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The State of Social Movements in Latin America

An Interview with Raúl Zibechi

Jeff Abbott

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Raúl Zibechi is a Uruguayan journalist and one of Latin America's leading political theorists. He is an international analyst for Brecha newspaper in Uruguay and a professor at Multiversidad Franciscana de América Latina. Zibechi has written numerous books on social movements and politics across the Americas, including Territories in Resistance: A Cartography of Latin American Social Movements and Dispersing Power: Social Movements as Anti-State Forces. Toward Freedom online publication recently spoke with Zibechi about the impacts of the progressive/left "pink tide" governments in South America, the rise of the far right, the politics of extractivism in oil, gas, and mining industries, and how women and youth represent the hope of building a new world. Of particular interest to Zibechi in this interview are the ways in which social movements in the region have revitalized themselves in the face of state co-optation and the new right-wing wave.

Jeff Abbott: What is the state of the social movements in South America after a decade of Progressivism?

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Raúl Zibechi: In the last 10 years social movements have been suffering a growing debilitation and a tendency to disorganization, with the exception of women's movements, specifically feminist movements in the southern cone of South America, and indigenous movements, which both maintain strength.

I believe that the politics of the progressive governments, specifically the politics of subsidies or the monetary transfers to popular sectors to integrate leaders of the movement into the governments have produced a great debilitation, the movements have been demobilized to a certain extent. What's more is that the progressive governments have appropriated the discourse of the social movements: They speak of human rights, they speak of agrarian reform, and there are governments such as that of Bolivia that define themselves as the government of social movements.

In a recent meeting of the Consejo Latinoamericano de Ciencias Sociales [Latin American Council of Social Sciences, a non-governmental research organization], [former Argentine President] Cristina Fernandez said that the social movements began in 2003 with the government of Kirchner. Before there were only *piqueteros* [largely unemployed workers demanding political and social change through protests and road blockades], she said. I believe here there is a gross error, but more so there is a politics to co-opt and subordinate social movements. The result is that the majority of movements are very debilitated.

JA: Has extractivism further spread under these Progressive governments?

RZ: It is important to recognize that extractivism is the most important model in Latin America. Every country with governments from the right or left carries out extractive projects. But the character of the progressive governments is that they have done nothing to leave extractivism behind.

For example, Venezuela today depends more on petroleum than before Chávez arrived to power. In Brazil, extractivism has generated a great deindustrialization and caused an industrial crisis

RZ: It is a very young movement. These meetings reveal a presence of the youth and a change in the traditional indigenous culture. As you know very well, a movement cannot reproduce the hegemonic culture. A social movement is also a change in the culture. The Zapatistas held a meeting of women, where the indigenous culture is very patriarchal, and then a meeting about cinema – it reveals that there is an interesting cultural change occurring.

JA: And are you seeing similar changes in communities of Latin America?

RZ: The Mapuche are in a very interesting process. I have met with a collective called *Comunidad de Historia Mapuche*, which is a group of Mapuche who studied in university and then returned to their communities and used their studies to strengthen the communitarian character.

Catrillanca, who was just killed, was less than 30-years-old. The most dynamic group today is the *Alianza Territorial Mapuche*, and is basically all youth. The other case I mentioned is that of MST where the women, youth, and LGBT members are playing a central role. This is an important cultural change that is modifying the political culture of the movements.

things, which have state-like characteristics. Yet they conserve their lands, where they are putting down limits against mining.

Here is the more conceptual element: Without land and territory, which are two distinct things, it is very difficult for a movement to sustain itself in the long term. This is because the land is what allows you to construct non-capitalistic social relations, or said another way, communitarian. These social relations, which are distinct from the hegemonic social relations, are what allow you to convert land into territory. The difference between land and territory is what you do with the land; with the land you can construct a new or different world than the hegemonic [world].

JA: Like the Zapatistas.

RZ: Like the Zapatistas, or like the Landless Workers Movement (MST) in Brazil. The MST, for example, was greatly debilitated during the government of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva. But in the last two years, they have begun a process from the base where the women, youth, and members of the LGBTQ community began to organize within the movement so that their demands would be heard throughout the movement. In this manner, the process inverted, and the movement began to be revitalized.

Why did it become revitalized? Now there were new social actors – the youth, women, and LGBTQ, began to activate, and curiously, especially for a campesino culture, these elements served to strengthen the movement. This process has only newly begun, but it begins from a new place that speaks very well of the movement, and successfully opened the movement to these topics.

Today we are in a new type of period. Today women and the youth hold the central position in all Latin America. The movements that have permitted and advanced the organization of youth and women are those that have revitalized. The meeting of Zapatistas in Morelia or the meeting of women in March of [2018] is a case in this direction. Here is a fundamental element: Half of the Zapatistas are less 20-years-old. It is a movement that has a future.

JA: It is a young movement now?

caused by agroindustry. The primary exports of Brazil are soy and iron ore.

The extractivism model has been strengthened by Progressivism. Not because of the fault of progressive governments, because it is the hegemonic form in the region, but rather because Progressivism did not know how to leave this model. This is an important criticism. We had hoped that progressivism would have done something different, but rather [what the progressive governments] did was more of the same.

This is a grave issue, because extractivism has many problems, such as environmental [problems], which we know. Yet, extractivism produces an increasingly polarized society. The topic of the one percent is directly connected to extractivism, which is dependent on the financing of the economy. [Extractivism] divides the communities and doesn't provide people with dignified work. This is what we have seen in the last 10–15 years with both progressive and conservative governments.

JA: How has this contributed to the rise of the right wing in the last few years?

RZ: I believe the rise of the right is a consequence of the empty politics generated by the progressives, which paralyzes [social] movements. There is no current situation where the movements are in conditions to immediately respond to the rise of the right.

The panorama is very complex. I can give you the example of Spain. A very strong social movement emerged in 2011 in Spain. Yet the party Podemos has reduced the social movement to an institutional terrain – it was debilitated. And shortly after, a new right-wing party was born, and today they have entered parliament with no less than 12 seats in parliament. When the movements leave the cause and when they leave their politicization, the right wing will take advantage of this space.

Today in Brazil, there is not one movement that is capable of confronting Bolsonaro, neither in the terrain of cause nor in ideas. The movements are in a very defensive situation and they are not

in conditions to confront the mobilizations of the sympathizers of Bolsonaro.

I believe that there will still be a good amount of time before activists are able to confront the far right. It will not be this year or next year [in 2018 or 2019]. And we'll see.

For me, history moves like a pendulum. Right now, the pendulum is moving to the right. And right now, the conditions are being created for the movements to retake the offensive.

JA: With this pendulum, we can talk about 1968 and the movements against the dictatorships across the region?

RZ: If we learn from history, what we need to do is recuperate the work of the base; recuperate work in the barrios or in communities; the work directly with the population, of organization, of political formation, and the capacity to see not only the short term, but the long term.

The great problem that occurred with the progressive governments is that the movements no longer had a strategic vision – I personally do not like the word “strategic,” since it is a military character. But a long-term vision.

This is what the Zapatistas mean when they talk of the *tormenta* [storm]. They say that there are elections, there are new affairs, but we cannot forget that in the medium to long term, we live in an ugly political and economic [reality] that is necessary to confront. So, everything that we do today has to be thought of in this medium/long term. Movements need to think about the economy: how are we going to sustain ourselves? How are we going to resolve the problem of water? How are we going to resolve the problem of security? And a whole series of aspects that today do not have solutions, but in 5–10 years we can think of means of resolving the problems.

During the dictatorships, the movements strengthened themselves. In the short term, the electoral process was eliminated from the agenda. In a dictatorship you cannot think of the next election. You have to think of what makes you stronger in the long term.

JA: Speaking of the Zapatistas, how do they reflect the history of the resistance of the Indigenous movements in Latin America?

RZ: The indigenous and African American communities know perfectly well that regardless of who is elected their situation will not change unless they themselves change. The only alternative they have is to strengthen their autonomy, their capacity to organize, and their capacity to make decisions. Naturally this process brings us beyond the immediate and what occurs in the electoral process.

To me this is a very important question, because it places us in a situation where the political agenda is not being made by those in power, but rather the people. I believe that we are in a good situation when something like this occurs. [...] If I, as a movement, if I play all my forces in the short term – for an electoral process, as an example – then I am disarming for the long term. I believe in this equilibrium we can resolve the problems of today, but in a way that does not create mortgages for the next year or for five years.

JA: What examples are there other than the Zapatistas of indigenous communities that have managed to build their autonomy?

RZ: I see a very interesting process in southern Chile, where I am now. The Mapuche world has created conditions to maintain their mobilization of the Mapuche nation in the long term. For example, in the last few days the case of the community of Temucuicui where the *Carabineros* assassinated Camilo Catrillanca has been in the news. The Mapuches of this zone in the last 10 years have recuperated one hundred thousand hectares of land. The recuperation of land is an element that permits the strengthening of a people or a union of communities to establish long-term projects.

Another example is the case of the Nasa [indigenous communities] of the southern Colombian department of Cauca, who have had many difficulties because they have done many contradictory