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Geopolitics and Contemporary Art, Part II: The Nation-State as the Possible Container for Global Struggles

Continued from "Geopolitics and Contemporary Art, Part I: From Representation's Ruin to Salvaging the Real"

One of the consequences of globalization and the deterritorialization of financial capital has been that the decisions that affect world citizens are now made by representatives of a corporate oligarchy untethered from the direct interests of nation-states. Secret negotiations and treaties have taken the place of constitutions and other forms of social contract, becoming the dominant method for managing natural resources, transnational security, copyright, privatization, food autonomy, financial fluxes, drug patents, and so forth. The International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the Group of Seven, the GATT, and other organizations and agreements, like the TTIP and the TPP, make up our de facto global government, one designed to serve the interests of transnational corporations, banks, and investment firms. What does the loss of national autonomy mean for the project of self-legislation more generally? What sort of sovereign practices remain available to nation-states when most of their historical mandate has been remanded to the coordinating committee for transnational accumulation?

At the peak of the antiglobalization movement in 2000, Frederic Jameson argued that despite its faults, "the Nation-State today remains the only concrete terrain and framework for political struggle." This was so despite "the recent anti-World Bank and anti-WTO demonstrations" which, although they seemed "to mark a promising new departure for a politics of resistance to globalization within the US," nevertheless left it "hard to see how such struggles in other countries could be developed in any other fashion than the 'nationalist' [one]."[1] This was the case because the only apparent alternatives to national struggle were cultural forms of resistance based on religion or a general defense of "our way of life." And these are limited by the lack of a universalizing frame.

In other words, for Jameson, the struggle still boiled down to a conflict between the "social" and the "economic," and, for this reason, the forms of social cohesion that preceded globalization, alongside national myths and narratives, remained an indispensable precondition for any effective and long-lasting political struggle. But twenty-five years into neoliberal reforms, the liberalization of the market, and the global homogenization of culture, it is worth asking if the nation-state can still serve as such a framework. Can the nation-state still be the container for defending the commons – infrastructure, biodiversity, natural resources, traditional knowledge, the means of

Several "Merry Crisis" tags appeared in Athens during riots in December 2008.

production and reproduction – against the ravages of transnational corporations?

As the nation-state has become a proxy for global corporate and oligarchic interests, what precisely is at stake is the legitimacy of governments and their institutions. Following the Invisible Committee, must we wage war against any and all infrastructure that organizes life by suspending and sacrificing worlds, in order to delegitimize institutions which rely on our consent to operate and oppress? This would involve creating zones of dissent and then establishing strategic links to other dissident zones so as to pursue secession through a different geography than the nation-state – not by revindicating the local, but against the global:

> As the Zapatistas have shown, the fact that each world is situated doesn't diminish its access to the generality, but on the contrary is what ensures it. The universal, a poet has said, is the local without walls. There seems, rather, to be a universalizing potential that is linked to a deepening per se, an intensification of what is experienced in the world at large. It is not a question of choosing between the care we devote to what we are constructing and our political striking force. Our striking force is composed of the very intensity of what we are living, of the joy emanating from it, of the forms of expression invented there, of a collective ability to withstand stresses that is attested by our force.[2]

This would mean exerting the power of society over the state – not to free the individual from the social (one of the main principles of neoliberalism), but to take seriously the idea that the individual can be freed only through the social. That is to say, the individual's well-being always depends on the collective's well-being, and vice versa. As Castoriadis put it,

> to abolish heteronomy does not signify abolishing the difference between instituting society and instituted society – which, in any case would be impossible – but to abolish the *enslavement* of the former to the latter. The collectivity will give itself the rules, knowing that it itself is giving them to itself, that these rules are or will always at some point become inadequate, that it can change them.[3]

Undoubtedly the nation-state arose as one such set of self-given rules. The question today is whether these have become inadequate, and thus how and in what way they should be changed.

The Impossibility of the Nation-State

A remnant of the anti-imperialist and decolonizing struggles from the 1960s and '70s, the Palestinian struggle is one that is still being fought within the horizon of the nation-state, as ending Israeli occupation is understood to mean the recognition of Palestine as a sovereign, self-determining nation. In this respect, the so-called "two-state solution" is really a "two nation-state solution," and it is interesting to consider the way this struggle has been variously framed over the decades as political vocabularies have changed.

In the 1960s, the armed struggle of the Palestinians was posited as a manifestation of anti-imperialism in the service of national liberation, and it elicited the corresponding solidarity from the international Left. In the 1980s and '90s, the Palestinians were cast as seeking recognition on the way towards the restitution of their human rights, including the right of return.

Today, and in contrast to the 1970s, militarism and armed struggle are almost always perceived as "mistaken" or as a suspicious form of politics because of their association with terrorism and dictatorship. Instead, solidarity with the Palestinian cause is expressed through the International Solidarity Movement, as activists around the world act as human shields protecting Palestinian houses slated for demolition and document abuses on the ground in an effort to give visibility to the numerous injustices perpetrated in the Occupied Territories. There is also the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) campaign against Israel, a form of putting pressure on Israel inspired by a similar movement against apartheid in South Africa.

In spite of the fact that the idea of nationhood, cultivated through memories passed on from generation to generation, is what unites Palestinians inside and outside the Middle East, facts on the ground make it increasingly difficult to envision a two-state solution. According to many observers, Israel-Palestine is a binational state governed by Israel in two distinct ways. Israel governs Palestinians not as an occupying power – which, according to international human rights law, would imply being responsible for providing services such as healthcare, education, and so forth – but through differential governing, with Palestinians as "impaired citizens," according to Ariella Azoulay. In her account, Israel actually governs Palestinians differentially through a set of mechanisms that deny them citizenship by treating them as exceptions to the rule.[4]

Azoulay shifts the paradigm of analysis by

highlighting the discrepancy between considering Palestinians as citizens of a hypothetical Palestinian state and considering them as citizens of the actual state of Israel that currently governs them. From this perspective, in the territory in which Palestinians live, power is programmatically deployed to create a state of suspension premised on violence and the threat of violence. Through targeted assassinations, the destruction of infrastructure and homes, violent arrests, restrictions on travel, bombings from the air, nighttime raids, expropriation, and the prohibition of demonstrations, the existence of Palestinians remains on the threshold of catastrophe, a chronic and prolonged situation which is known to the locals in the West Bank and Gaza as "the tyranny of incertitude."

In fact, the way Palestinians are governed by Israel is less exceptional than characteristic of nation-states in the era of neoliberalism. Nation-states often resort to the logic of exception as a way of obscuring their own relative powerlessness. According to Aihwa Ong, neoliberal governments treat different populations differentially, creating a diversity of zones, each with different regimes and levels of exception. She calls this model "graduated sovereignty":

> The model of graduated sovereignty shows that it is not so much a question of market versus the state, but that market society at our particular moment in history entails the existence of some areas in which the state is very strong and its protections very significant, and other areas where it is near absent, because these zones must be flexible vis-à-vis markets, or else they become structurally irrelevant. What we see then is a system of displaced sovereignty, a model of galactic governance that may be traceable back to premodern roots in Southeast Asian trading empires.[5]

The differential governing of Palestinians in Israel, as an extreme form of graduated sovereignty, is thus different only in degree from the rest of the world's experience, rather than different in kind. The Palestinian case is simply one of the more extreme examples of differential governing, which manifests as episodes of targeted violence against a backdrop of manufactured precariousness justified by an underlying ethnic and religious narrative. But just as the Palestinian National Authority is sometimes described as a proxy for non-national

Palestinians climb Israel's separation wall to attend prayers at Al-Aqsa Mosque, July 26, 2013. Photo: Oren Ziv.

interests, the same is said, for example, of the Mexican government, which has been described as a "failed state" because it is not fully sovereign in its own territory. If Palestine is governed according to foreign and Israeli interests, Mexico is governed according to the interests of transnational corporations and organized crime, two pillars of the international oligarchy that are often difficult to distinguish in practice. Arguably, neither is a case of state malfunction, but rather, they exemplify the way in which nation-states operate under neoliberalism, as instruments for denigrating or even exterminating forms of life in accordance with the needs of oligarchs.

This model of governance emerged alongside new regionalizations and territorializations that began in the 1960s and '70s as a response, arguably, to the success of the workers' movement in leveraging first-world national communities to raise the price of labor. The resulting capital flight arranged the world into clusters of innovation and progress, or alternatively, of destitution and poverty. With its ability to go beyond national divisions, the globalized market integrated first and third worlds, forcing certain areas to "develop" by creating pockets of wealth and cultural sophistication within the third world, and areas of destitution and misery within the first. The result is that it is increasingly difficult to think in terms of first- and third-world nations – or even developed and underdeveloped ones – rather than in terms of territories and zones connected in various degrees to global processes. There are thus zones where the extraction of surplus value is particularly intense, coexisting side by side with abandoned zones or pacified spaces: Milan and Campania, Tel Aviv and the Gaza Strip, San Diego and Tijuana, Los Angeles and Skid Row. The question then arises: How can the destitute territories and enclaves be politicized? What would that politicization look like?

New Forms of Commonality

In the 1960s, the notion of underdevelopment served as a frame uniting the disparate efforts of third-world countries to utilize state intervention as an instrument of development and progress. In contrast, current "underdeveloped" areas are not abandoned by the state but governed differentially (as targeted neglect, strategic betterment, cultural intervention, violent dispossession, and so forth), and according to the demands of the global market. Through programs geared at "developing" these areas in

Anti-TTIP protesters gather in Berlin, May 6, 2014. Photo: Mehr Demokratie/Flickr.

Third-annual worldwide protest against Monsanto's monopoly, May 2015. Protesters claim Monsanto controls 90 percent of the seed market in the US.

the name of progress, international financial organizations, governments, and NGOs systematically undermine subsistence by subsidizing agriculture in the form of transgenic seeds and chemical fertilizers, and by creating forms of labor – whether on industrial farms, in tourist complexes, or in sweatshop factories – that destroy traditional forms of community organization, seeking to transform native peoples into consumers. These kinds of state and nonstate intervention reproduce global discrimination and poverty. "Development" nowadays means dispossessing peoples of their lands, providing differentiated (low-quality, in this case) access to healthcare, education, and employment, destroying traditional knowledges, and undoing communal forms of living and the idea that life can be independent and individualized. Contemporary "development" creates novel forms of intolerable interdependence, destroying the environment and transforming resources into privileges to which part of the population has access based on the dispossession or destruction of communities elsewhere.

If in the 1960s and '70s emancipation meant an alternative to capitalism and a means to overcome colonized identities, realize equality of rights, and de-repress sexuality, today emancipation means equality in the sense of achieving equal rights of access to goods, services, a living wage, and other kinds of privileges like water, electricity, and infrastructure. And yet, access to these kinds of commodities and their corresponding infrastructure implies an impossible model of development, since the Earth lacks enough resources for everyone to live modernized lives. Evidently, the main problem is the logic of development and progress driving extractive capitalism. Perhaps emancipation and equality must now also mean taking into account the ethical dimension of the intolerable forms of injurious dependency – that is to say, the exploitation, dispossession, and destruction of many within what Naomi Klein calls "sacrificial zones" – for the benefit of a few.[6]

It is no longer the nation-state which is at stake, but life itself, and what is needed is the self-organization of our common life against neoliberal forms of social engineering. More than anticapitalism – which, embodying the everyday dialectic of leftist common sense, condemns capitalism without imagining anything else – what is urgently needed are new forms of collective organization. According to Sylvère Lotringer, we are just beginning to experience the consequences of savage industrialization and the massive exploitation of natural resources – mass extinctions, permanent war, climate change – and these do not fit into our existing idea of politics and critique. Thus, critique is not an answer to capitalism, because it introduces distance where there is none.[7] What is needed – and this is where art can play a crucial role – is a form of struggle that would elicit a long-term shift in values, leading to systemic change.

What is key here, as Jaime Martínez Luna suggests, is to plant the seeds for a new form of political organization, not through political identification or democratic participation, but as a form of *belonging*: a concrete relationship that presupposes commitment, obligation, and agreement. Identity (or common interest, which gives cohesion to a political cause) is an abstraction that mutates depending on the political action executed, while belonging is what is concrete. Belonging is the site for identity, and can help us create assemblages based on respect, work, and reciprocity. In the context of such assemblages, the relationships within social cells become concretized; as Martínez Luna puts it, such assemblages "exist to create life: that is movement, action, realization, intervention."[8]

A key concept that would be useful here is "*comunalidad*," a notion from Oaxaca, Mexico that emerged in the 1980s. It describes communal being in traditional ways of organizing, opposing capitalism and colonialism in favor of an ethical reconstruction of peoples. Communality is a way of being in the world that revolves neither around a commons administered by bureaucrats, nor some transient, ephemeral, and nonbinding postcommunism. Rather, it is a pact that considers the commons less as common *property*, as something owned in common, *but as a common way of life* – without forgetting that communality implies new forms of inhabiting territories *from the other side of modernity*. According to decolonial thinking, modernity and coloniality are inextricable: two elements of the same movement, which involves establishing truth at the expense of different forms of knowledge. In this regard, decoloniality is the outside of modernity and embodies other forms of feeling, making, thinking, being, and inhabiting the world – forms which are nonmodern and non-Western. Following decolonial theorist Rolando Vázquez, the recognition of nonmodern geo-genealogies and trajectories would reveal the movement of exclusion, violence, invisibilization, and forgetting that are inseparable from modernity, and would open up new forms of politicization – for instance, the notion of "*buen vivir*," or living in plenitude, which orients indigenous communities and organization.[9]

According to Vázquez, this axial principle

from outside modernity encompasses and recognizes the participation of human beings in a vital collectivity of close relationality, in the sense of mutual dependence and shared vulnerability. The notion of *buen vivir* also provides a different conception of the human, where the human is always in relation with the cosmos and with nature, beyond modern modes of appropriation and representation. The survival of humanity might depend on taking up a conception of the world beyond the dichotomy between humanity and nature in order to surrender the anthropocentric point of view. In this regard, I am not advocating a romanticized, ultraleft politics based on a return to the pastoral, as exemplified by the Zapatista experiments with autonomy. Rather, we must understand the role of the nonhuman world in helping us to construct more livable worlds by translating the autonomous forms of organization pioneered by indigenous peoples into urban contexts. For instance, in parts of Mexico citizens organize and arm themselves for the sake of their safety under a legal practice recognized as indigenous peoples' "*usos y costumbres*" (uses and customs). In this way, vigilante and community police forces have proliferated throughout Mexico as a means to stop organized crime and its complicity with differentially governing state institutions, or to prevent political powers from auctioning off the commons. Currently, there are self-defense groups in the states of Hidalgo, Puebla, Veracruz, Oaxaca, Guerrero, Michoacán, Tamaulipas, Quintana Roo, and areas of the State of Mexico; and although they are indeed recognized by the law as *usos y costumbres*, the government has begun to criminalize them.[10] These forms of autonomy point at the urgent need to experiment with means to build radically different socioeconomic relationships, instituting communal defense, property, and commons-management regimes. Another example would be the Territorial Land Use Law in Cuetzalan, in the State of Puebla, Mexico, which implies citizen participation in defining and diagnosing land use.[11] Thanks to this law, the municipality of Cuetzalan has recently been victorious in insisting that the area remain free of mining exploitation, hydroelectric plants, carbon extraction, and the use and exploitation of water by private entities.[12] This model of autonomous organization sets an important precedent in the struggle against neoliberal destruction.

We must take into account that autonomous community organizing in cities tends to be transitory and cut off from the means to satisfy immediate needs or the capacity to control territory. This is because relationships in cities tend to be highly stratified, as capitalist modes of organization create fictitious communities through hierarchical social structures, concentrating decision-making mechanisms in a few hands; therefore, it becomes difficult to establish authentic dialogues and long-lasting relationships. As I mentioned in Part I of this article, one of the strategies of neoliberal governance is to implement fictitious inclusion and participation mechanisms, hiding the fact that political decisions affecting citizens are taken in secret and are extremely remote from our influence. Is it possible to build autonomous spaces and to recuperate the immediate bases of social reproduction in cities? This is a difficult question. It must be remembered that if, in the countryside, what is at stake is territory, in cities the key is the materialization of forms of power and their distribution in space.

Moreover, autonomy is a communal and relational form of organization and thus, an alternative to the state and the market. In this regard, the "common" is a vague and yet necessary concept for today's struggles; it needs to be posited as an alternative horizon contesting the mercantilization of life and the seduction of the collective imaginary by capitalism. Communality is everything we share, but it also means rejecting our five-hundred-year-old system of socioeconomic relationships. It implies building new relationships outside the logic of capitalism and the market, which people all over the world are attempting to do through an array of experiments with cooperatives, collective work, solidarity, urban gardens, time banks, and free universities. These experiments are the beginning of the production and sharing of wealth in common, which would also fund, plan, project, establish, and organize something that already exists to institute forms of autonomy that are different from the forms of participation offered by neoliberal governance.

These experiments happen within the folds of institutions and against institutional fascisms that oppress and make decisions against our interests. Their aim is to disperse and transform power relationships. Autonomy means creating sites where rules different than those imposed on us by the neoliberal system can be applied to construct different political, social, and economic relationships. To build autonomous spaces is to recover the immediate bases of social reproduction in urbanized areas. What is at stake is the materialization of forms of power and how they are distributed in space. In that regard, art has been, and can continue to be, a privileged laboratory for studying fields of power and for experimenting with sociatry, therapy, and new models of assemblage, organization, exchange, and the reproduction of life, not of capital. But without a social base, without

establishing long-lasting collectivity in relation to a political project, it is difficult to begin building and inhabiting the world differently.

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