistence the banner that justifies our remaining stuck in the morass of the old. We accept the consequences of choosing the former, but even this choice does not solve the fundamental issue. It simply changes how the question is posed.

**Permanent Rejection**

Permanent rejection would be the closest position to that held by our group, not out of conviction, but rather due to our inability to extricate ourselves from the problems that we have just posed and in which we are still entangled. We are convinced that beginning a new journey requires the affirmation of a minimum platform, one from which to draw a dividing line between our position and what we wish to leave behind. We have synthesized these starting points that we call principles into five basic affirmations. Any politics of emancipation whose content and development is open must be consistent with the principles expressed in these affirmations:

1. Maintain a distance from the state.
2. Act and organize outside of the old party system.
3. Affirm the presentation of people above their representation.
4. Proclaim the autonomy of this politics of emancipation from economic and social structures, taking care not to subject it to the dynamics that struggles assume in those arenas.
5. Begin with the axiom, everyone is equal.
For us it is no small feat to have articulated these, and in a sense, it is an effort to distinguish our positions from those, outlined above, that consistently adapt themselves to the circumstances of the moment because they are not accountable to any fundamental starting point. These principles are incompatible with both the political democracy dominant today and with capitalism as an economic system (in short, with Democracy Inc.). Nonetheless, these principles are never upheld in opposition to Democracy Inc. and for this reason do not acquire their strength from contradicting it. They are self-sustaining instead of being forged in the sterile and tiresome rhetoric of “being against.” Such principles are the first indication that we are not simply in a permanent state of rejection and that we have built a modest, real starting point in the here and now.

The thorny issue before us is how to cultivate a practice linked to these principles, so that we can demonstrate that what we propose and do within a given situation is perfectly compatible with them.

In Argentina we find ourselves in a situation of widespread precarity. What is the significance of this situation? Precarity is a way of life. And for this reason, in the affirmation that an Other emancipatory politics is possible (i.e., the release of a fistful of ideas and principles that divide the waters with respect to the past), we should also understand that such a possibility already exists as an effective reality. Were it not the case, our central question would remain in speculative obscurity, but accepting this premise obliges us to reformulate the problem. The task will no longer be to analyze an abstract possibility but rather to affirm that we already are that political present that begins to subvert politics. Which is not to say, of course, that we are the only ones, nor that we can offer a guarantee of our future destiny. Put simply, we don’t have a problem; we are part of it.

Under such circumstances, we believe the problem cannot be resolved theoretically but instead requires practicality. We can make this demand only with respect to something that actually exists and is not a mere projection of the future—that is, having a different future is contingent on what we do here and now. We understand that we are entangled in a question concerning time, but instead of alienating the present in favor of a future that never arrives, we seek to proclaim that the future is already here and bring it into our current reality. We are not evolutionists. In trying to establish something new, there is no alternative but to act today as if it were tomorrow.

Although this temporal articulation may seem abstract, it is of fundamental political relevance, especially when it comes to making decisions
that seek to chart untrodden paths. All true politics—that is, politics of emancipation—have their own time, one that is different from that of the social movement and the state. In the moments when the ability to open up an Other politics is very weak, we should not cede our own rhythm to what sustains the institutional order. This crucial point is where our path diverges from that of indefinite postponement. If one assumes the non-existence of a new politics, then it is certain that only the effective time of Democracy Inc. will prevail. Furthermore, this ensures that there will be nothing to require that we care for another time. The political dispositif that obliges us to support the lesser evil so as not to be out of step is undergirded by a linear view of time and by a renunciation of our agency—it resigns us to the role of spectator.

As we have seen, some believe that by supporting the lesser evil they weaken the worst of the system. They hope that future circumstances will open a more favorable space for the germination of the new. But if we begin from the idea that the new already exists and that we—among others—are its effective reality, then the decisions we make in a given conjuncture should be based on an analysis of their real effect in the here and now (for instance, whether they fortify a politics in line with our principles). We can, and we must say: distancing ourselves from the conflict between the government and the field of the people (or not having voted for the more populist candidate against another even more reactionary one) is neither escaping reality nor is it isolating ourselves. It is affirming another political time and another political existence. We are simply saying that we refuse to enter a conflict that is not ours (evil versus the lesser evil). Rather, and without any modesty, we affirm that our politics (which already exists) must be taken into account as an actual element of the given situation. This element has the capacity to declare that the real contradiction is not between the terms with which Democracy Inc. tries to seduce us but between those terms and the Other politics, which already exists and of which we form a part. It goes without saying that today it is very difficult for an emancipatory politics to be counted by the ruling order or to be considered as a real element of the situation (and if it ever is, it will redefine this politics from its reactionary perspective). In reality, this affirms the autonomy of the Other politics, which should not tie its destiny to recognition by the state.

Hence, it is pertinent for us to ask once again “what is to be done?” and to abandon that terrain we have inhabited for a long time and which is defined by the question, “what is not to be done?” As a new emancipatory effort, it is impossible to immediately erase the mechanics and rhythms of
that time in which we had affirmed our reason for existing (i.e., in the criticism of the old and the masks that were created to peddle supposed novelities). While we believe it is necessary to maintain this criticism, we are now also shifting it and moving toward becoming protagonists of affirmative acts that work within its consequences. So, what is to be done?

First, it is crucial to continue doing what we were doing, what might be called the dissemination and discussion of ideas, principles, and theoretical horizons that nourish our conceptions of what we mean by emancipatory politics. This front can never be abandoned.

Second, we situate ourselves in direct lineage of the events of December 19 and 20, 2001. The basic principles of our political existence allow us to affirm those days as ones in which a real break was achieved from that political sequence of Democracy Inc. inaugurated by President Raúl Alfonsín in 1984. Democracy Inc. is a political-economic ensemble through which capitalism imposes the law of the market and that of profit onto the structure of the state. This structure, in turn, puts at its disposal all resources for the relief and rescue of the capitalist system when necessary. When the market dominates the state, it is said that the state has “withdrawn,” just as when the state runs to save the economy it is said that the state is “interventionist.” Furthermore, this discourse imposes a simulacrum of political choice to which every citizen must submit: democracy or dictatorship. That is to say: representation, parliament, parties, voting, management of state power, administration, and so on (the lesser evil), or else, terrorism, dictatorship, one-party state, and the like (the greater evil).

Before the events of December 19 and 20, the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo [Madres de La Plaza de Mayo] short-circuited this reactionary alternative by declaring in regard to the Full Stop Law and Law of Due Obedience, that “Alfonsín es lo mismo que Videla” (“Alfonsín is the same as Videla”). In the same vein, in December 2001, the popular explosions in the streets created the impression that a whole Other politics was possible and in effect and thus their essential slogan “Que se vayan todos y que no quede ni uno solo” (“Out with the lot of them and let none remain”). The birth of the procedures of discussion and decision making in popular assemblies, as well as the absence of political parties and trade unions in the lead roles of organizing and directing, marked a turning point that threw the old way of doing politics into question. While it is true that this moment may have been created within the system, its politics—a politics at a distance from the state, outside of the political parties, and composed of new forms of organization and decision making beyond the system of representation—has not suf-
fered (nor will it) the same fate as the system as long as we, alongside many others, have the capacity to maintain and extend the consequences of its appearance.

Third, we seek to build our politics on something more than simply opposing other groups who, in our eyes, relapse into the old way of doing politics. We cannot sustain ourselves by simply arguing with those who, within this space of uncertainty, disagree with us. What we are trying to do is put into play a practical implementation of politics that conforms to our principles. And for this reason, we are convinced that one can no longer speak on behalf of entities as phantasmatic and ethereal as “the people,” “the workers,” “the social movements,” “the field of the people,” “the exploited,” and so on. Everyone speaks on their behalf, but here we have an idea to contribute. Representation is believed to be a political system in which citizens, by means of voting, delegate their power to third persons, called representatives. These delegates are soon criticized because they end up “deviating” from their mandate in order to do the only thing they know and can do—go to work for the system, their real boss. This has always been true, but today it is required at the level of constitutional and commercial law. We think that at the heart of an emancipatory thinking-doing is the disruption of the mechanism of representation, and that to do so is to fundamentally change the subjective position of political enunciation—that is, to cease to speak on behalf of fetishized entities. Any politics that is deployed through the framework of “the people [or any other substitute] want, suffer, or seek . . . ” is destined to reproduce the very system of representation it so ardently seeks to combat. Those who “know” everything that the people want, suffer, or seek cannot aspire to anything other than to being their authentic representative. Let us say it loud: no one knows what “the people” is or what they want. The people, the workers, the unemployed, youth, and so on are entities encapsulated in roles and stereotypes. In order to create an Other politics it will be necessary at some point to ask those who are buried at the bottom of these reified identities what they think. Yes, have them make declarations and speak out; have them speak their mind about their circumstances and problems they face.

A compañero of ours had an experience that seems relevant here. In working with social movements in which militants of varied backgrounds were dedicated to different sorts of undertakings and projects with “the poor,” he proposed convening an assembly meeting with those called “the poor” in order to know what the poor think about the poor. They stipulated two rules for the participants: they could not speak about personal needs
or economics. This led to great confusion. How do we speak about poverty while abiding by these two conditions? Is not poverty a question of needs and economics? The proposal, made during an activity that defined itself as political, was totally absorbed by immediate needs, and as a consequence, politics was always postponed. But what our compañero wanted to release was a subjective political element that was being suffocated in the struggle for survival. For example, a peasant, asked why he had joined the guerrillas, responded that it was not because of poverty (not being ambitious, he was able to manage with very little), but rather because what he could not tolerate was humiliation. It is essential here that instead of talking so much about the needs of the people, of their exploitation and the like, we ask how we are implicated in them, bringing us closer to a politics that puts into effect, and not merely into words, the questioning of representation.

Finally, we recognize the importance of the struggles waged against brutal capitalist exploitation in the name of rights and economic and social demands, and we further declare that they are absolutely just (these are our struggles). Yet our reasons for being are political and emancipatory. Such is the heart of the problem. But this knot is difficult to untie because at its core remains the central question of the emancipatory thinking-doing of an Other politics—that is, how to break with the subordination of the political to the economic and thus break with the old way of doing politics. The network of capitalist production is so powerful that it has taken over entire cycles of our daily life that were once relatively safe, and it often seems impossible to separate the diverse facets of anyone’s life from the economy and its needs. From within this perspective, arguing that politics is radically autonomous from the economy is like saying politics is outside of life itself. And this would be true, if by life we mean the social capitalist link with the state that promotes Democracy Inc. as well as “totalitarian” state capitalism (sometimes called socialism for the twenty-first century). To keep politics at a distance from the state may seem plausible for many, but breaking with the economy seems impossible. But we are committed to making this impossible possible.

Let us take the upcoming legislative elections in Argentina as an example. The dominant discourse of all the political forces, from the most recalcitrant Right to the orthodox Left (including many groups not directly participating in the election), focuses on government programs targeting economic issues or closely linked to immediate needs, all of which essentially also refer to economic conditions. We want to know what happens to politics. Because we see that the participants in this game do not at all
question the current political system of Democracy Inc. (the state as the seat of power, the parties as the only recognized form of “exercising” politics, representation, voting, numbers as the key factor in the validation of ideas, etc.). Nor are they concerned with the political subjectivity that the acceptance of this system implies. This subjectivity is accepted as natural, but it is nothing more than their conception of what approximates politics. For us this question is the central problem for any emancipatory political project. We challenge and seek to dismantle this circuit, and for this reason we maintain that this way of accepting and practicing politics is obsolete. Capitalism has successfully safeguarded its devastating manner of functioning by capturing and reducing politics to a formal legal system capable of ensuring the flow of various programs for economic administration. At the same time that its law of the market and profit destroys everything in its path, it opens up, within the political sphere of Democracy Inc., the possibility that people, understood as isolated, flailing individuals or as members of various minorities, turn to the state in search of protection and recognition of their rights.

In order for this dispositif to function, a reactionary ideology for mass consumption must also be imposed in which men and women should think of themselves as the victims of the inevitable misfortunes and calamities that sweep across the world and in the face of which people feel impotent. From this situation there arises an outcry of the victims, who desperately seek a power (the powerful) to defend them (to represent them) and afford them basic minimum rights. And the state, to whom they go for protection (shrouded as it is in the logic of capitalism), willingly accepts this challenge because it unfurls from within the given conception of its functioning—a conception that redeploy the notion of humanity as something natural, biological, and consisting solely of needs and satisfactions. Victimization, making biological life the supreme value and primary right superseding all others, and the ensuring of the rights of every group with respect to their identity, all form part of a rigid explanatory framework that we fall back on in order to explain why everything in this world is economic, why social Darwinism reigns, and why politics has been swallowed up by capital.

We should not forget that within this alliance (between the state and capitalism) there arises an option other than the hegemonic one in the West (Democracy Inc.), which is branded “totalitarian.” It is nothing essentially new, except that here the state must guarantee the existence of a stable military-economic bureaucracy in order to defend itself against the whirlwind of the market and in the hopes of not being excluded from the capi-
traditionalist world. Otherwise (as is the case with China), the state may develop a market of its own in open defiance of Western powers. All roads lead to capital... We therefore believe that it is no coincidence that those who enact this type of politics form a political class.

Here we affirm that struggle is political. We must undo the view that reduces politics to the dichotomy of state and economy. We must subvert precisely what no one notices when they cast a vote. “What is to be done?” has a clear direction. Restating the question that simultaneously calls us and oppresses us: How do we operate within a field where there is both the desire to invent a new political radicalism in the here and now—rupturing the given order—and where we are simultaneously forced to remain exterior to the options that are presented to us on a daily basis? We are now ready to make a few clarifications in this regard. If the fate of all invention—to risk an unprecedented hypothesis—is that it retroactively confirms the effects it produces, then the only way to practice this invention is to act as if its existence is already accomplished by its mere enunciation. That is, it is necessary to sustain invention with a deed or action consistent with its declaration.

Accordingly, we must reformulate part of our question. Instead of speaking of the desire to invent in the here and now, we must instead say that the difficulty lies in how to operate in a field in which a new political radicalism already exists in the here and now and obliges us to stay outside of the options presented to us on a daily basis. This is not a small difference. One must start by saying that there exists another way of thinking-doing politics, that there exist new thoughts and practices and that these replenish emancipation from often unthinkable angles.

**Rejection of Existing Options while Proposing and Doing Other Things**

Of course, our central question will change as we develop a plan to move ourselves from the role of spectators, simply hoping for an Other politics to exist, toward considering ourselves as already part of this Other politics. Similarly, the question of being exterior to the processes that are presented to us on a daily basis will not be the same if we have decided that our essential role is political, not that of community management or assistance.

We do not define ourselves by being against voting. Nor would we ever campaign against voting. Nevertheless, we maintain that elections are one more piece of the existing political system that at the moment of voting crudely demonstrates the mechanism for producing and managing consen-
sus in the population, beginning with the expansion and strengthening of what is called public opinion. It is not news to anyone that the broadcast and print media are made up of powerful corporations that connect the state with the economy, forming “public opinion,” and that they then settle their conflicting interests on election days. We have already pointed out that this media-institutional-economic framework is what is left intact and unaddressed by the entire political spectrum when, like little soldiers, they all march together to the election booth looking to garner the quantity of votes that will allow them to carry out whatever kind of fanciful speculation they desire. And this fact is not even hidden; at the end of any election day everyone shouts in unison: “It was a triumph of democracy.”

In 2006, Mexico was to elect a new president. Andrés Manuel López Obrador of the PRD (Partido de La Revolución Democrática) was the candidate of the Left, and he positioned himself well to challenge the power of both the Partido de La Revolución Institucional (PRI) candidate, Ernesto Madrazo, and the conservative candidate of officialdom, Felipe Calderon of the PAN (Partido de Acción Nacional). Since the public appearance of the Zapatistas in January 1994, the PRD had maintained friendly ties with the rebel forces. But due to the attitude displayed by PRD members who supported López Obrador—most importantly, that displayed by Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, who instructed his son, Lázaro, then senator, to vote against the San Andrés Accords, which would have created a constitutional framework for indigenous autonomy—the Zapatistas decided to distance themselves from López Obrador. Nevertheless, among those who had sympathized with Zapatismo, specifically among the middle class and intellectuals, there was a generalized position of explicit support for the candidacy of López Obrador. The leftist candidate’s program was to end the neoliberal policies of then president Vicente Fox, revise a series of privatizations, give full democratic freedoms to the people, and so on. No one suspected that the EZLN would turn its back on the candidate who promised significant change to the reigning right-wing politics. Internationally, López Obrador was associated with the wave of both governments’ and peoples’ struggles across Latin America calling for an end to the dependency created by the Reagan era that had begun fifteen years prior, movements symbolized by the election of presidents Luis Inácio “Lula” da Silva, Hugo Chávez, Cristina Kirchner, Rafael Correa, Evo Morales, and so on. López Obrador even had the explicit support of Chávez, who claimed that López Obrador would dethrone Fox and his gang. At the very least, the Zapatistas were expected to remain silent, which could then be interpreted as tacit support.
During 2005 and 2006, however, there was a rupture within Zapatismo that few have paid attention to. It is a rupture with the entire political class and the “progressive” intellectuals connected to it. This rupture is embodied in the Sixth Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle and the implementation of the Other Campaign, which attempted to spread Zapatismo throughout the entire Mexican territory and to create, in the middle of the electoral campaign, a distinctly other campaign, in order to repudiate the “progressive” candidate but also to question the entire political and institutional system of Mexico. The Zapatistas sought to deploy an Other politics, which takes as its central focus the idea that they must listen to people, to give them the word, and that these people in turn listen to the Zapatista word.

We believe that Zapatismo is a politics that has introduced new revolutionary ideas in Latin America unlike any other experience in the region. It is easy to see the capacity of some of the Zapatistas’ ideas to transcend the particular frames in which they were forged (such a capability is essential to any politics that aspires to an emancipatory dimension), and this capacity allows these ideas to be read, understood, and practiced as much in an indigenous community made up of thirty families as in the middle of Buenos Aires. The truth is that the aforementioned rupture was going to isolate Zapatismo from “progressive” intellectuals and civil society as a whole, and the Zapatistas knew they had to face this consequence. They knew there would come a time when they would have to distinguish between the old way of doing politics and something incipient and new. They knew that the value of politics does not depend on its numbers and that for something different to germinate it must be supported by all who proclaim it. Fundamentally, they also knew that power and the media were waiting for that moment, because whatever choice they made they would end up losing. Why? Because if they had supported López Obrador, then the political and institutional structure of Mexico would devour them, and if they did not support him, what would happen is what in fact did: isolation.

The case of the Zapatistas, in its own way, feeds into the central problem that guides our discussion. It is directly connected to a structural political dispositif. That is to say, it is recognizable as existing and effective in any situation where a new political existence seeks to affirm its rights to rupture with the constituted order. That is why it is possible to bring it to bear on our political reality in order to help us think about the issue that engulfs us. In our analysis of that line of thinking, we described how this mecha-
nism works as indefinite postponement. One of the excuses used to defend and preserve the unity of the given political order is the recognition that differences will always coexist within that struggle between greater and lesser evil. Thus, any precarious political existence that seeks to subvert that order will be undermined by the argument that its existence is null and void and that the lesser evil can do “something” (and for this reason it is always better to side with the lesser evil than to stay isolated in intellectual limbo). Some even dare to say that this “something” can create better conditions for the new to germinate. On the contrary, we affirm the need to confront and dissolve this option and the consequent pressure to acknowledge hopeful “differences.” It is therefore pertinent to bring to bear the actual sequence the Zapatistas underwent three years ago, as they were facing the same political dispositif.

Addressing this issue, Subcomandante Marcos, the Zapatista spokesperson, stated: “That was what bothered a lot of people the most, that we would make a clean sweep of it all and we would not recognize the differences or the nuances that they wanted.” Confirming that the Zapatistas had turned away from the past, he added: “We no longer make the usual distinctions that we had always made between those who were bad and others who were good. No, they are all the same.” The most astonishing thing is that the “progressive” spectrum, leftist intellectuals and others who out of some sense of duty utilized the word emancipation in their speeches, reacted to this decision of the Zapatistas by dusting off the quintessential reactionary argument: the Zapatistas’ project was utopian and out of place in Mexican reality, and the extreme Right would be the only group to benefit if the Left did not support López Obrador. But even more amazing is that Marcos had been able to demonstrate an effective trajectory and to have a substantive presence over the last fifteen years and is aware that the Other politics, and the Other politicians, are still extremely fragile. The Zapatistas also clarify how they had already tried to articulate this new politics with the conjunctural support of power but, “the assessment we made was that up there, above, there was nothing, that we had already invested much of the history of our compañeros and our efforts in negotiating with the political powers and that there had been no results.”

We advise all those who wish to change the course of politics as it operates today, who fervently desire not to give up on the possibility of a new emancipatory thinking-doing (whatever new ideas and experiences are proposed), that this nebula exists solely because of our determination to
defend and be true to its premises, however minimal. The arguments that it does not exist, that it is weak, and that it is ineffective are the familiar territory of the Right, which sows only the seeds of impotence.

For example, we know that one of the principles that sustained Zapatismo was advocating the end of political parties. When asked if he “imagines a country without political parties,” Marcos answers: “Ah, yes! Not only do I imagine it, I passionately desire it, and we will do everything possible so that it may be so. . . . The politicians who dedicate themselves to politics will have to be totally different. And unfortunately there are no references in the world so as to say, ‘it will be like such and such place.’” Let us measure the full force of this situation: an emblematic leader of Zapatismo says, after fifteen years of open militancy in Mexico, that there is no real referent that can be used as an example of how a new politician (a nonpartisan politician) of the new politics would act. And it is true, because it is a condition of the matrix of all radical invention that there is no referent to lead the way. Rather, it must be created; otherwise, it will not come into this world. It sustains itself only within the passionate desire in which it exists. But in order not to confuse this desire with a simple wish, we maintain that, however minimal it may be, there are clear signs that this process already exists.

This is also Marcos’s position when he affirms: “We’re not talking about a utopia, of what would happen if we got rid of political parties. The proof of this can already be seen in what has been achieved in the Zapatista communities, which has been achieved without professional politicians.” This will be similar to what was achieved in the open process during December 19 and 20, 2001, in Argentina, and to what the French will report about May 1968 and the Brazilians in the experience of the landless movement, and so on.

Finally, the Zapatistas are not about to campaign against voting, and so in the Mexican presidential elections of 2006, they simply invited people to think. In an interview, Marcos was asked whether he was inviting the people to vote or to abstain:

No, I’m inviting the people to think, because the only thing being avoided here is that people think. The whole problem is that one must either vote or not, rather than think about what proposals are being made by this or that side. Because when you think about it, you are going to say, “Well, why doesn’t this system give me an option? Yet somehow I have to choose among three. So if none satisfies me, I will choose the least worst. Where is democracy?” That is the danger presenting itself, and those people who will show
up to vote will be carried away, either because there is no other solution or because there is nothing else.10

What Is to Be Done?

The objective of these reflections, interspersed with a certain declarative and assertive spirit, is twofold. First, we want to explain a problem that Grupo Acontecimiento faces, one we wish to share with other groups, organizations, and people who do not fit into the given order of things (or who do because of life’s inertia but who nevertheless are in search of new horizons). In other words, we wish to share this problem with all those who from our perspective form that nebula that gravitates toward an Other emancipatory politics. We view this issue, which we have formulated and continue to reformulate by means of exposition, as a real impasse for our development. We prefer to face it rather than to avoid it or postpone it.

The purpose that has motivated us for more than seventeen years is to try to remain faithful to our belief that a new politics of emancipation is not only necessary but also entirely possible. We call this politics the Other politics, to mark a dividing line with Democracy Inc., which imprisons us and which, at election time, accentuates its spectacular side for the media and television that obscenely display it. All of our effort is now concentrated on undoing the knot of the lesser evil imposed by the dominant political ideology. This position ends up complementing the old political currents of populism, including its leftist variants, with the Communist Party as its clearest model after World War II (which was the tireless promoter of official orders before each and every election to vote for the most “progressive” bourgeois candidate). We do not want anything to do with this kind of politics and those politicians who explicitly state that they have decided to accept the rules of the game of Democracy Inc. and now seek to develop their strategies within this format, while safeguarding the possibility of eventually developing it enough to achieve “radical democracy” with “social inclusion,” which at best means nothing more than assuring people that they will be able to continue selling their labor for a miserable salary.

To fight this battle we must cease to inhabit the space of the possible and place ourselves in a space where it is affirmed that the Other politics already exists, not only because of all the symptoms of this existence exhibited across the globe ever since the French May 1968, but also because of our own presence as Grupo Acontecimiento and that of many others that persist in this direction. This change of what we call the subjective posi-
The assertion decisively moves us away from the place where we would have once announced what needed to be done to arrive at this other place, to one where we now say that it already exists, and we are building it.

From this new position we can affirm:

- an Other politics of emancipation exists in our country (and in the world).
- refusing to choose the lesser evil does not benefit the most recalcitrant Right. (The repeated deployment of this politics of the lesser evil has never done anything but reinforce the Right, and there is not a single example that disproves what we say.)
- no destituent force exists other than the one that dismisses, hinders, and diverts any efforts to break free of Democracy Inc.
- our wish to definitively exit the circle that hampers the creation and expansion of new, rebellious and libertarian ideas. That circle condemns us to criticize the past, plan objectives for a future that never arrives, and live in a present that is stuck playing the system’s game, with its teams, rules, and referees.
- that we have inherited a conceptual knot from the old way of doing politics, and we need to untie it in order to release new possibilities, which is what we are trying to do in this collective statement.

One has to derail the argument that says until another option with prominent new emancipatory politics exists, we must continue to support the lesser evil. This position is perfectly understandable for those who want to continue clinging to the past. But for those who declare they aspire toward a new emancipatory politics, it is unacceptable. If that argument did not exist, many of those who argue in this election over which candidate to vote for (over who is the least rotten in the cesspool) and then proceed to vote in a sad and apathetic act that even they themselves do not believe in would see that the Other politics that already exists could be strengthened by the inventiveness and creativity that it requires of us all.

—Translated by Ramor Ryan

Notes

1 This essay was written by Grupo Acontecimiento during the run-up to the July 2009 legislative elections in Argentina.—Ed.

3 This translation is an abridged version of a longer article by the same name that appeared in Revista Acontecimiento, nos. 36–37 (2009): 7–29.—Ed.


5 Raúl Alfonsín was the first elected president of Argentina after the military dictatorship headed by Rafael Videla (1976–1981).—Ed.


7 Subcomandante Marcos, interviewed by Carlos Loret de Mola on “Primeiro notícias,” Televisa, May 9, 2006.

8 Castellanos, Corte de Caja, 83.

9 Ibid., 82.

10 Subcomandante Marcos, Statements Made on Mexican Television Station Televisa, May 9, 2006.