

## Lost in Translation: The Revolution Against “The Southern Question”

Jeremy Lester

The evening puts out its first edition of swallows  
Announcing the new politics of the hour,  
Scarcity of light's wheatears,  
A fleet of ships sails from the shipyard of the sky,  
The department store of shadows in the west,  
The mutinies and disorders of the wind,  
The birds moving to new addresses,  
The time when the evening stars will appear.

The sudden death of things  
Drowned in the tide of nightfall,  
The weak cries for help from the stars  
From their prison of distance and infinity,  
The incessant marching of dream armies  
Against the insurrection of ghosts,  
And, at the points of light's row of bayonets,  
The new order imposed upon the world by dawn.

Jorge Carrera Andrade

The beauty (and utility) of a metaphor is that you can use it in one time and context, put it safely away in a drawer (of the mind), and then bring it out again in a completely different time and context, confident that it will still have pretty much the same relevance and impact the second (third, fourth... hundredth) time that it is used; if one is lucky. And this is precisely the case in this instance. Commentators, analysts, journalists, politicians have all been rummaging through their metaphorical drawers of late in order to re-locate one in particular. If we are honest, once we have found it, we realise that it has become a bit frayed at the edges over the course of time, but what the heck, haven't we all. And the metaphor in question? It is of course those irrepressible winds of change. Yes, they are still there, they haven't gone away, and once again they are being put to good use, creating 'mutinies and disorders' not a stone's throw away from the heart of the dreaded "Empire". Call it what you will – excessive romanticism for distant, exotic places where good and evil, Left and Right, right and wrong, seem to stand in much sharper relief – but for those of us who have the misfortune to watch and to suffer the daily agonies and claustrophobia of political life right at the very core of the Empire, the past few years in Latin America have indeed been like a breath of fresh air. True, in some cases the winds haven't penetrated much at all. In some other cases the perfume in the air is not quite as aromatic as some

of us might wish. And in other cases still, the original freshness of the air has started to turn just a little stale, due largely to the fact that the initial southerly direction of the winds has been replaced by a more northerly direction. But at least in some locations (Venezuela, Bolivia and, with luck, Ecuador), not only are the prevailing winds full of the sweet aromas of radical change, if you listen carefully and closely they also contain music and voices that are melodious to the ears. It is these latter winds that I mostly want to concentrate on, for they are not ordinary winds of course. Indeed, they are anything but. They are winds of life, full of heartrending hisses that rip through the poor streets of towns and villages. They are winds bearing (*non*-genetically modified) seeds – of liberation, social justice and human dignity – which germinate the earth wherever they are deposited. They are Aeolian winds; the kind that the young Karl Marx was so enraptured by that he himself often used them as a metaphor for revolutionary change and even wrote a brief poem that was partly in honour of them.

Just a few years into the twenty-first century we have entered a new revolutionary epoch; a new period of intense, dizzying political change and of outright class conflict. Yes, I know that these words sound strange on our western civilised (oh, how civilised!) tongues. For us they have become foreign, strange words; unbelievable, incomprehensible, expropriated words; alien to our ears, alienated from our minds and hearts. But don't take my word for it. Take the word of all those thousands – tens of thousands – of ordinary, down-to-earth (I refuse to say 'simple') people across the length and breadth of Latin America who have planted the seeds borne on this wind and who are beginning, in some places at least – however slowly, however hesitantly – to reap some of their promised, richly deserved, harvest. Perhaps, I hear some of you think, the words are mistakenly pronounced on their tongues, even inappropriate. That is for you to decide, though I am tempted to say that that is their political privilege and our dull academic problem.

This paper is therefore a (small) tribute to the huge initiative and creativity of the people who have hurled caution to the wind, who have had the courage to pronounce the "R" word again (in conjunction with the "S" word), and who have begun to transform the world around them; just as it is a tribute to those who continue the revolutionary *counter*-hegemonic struggle elsewhere in Latin America.

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Let us start by going on a voyage. Our destination is the land of the Mayas; to be precise, Dzibilnocac, one of the most ancient sites of Mayan civilisation. The terrain that we need to traverse is a little like a Max Ernst *paysage*, mixed with the night sounds of Silvestre Revueltas, charged with the spark of a history unknown. It is a terrain full of glyphs (sculptured symbols and characters) that have suddenly become rejuvenated, given fresh life, and that therefore have to be interpreted and comprehended. The purpose of our visit is to have a different conception of the world; to engage in a dialogue with the stars; above all to re-locate the revolutionary paths of their forefathers and ancestors. It is *not* a voyage of

nostalgia though. It is a voyage of memory rehabilitation. It is a voyage of understanding the contemporary hegemonic struggle. Dzibilnocac is not so much a place as Time itself. It is where nothing is created, but nothing is lost. It is where actuality is constant; where the past has a permanent presence in the present. It is where *physis* and *logos* meet and unite.

Accompanying us on our voyage are all kinds of interesting people, but for the most part we are in the company of Surrealists. Our guide, and main interpreter of the glyphs, is Armand Gatti.<sup>[1]</sup> For those of you who don't know Gatti, it is worth a brief detour to tell you something about him. Armand Gatti is a Frenchman, born in Monaco in 1924, son of a Piedmontese anarchist and a cleaning woman. In his youth he attended a religious secondary school, but at the age of eighteen he joined the *Maquis* (the French Resistance). He was captured, imprisoned for a time in the Linderman concentration camp just outside of Hamburg (a place, he says, he has never really left), but was eventually pardoned and deported. He escaped, became a parachutist, and after the war worked as a roving reporter for a whole series of newspapers and magazines. In 1954, after receiving the Albert Londres prize, Gatti went to Central America to report on events taking place at the time. His first port of call was Guatemala, and not very long after he arrived, he found himself caught up in the US organised coup-d'état against the progressive government of Jacobo Arbenz. The violence and repression on the part of the new regime was massive and highly organised. Refusing to stay on the sidelines as nothing more than a witness to the brutality, Gatti chose sides and joined up with the 'Mayan Maquis' which was leading the resistance, not as a combatant of arms but as a combatant of words.<sup>[2]</sup> He became a guerrilla whose weapons were words, and in his own words he has remained an urban guerrilla ever since, using the power of language now as a writer, dramatist, film director and poet. His works have been published, performed and shown all over the world, but his preferred locations, his real *mises-en-scènes*, have always been in the deranged *habitués* of factories, prisons and the *banlieues* of Paris, with his current artistic residence being the "Maison de l'Arbre" in Saint-Denis by the Seine.

The world for Gatti, then, has become a world of language. To situate himself in this world he equates himself with a comma; not a mechanical comma, but a comma that tries to create harmony with the underlying sense and real meaning of words. The only problem is that in the world in which we live this has become nigh-on impossible. For the most part, our words are fragmented and are separated one from the other by dictatorial full stops which are not interested, let alone capable, of forging links between words. His main task, then, is to try to create these links anew and to honour and to fulfil that surrealist desire to see 'words make love'.

So much, then, for our guide. Let us return to the voyage which he is taking us on. It is a voyage set in the vast landscape of space, sound, and time; an expanse of more than five thousand years of Mayan history. There are no maps to guide us; they simply would not be of any use. Although if we did have a map, it would be like that infamous surrealist map of the world in which it is the cultural

representations that determine the terrain and the landmarks. Likewise, although we will encounter people along the way, they are not individuals who we meet so much as collective embodiments of groups, each one representing a different aspect of the dialectical existence of the indigenous population which has pitted endless tragedy against endless acts of courageous resistance. It is, of course, a voyage of the mind, of language, and of imagination. And perhaps more than anything else it is a voyage of *colour*. Colours signify the existence of the population, and each colour has multiple meanings attached to them. We are introduced to all of the cardinal colours, but it is only when the colour red is encountered that we hear an immediate, spontaneous, explosive, outcry of uniform symbolic meaning. Red is for passion. Red is for revolution. Red is for Communism. Red is for... Antonio Gramsci. And in choral harmony our hosts unite in song:

Avanti o popolo, alla riscossa,  
Bandiera rossa, Bandiera rossa  
Avanti o popolo, alla riscossa,  
Bandiera rossa trionferà.

Bandiera rossa la trionferà  
Bandiera rossa la trionferà  
Bandiera rossa la trionferà  
Evviva il comunismo e la libertà

Degli sfruttati l'immensa schiera  
La pura innalzi, rossa bandiera.  
O proletari, alla riscossa  
Bandiera rossa trionferà.

Bandiera rossa la trionferà  
Bandiera rossa la trionferà  
Bandiera rossa la trionferà  
Il frutto del lavoro a chi lavora andrà.

Dai campi al mare, alla miniera,  
All'officina, chi soffre e spera,  
Sia pronto, è l'ora della riscossa.  
Bandiera rossa trionferà.

Bandiera rossa la trionferà  
Bandiera rossa la trionferà  
Bandiera rossa la trionferà  
Soltanto il comunismo è vera libertà.

Non più nemici, non più frontiere:  
Sono i confini rosse bandiere.  
O comunisti, alla riscossa,  
Bandiera rossa trionferà.

Bandiera rossa la trionferà  
Bandiera rossa la trionferà  
Bandiera rossa la trionferà  
Evviva Lenin, la pace e la libertà.

That the name of Antonio Gramsci should have such an honoured place in this kind of context and setting should come as no surprise to anyone. Gatti has not chosen the symbolic celebration of Gramsci at random. Or, if there is a sense of chance at work here, it is that fascinating surrealist conception of *objective chance*. From his own personal point of view, Gatti's choice of Gramsci has been well documented. Indeed, it has almost become an element of folklore in its own right.

When I left to join the *Maquis* on the plains of Mille Vaches in the Massif Central [a surrealist name if ever there was one], I took with me a Garibaldi shirt (the discrete redness of which I had to conceal of course) and a handful of books: Rimbaud (when one is young, this never fails you), *I Fioretti* of Saint Francis of Assisi (which my mother insisted I took along), my master at that time, Henri Michaux, the taoist Zhuangzi, the Danish physician Niels Bohr, and Antonio Gramsci...

Of all these 'friends' it was Gramsci who came to influence Gatti the most. 'Gramsci... was my pillar of strength during the years of the Resistance. Most of my time with the *Maquis* was spent reading Gramsci under the trees.'<sup>[3]</sup> And remember, this was 1942!

As for the broader reasons behind the depiction of the indigenous Indian celebration of Gramsci, this too is not hard to fathom. Gatti himself has contended that from a personal point of view he has rediscovered a strange combination of Gramsci and Francis of Assisi in the (now iconic) figure of Subcomandante Marcos; one who puts cultural life and existence above economic fact. This is somewhat debatable, but we can let that pass. What we can say with almost absolute certainty and unanimity, though, is that of all Western Marxists, Gramsci undoubtedly remains the one who is most honoured and admired on Latin American soil, and his continuing influence most certainly can be felt in many different places and in many different settings. Why? Partly, I think, it has a lot to do with the fact that Gramsci is both consciously portrayed as well as explicitly used throughout Latin America as 'the conscience of the Left'. Of course, whether this is right or wrong, let alone a good or a bad thing, is a different matter altogether. One feels reasonably sure that he himself would vehemently dislike this all too moral kind of portrayal of himself and his legacy. But partly – and here is the stronger positive sense of his continued influence – many of his ideas and his general reflections do still address at least some of the broad issues at work in the contemporary world, be it in Europe, Latin America, or anywhere else for that matter.

In Latin America itself, based on discussions with activists and intellectuals, as well

as on numerous published testimonies, a number of factors repeatedly come to light here. There is considerable appreciation, for example, of Gramsci's fundamental opposition to any form of fatalism. Whatever else one can say about Gramsci, there is nothing rigid, dogmatic, mechanical or excessively 'deterministic' about his ideas or his use and application of those ideas. His is an open dialectic. It is in this latter element that one can also see another dominant attribute of his continuing influence; namely, his fusion of ideas and practice, his bringing together of history and philosophy, in short, his overriding commitment to the necessity of *praxis*. This as well brings us on to another issue; one that was long ago recognised by Régis Debray in those (far off) days when he was an aide and adjutant to revolutionary movements across the length and breadth of Latin America. What Debray particularly appreciated about Gramsci, and more importantly what he thought was particularly appreciated by his fellow revolutionaries on the ground, was 'Gramsci's meticulous attention to the historical reality of the nation, [which was always] inseparable from the theoretical moment. Marxism must be born of a historical implantation, must continue a tradition – and this in its *incarnated* form. Thus it must "translate" the concreteness of life into theoretical form... *Translate* common sense into philosophy and *incorporate* (Marxist) philosophy into common sense: These are the two key precepts. [It is the] question of the *transition* from one to the other, understood at once as translation and transformation.'<sup>[4]</sup> Debray likewise gives us another important insight as to why Gramsci has always been popular in Latin America. It is the manner in which both his writings and his actions 'bear witness', can be seen as 'milestones of a historical hope'. More particularly, it is the way in which the transition of theory into practice aspired to produce nothing less than a new civilisation, a new culture, a new way of life, and perhaps most important of all, 'a scale of values radically different from those prevalent under Western capitalism – which has become inorganic, decadent, dualist.'<sup>[5]</sup>

The unity of theory and practice; making theory the agent of the transition into history as well as the transformation of history; welding together the objective demands of any historical moment into the spontaneous feelings of the masses. These, of course, are not just abstract points of philosophical principle. They are also concrete questions of direct political *strategy*, and no one should underestimate the strategic significance of Gramsci's own concerns, and no one should certainly underestimate or downplay the practical strategic influence that Gramsci currently has on political movements and forces throughout Latin America. This is not a question of how many times a political leader might nominate Gramsci in his speeches, interviews, and conversations as being some kind of source of inspiration. This is an easy game to play but ultimately very superficial: Gramsci 2, Trotsky 1. Marx 3, Lenin 0. It starts to read like a set of sports results. No, it is much, much more than that. It is about ways in which a political leader's day-to-day outlook, his or her way of looking at the world around them, their way of formulating tasks to be carried out and how these tasks might be fulfilled, are all soaked through to the core with a broad Gramscian perspective; often subconsciously, often without knowing or fully recognising it. And if one is looking for concrete illustrations of this Gramscian penetration of the mind and its way of viewing the world, I would point to two cases in particular. The first is

President Hugo Chávez of Venezuela. In Chávez's case the Gramscian influence is certainly acknowledged, and repeatedly so in more recent times as his programme of reforms has so evidently become more and more radicalised. And in this conscious recognition of Gramsci's influence, one element above all is usually singled out for primacy – the overwhelming need for 'intellectual and moral leadership'. But as already stressed, it is not just about the conscious recognition of an influence, and the more one reads his speeches and listens to his words, there can be no doubt that while the language or the dialect is decidedly influenced by political sources much closer to home, there is nevertheless a strong underlying Gramscian accent that can invariably be detected if one listens carefully.

But it is in the second of our cases where I would contend that the Gramscian penetration of the general intellectual and strategic outlook of the mind has gone furthest. And the individual I am referring to is Álvaro García Linera, the Vice President of Bolivia. If you want a clear testimony of the continuing, clear-cut, practical, strategic influence of Gramsci, then I do not think that you could do better than to read the speeches and listen to the words of García. And I say this in the full recognition that Gramsci's name is hardly, if ever, directly mentioned. In a strictly Bolivian context, García has primarily been influenced by the political theorist, René Zavaleta, one of the main pioneers of the idea of a national-popular bloc comprising a heterogeneous array of subaltern subjects.<sup>[6]</sup> While in a broader context, García tends usually to stress the influence of Pierre Bourdieu, and indeed his interpretation of Bourdieu's ideas is often extremely creative. But notwithstanding the silence of Gramsci's name, there is barely a sentence uttered by García that is not construed in Gramscian terms. And this applies as much to his time in opposition as it does to the period in which he has occupied the Vice Presidency. From his understanding of the nature of the state and the remit of state power, to the founding correlation of forces that give rise to any individual state regime; from his awareness of the mobilising beliefs that generate a degree of social and moral conformity among both ruling and ruled, to the state's deliberate use of cultural and folkloric rituals and repertoire to sustain its power; from his understanding of the general symptoms that can generate a profound crisis of the state, to his specific diagnosis of how hegemonies can grow tired and exhausted; from his appreciation of how moments are produced where the state ceases to be perceived as irresistible, to his stress on the need to maximise the expression of popular dissent; from his understanding of the need to unify heterogeneous forces together into a solid class-based alliance, to his stress on the practical educational process of realising political, moral, cultural, and organisational leadership; from his acute understanding of the chasm that separates the negative act of destroying the old, and the absolutely essential need to have a ready-made positive conception of an alternative order already in place; from his stress on how historical blocs can disintegrate from within, and how new historical blocs need to be formulated; from his understanding of the moral dimension of hegemonic construction, to the intellectual requirements of a new collective will – on these, and many other matters, few have understood and assimilated some of the most essential Gramscian orientations better than Álvaro García Linera. His whole outlook is literally saturated in Gramscian perspectives. And one cannot repeat the point enough: this is not just an intellectual or theoretical interpretation of

Gramsci's ideas; it is a direct political-strategic use of Gramsci that is second to none. Is it any wonder, therefore, that given the Gramscian influence on the likes of such prominent leaders as Chávez and García, the levels of 'Gramsciphobia' within the top echelons of the US administration and academia, which have always been high, are now (in some cases at least) registering concerns that are off the measurable scale?<sup>[7]</sup>

In short, these are more than just 'echoes' of Gramsci's influence on some of the most salient processes at work in the new revolutionary epoch that has emerged in certain parts of Latin America. It is almost as though there is a constant on-going dialogue with him. He is a permanent interlocutor. But having said all of this, we also have to clearly recognise and appreciate how this dialogue takes place and acknowledge some of the other consequences that stem from this interlocutory exchange. Gramsci's main role in this dialogue is to be the poser of questions; good questions to be sure, the right kind of questions, the kind that both demand and stimulate (hopefully good) answers. But notwithstanding the tremendous utility and appropriateness of the questions, they can only ever be very general in nature. The answers to these questions, however, have to be extremely specific, and precisely because of their very specificity, it must be others who provide the answers. Gramsci can today provide no specific answers and no specific solutions himself, nor should we expect this from him. This would be asking too much of his legacy. In addition, if a dialogue is to be genuine, even one based on a primarily disjointed question and answer process, then inevitably there have to be moments of disagreement and differences between the respective participants in the dialogue. Last but not least, not all things in this dialogue are going to be 'translatable'. Inevitably, some things will be lost in translation. In other words, then, having recognised and celebrated the fact that a Gramscian way of thinking about the world around us, and engaging in a head-on struggle with that world, has not been exhausted, so we must nevertheless recognise the limits, weaknesses, and deficiencies of Gramsci's approach. After all, to honour Gramsci, to do full justice to him, is surely to engage in robust critical engagement with him. Just as much as one should not dismiss him outright as *passé*, so must one certainly not deify him, or utilise him artificially in areas that are simply not appropriate.

It is when we come to ask the basic fundamental question, 'who are the main social protagonists, who are the dominant historical agents, of the current revolutionary epoch in Latin America?', that we come up against arguably the main limitation of a Gramscian approach (although of course he is not the only one who is culpable here). For whatever answer we give to this question, you can be pretty sure of one thing. With very few exceptions (perhaps most notably in Argentina), the social sector and class which will *not* feature prominently in the answer is the traditional urban working class. The labour movement has all but been decimated by its political and cultural defeats over the past three decades. What remains of the sector is highly dispersed and highly co-opted. Labour has effectively been 'disincorporated' from the old-style emancipatory projects, and as a consequence it is certainly not industrial workers who man the insurrectionary frontlines or barricades. Instead, the real protagonists are to be found elsewhere. They are to be found amongst the massed ranks of the 'dispossessed', the



'squatters', the 'wretched of the earth', the 'lumpen'. And most noticeable of all (again with Argentina as the key exception), they are to be found amongst the peasants, the *campesinos*, and the agricultural workers (*trabajadores agricolas*), both with and without the 'indigenous' label attached to them. This is without doubt the key innovatory factor at work here. And it is so innovatory that we simply cannot rely, or refer back to, a Gramscian framework here to explain this phenomenon. Gramsci had many positive things to say about so-called 'subaltern' forces, but when it came to the peasants he was as generally dismissive and sceptical about their revolutionary hegemonic potential as most other classical Marxists were at this time. True, he never went quite so far as to dismiss them as a reactionary 'sack of potatoes' trying to roll back the wheel of history. But he did repeatedly draw attention to them as a pre-modern, uncoordinated, amorphous mass who were totally incapable of giving any meaningful expression to their real aspirations and needs. He lamented their shortsightedness, their revelling in their ills and misery, and their susceptibility to the most simplistic articulations of the bourgeois state apparatus. And he had few qualms at all about portraying them as 'enslaved to the banks and the parasitic industrialism of the North', and of being no more capable of reacting to their desperate plight than by acts of brigandage. In short, Gramsci concluded, the peasant is 'not a revolutionary' nor is he a 'fighter for communism'. All he can hope to become, left to his own devices, is 'an assassin of the "rich"'.<sup>[8]</sup> And it is for all these reasons of course that, incapable of representing their own interests, and unable to form a genuine class structure of their own, they must therefore succumb to the leadership, direction, and domination of the (Northern) industrial proletariat. They must be led by the hand, kicking and screaming if necessary, into the era of modernity, for it is only by this means that their emancipation will be secured.

It is this depiction of the peasants, then, that simply cannot in any sense at all explain what is currently happening. Latin American *campesinos* today are not being led or directed by any other social force, and certainly not by the proletariat; nor do they need to be. Instead, it is they themselves who are primarily doing the 'leading'. It is they who are firmly in the vanguard of revolutionary change. It is they who are the modernising force in real transformational ways (with no need for the 'pre' or 'post' prefix to be attached to this modernising role). It is they who are the most cosmopolitan in their intellectual outlook, creatively dynamic and 'organic' in their organisational and mobilising skills. It is they who best embody the requirements of *praxis*, 'attracting "doers" rather than ideologues'.<sup>[9]</sup> And it is they who have the greatest clarity of awareness and understanding of their class interests and their class consciousness; one that makes them absolutely committed combatants in a class war. Trotsky may help us here explain this phenomenon with his notions of uneven and combined development and the 'privileges of backwardness'. Other theorists, such as Franz Fanon, can likewise help us put this into some broader perspective. As too can someone like José Carlos Mariátegui. But the only real way in which we can apply a Gramscian framework here is to do exactly what he himself had the courage to do in relation to the exceptional nature of the Russian Revolution. That is to say, recognise the exceptionality of the current situation from his own paradigm, admire it, praise it, celebrate it, and use it *against* the spirit of Gramsci himself. In short, I would contend, what we are

witnessing is not just a new *Revolution Against "Capital"*; it is likewise a *Revolution Against "The Southern Question"* – Gramsci's version of the "Southern Question" (admittedly of course in a highly expanded form). As has already been argued, the new vanguard forces of change in Latin America certainly do not reject the 'invigorating, immanent thought' of Gramsci. But by living this thought in new kinds of ways they have certainly *decontaminated* some of its own 'positivist and naturalist encrustations'.

This thought sees as the dominant factor in history, not raw economic facts, but man, men in societies, men in relation to one another, reaching agreements with one another, developing through these contacts (civilisation) a collective, social will; men coming to understand economic facts, judging them and adapting them to their will until this becomes the driving force of the economy and moulds objective reality, which lives and moves and comes to resemble a current of volcanic lava that can be channelled wherever and in whatever way men's will determines. [\[10\]](#)

It is perhaps the destiny of us all to have our own words used against us. In the context in which this has been done, and in light of the achievements made, one feels sure that Gramsci would not object. It is a cause for celebration that once again we can say: 'this should not in principle be happening, yet thank goodness it is.'

What kind of general factors, then, might explain this new revolutionary role of the peasants? And what have been some of the consequences and effects on other social forces? If there is one word which most accurately describes the nature of peasant life in Latin America (or anywhere else for that matter) it is the word 'survival'. There is nothing new in this. That is the way it has always been. It is this struggle for survival that lies at the heart and soul of their very existence. One tends automatically to think of survival as a reactive process, as a form of preservation and conservation. But in today's Latin America it has become much more than that. Survival has become an act of transformation, not just of the peasant's own condition of existence, but more importantly of everything external to his own existence. That is to say, survival has been dialectically linked with the desire and need for overriding systemic change – social, economic, cultural, and political. Latin American peasants have proved to be remarkably good dialecticians.

Underpinning their condition of survival, the very way in which they live their lives and carry out their work, peasants have always relied heavily on strong communitarian, and indeed egalitarian, structures of organisation. They have not had to invent these structures out of nothing. They have developed organically over many decades and centuries, and the peasants have demonstrated remarkable skills in adapting and improvising traditional structures of organisation to present-day requirements and needs. Linked with this has always been a strong sense of loyalty, both to themselves as a group (a class) as well as to their cause. One also needs to recognise that they have always been essentially a class apart, with all the positive and negative connotations that are attached to this. The

positive side of this has been a strong sense of self-reliance, the ability to support themselves, to look out for themselves. Politically as well this has invariably meant a hostility to basic notions of representation at the hands of others not directly, organically, linked with them. They have traditionally preferred the direct to the indirect method of the representation of their interests. The negative side of this self-reliance, however, has also been strong. It has been the tendency to cut themselves off, disengage themselves from 'outsiders', isolate themselves. But as stressed above, this is certainly not the case at the present moment. It is the peasants who have taken the fight to others, not the other way round. Moreover, it is a fight that they are prepared to wage nationally as well as trans-nationally.<sup>[11]</sup> And on top of all this, it is a fight that they are prepared and willing to wage as a class – both in itself and for itself. 'No class has been or is more economically conscious than the peasantry. Economics consciously determines or influences every ordinary decision which a peasant takes.'<sup>[12]</sup> It is in this fundamental transparency of the economic relationship of a peasant's daily experience that we can perhaps best locate one of the strongest underlying sources of peasant radicalism today.

Nor are these the only factors at work here. The peasants have a very strong, shared vision of what they want. They know what they are fighting for. They know what and who they are fighting against. Underpinning this vision is also a different conception of temporality; a question of time. The collective memories of peasants – the memories of resistance – are not only longer, they are also more solid, more firm, more alive. Their whole bodies are laden with such memories, and they know that redemption will be theirs; the redemption of the work that they themselves have constructed with their bare hands. Or, to put it another way, it is 'the music of the future, resounding in the present as an echo of the past – particularly when a historical explosion is under way.'<sup>[13]</sup> In terms of time as well, then, peasants have proved to be much better dialecticians than most other social forces.

Just as crucially it is a question of culture; the codes of behaviour, the rituals, the beliefs, the language, the body of wisdom and knowledge that have so shaped peasant existence over many centuries. It is a culture that, notwithstanding all kinds of changes, has not been contaminated by the values of the neo-liberal bourgeoisie. Moreover, by not succumbing to their exploiting enemy's values; by not identifying or, worse still, assimilating themselves to their enemy's way of life, they give meaningful expression and credence to their conviction that their enemy can and must be defeated. In short, they have been much more immune than the working class to the temptations of the bourgeoisie. Their hearts have not been ambushed by the bourgeoisie, and it is in their hearts that they continue to carry the mandate of the earth.<sup>[14]</sup> And there is one final issue that needs to be raised and that merits serious reflection. It is an issue that has been most cogently expressed by John Berger:

The remarkable continuity of peasant experience and the peasant view of the world acquires, as it is threatened with extinction, an unprecedented and

unexpected urgency. It is not only the future of peasants which is now involved in this continuity. The forces which in most parts of the world are today eliminating or destroying the peasantry, represent a contradiction of most of the hopes once contained in the principle of historical progress. Productivity is not reducing scarcity. The dissemination of knowledge is not leading unequivocally to greater democracy. The advent of leisure – in the [most technologically advanced] societies – has not brought personal fulfilment but greater mass manipulation. The economic and military unification of the world has not brought peace but genocide. The peasant suspicion of 'progress', as it has finally been imposed by the global history of corporate capitalism and by the power of this history even over those seeking an alternative to it, is not altogether misplaced or groundless.<sup>[15]</sup>

And as Berger goes on to note, capitalism's 'historic role is to destroy history, to sever every link with the past and to orientate all effort and imagination to that which is about to occur. Capital can only exist as such if it continually reproduces itself; its present reality is dependent upon its future fulfilment. This is the metaphysic of capital.'<sup>[16]</sup> Destroying the peasants of Latin America would be a final act of historical elimination. Here, then, is the ultimate significance of the contemporary peasant-led resistance. And here is the ultimate significance of the 'Revolution Against The Southern Question'. In opposing capitalism's attempt to destroy history, in preventing its continuing acts of 'anthropological genocide', different levels of historical time have effectively been combined into a single historical moment. That moment is now, and the moment must be seized for all it is worth.

To seize the historical moment a new historical (national-popular) bloc needs to be established, and there are at least some signs that this is indeed what is currently happening. The continuing acts of resistance by peasants have become transmission belts for a much wider process of consciousness-raising. Old solidarities are being re-constituted based on all manner of 'elective affinities' that are beginning to unite heterogeneous social forces. Rural-urban links are being strengthened in new innovative ways, and in the swelling, heaving slums of the cities new protagonists are being mobilised.<sup>[17]</sup> Furthermore, it is from within the ranks of this burgeoning historical bloc that new intellectuals have emerged. Quite whether one can call them 'organic' in the strict Gramscian sense of this term is perhaps open to question and doubt. What is certainly not open to doubt, however, is their 'organic' nature in a more literal sense of this term (i.e. rooted amongst the ordinary people themselves and constituting both horizontal and vertical links between them and others), and the fact that they certainly merit the label of being real *transformative intellectuals*. It is almost as though the long years of patient cultural struggle, education, and consciousness-raising – that process that Paulo Freire called *conscientização* – have finally borne fruit. Having learned the ability to read the word, the massed ranks of the newly literate have also learned the ability to read the world; and not just read it, but transform it. It is not so much literature or words they are now making so much as history; history conceived as the gate-crashing of chance through the door of necessity.

So, who are these new 'transformative intellectuals'? They are the likes of Esperanza, as well named as anyone can be, who is an adult literacy facilitator in one of the largest and poorest of the *barrios* and neighbourhoods of the urban slums; or Conchita, who takes literacy classes in one of the smallest, remotest rural communities. For both these young women, their aim is to instil the belief in everyone they teach that, *Yo sí puedo* (I can do it).<sup>[18]</sup> Their weapons are pencils and exercise books, and by means of hard work, long hours, genuine solidarity and fraternity, they have helped to unsheathe the alphabet on a new generation of empowered adults. They are the likes of Nilda, a doctor originally from Cuba, but who now travels the length and breadth of Latin America offering her 'compatriots' specialist surgery for cataracts completely free of charge; or Manolo, who runs a new-style, self-managed *ambulatorio* in the slum neighbourhood where he resides. They are the likes of Victor, who has set up and runs a popular *Casa Cultural*, along with dozens of volunteer artists and performers, or Santiago who manages a new state-subsidised bookshop and cinema in a poor slum neighbourhood where guns used to be more freely available than books. They are the likes of Rolando, a street artist in the same neighbourhood or, yes, let us include him as well – Rafael – a liberation theologian priest. They are the likes of Silvestre, a highly professional conductor of a youth orchestra in the slums, who has taken kids off the street and given them a new-found purpose in life through the music and harmonies they now create. They are the likes of Emiliano, a manager at one of the new-type *Mercal* supermarkets, distributing food to the poor and needy at prices that even they can afford. They are the likes of Beatriz, a production worker in the formerly disused, then occupied, now self-managed cosmetics plant. They are the likes of Guillermo, a trade union leader working in the newly nationalised hydrocarbon plant. They are the likes of Miguel, a new-style 'community policeman', charged with the task of maintaining public and civic order. They are the likes of Hipolito, a soldier in full combat fatigue, waging war against poverty, and who commences his military manoeuvres at six o'clock in the morning, repairing schools or building roads and other amenities along with his fellow comrades in the 'People's Battalion'.

Or, if you prefer a different kind of setting, they are the likes of Ulises, a training instructor in one of the numerous schools and 'popular universities' connected with the occupied land sites. They are the likes of Ramón, a lawyer defending the occupying of non-utilised agricultural land. They are the likes of Fernando, the head of a neighbourhood defence committee, teaching strategies of resistance against the incursions of paramilitary forces. They are the likes of Octavio, head of a school for training cadres linked to land occupation movements, or Heriberto, a university agronomist who freely offers expert advice on how to make the most of often poor quality soil. They are the likes of Ignacio, manager of a new 'People's Bank', giving micro credits and loans to peasants (usually without any interest charged). They are the likes of Leandro, who helps run a Land Committee which distributes newly acquired land titles. They are the likes of Carlos, a union activist recruiting and mobilising support against the remaining *latifunders*. They are the likes of Tomás, an ecologist who opposes the continual destruction of the land by foreign-owned oil and gas multi-national conglomerates. And yes, they are the likes of Pepe, a *cocalero*, who promotes the positive herbal remedies of the coca

plant.

They are the likes of Jorge, local director of *Telesur*, who channels his reporters and camera crews to destinations that show the true face of Latin America. And last but not least, they are the likes of Juan, a young man, barely more than a boy, of peasant stock, who has recently enlisted in the army, having come to the big city from the *ranchos* in the hills. Juan's main talent is the bugle. No one plays this instrument quite like him. In fact, he is so good that very quickly he is asked to join the ceremonial guard at the presidential palace. But one day the kind, sympathetic President, who has the same coloured skin as Juan's, is replaced by a mean looking man with rigid, severe features and a skin colour that is of a distinctly different tone. Juan is in a difficult situation. He has to choose. When the new, bad President comes out of the palace, will he obey the orders from on high and sound the bugle or not? He chooses. He chooses... *not* to play. Enraged, the General in command orders him to play and threatens Juan with a court martial. Juan is unmoved. He caresses his instrument one last time before turning to the General. 'If you are so keen on playing the bugle, here it is. *You* play it.'<sup>[19]</sup> Juan certainly does not think of himself as an 'organic', 'transformative intellectual' in his society. Nothing could be further from his mind. Yet he should be considered as one. He has earned the right to be called an 'intellectual' and a 'permanent persuader' (much more than probably you, and certainly a great deal more than I, have deserved the title).

Is all of this a much too positive assessment of the current situation? Is the optimism at work here over-validated? For sure it certainly is. We must not kid ourselves. More sober assessments could be, have been, given by others (and by myself too). And it is surely no surprise and no coincidence that if there is one statement from Gramsci that is repeated over and over again in a great many Latin American political circles at the moment, it is his comment about the old order being in a process of death and decay, the difficulties of the new order being born without the need for any life-threatening caesarian intervention, and all the 'morbid symptoms' that reside in the interregnum between the two. The problems and the dangers are of course well known, well documented and, in many cases, well rehearsed. And it hardly needs to be added that they exist from within and from without in almost equal measure. From within, there are all the usual 'domestic' problems of 'passive revolution', or what Francisco de Oliveira has called, in a contemporary Brazilian context, 'hegemony in reverse'<sup>[20]</sup>; *trasformismo*; *caudillismo*; clientelism; corruption; and corporatism. To this can be added armed (bourgeois) separatist movements; paramilitary formations; death squads; and the existence of not just civil conflict but potential civil war in some cases. And just for good measure, one could also throw in the problems of 'latecomers' joining certain bandwagons for different reasons all of their own, and the fragility and contradictions of the political alliances pushing for change. In short, they are all the difficulties associated with trying to construct a new model of state power.

As for the dangers from without, once again they are so common they hardly need mentioning, and most if not all stem and relate back to the oversized, all-powerful 'neighbour' to the North. One coup d'état (in Venezuela in April 2002) has already

been sponsored and supported by the neighbour, and one can certainly expect more attempts. And when one bears in mind the myriad covert actions of subterfuge, the attempts to isolate, delegitimize, and destabilise the 'contagion' from the South, the rhetoric about 'rogue states' and new 'axes of evil', and then put them together with the re-activated training 'schools for dictators and torturers', the recent rapid growth in US military expenditure devoted to Latin America, the expanded activities of their military bases in Guantanamo Bay, Roosevelt Roads and Fort Buchanan (in Puerto Rico), their air bases in Honduras and Ecuador, their radar stations in Colombia and no doubt many other secret locations, one quickly appreciates the exact nature of the dangers at work here, without in any way having exhausted the possible list.<sup>[21]</sup>

Yet, notwithstanding all of this, no apologies should be given for demonstrating some degree of optimism. Latin America's present is very much 'infected with real possibility', one that is increasingly becoming contagious, and there are genuinely new vital energies at work that deserve to be acknowledged and celebrated. There are times, then, when one must not fall prey to the doleful allure of an all-encompassing intellectual (properly speaking, 'academic') pessimism. Two principal reasons will suffice. The first relates to the fact that confidence is being gained and fear is slowly but surely being overcome, and this in itself is no small achievement. Fear has always been the biggest enemy of all in most social sectors in Latin America, and this (largely colonial legacy) has always had a huge stultifying political impact. As Donitila Chungara so cogently expressed it more than thirty years ago now, it is the fear 'that we carry inside each and every one of us.'<sup>[22]</sup> It is still there, but the disease has stopped spreading and appears no longer to be hereditary. The second reason, meanwhile, is equally as simple and straightforward. It is the optimism that comes from seeing Left-socialist forces possessing the power again (as well as the determination and the will) to engage in a real process of innovative hegemonic *construction*, rather than just having to oppose an entrenched system dominated by the exploitative, destructive, authoritarian, fundamentalist neo-liberal enemy. Hölderlin was spot on. The place of rescue and hope does indeed grow where there is most danger.

Back in the land of the Mayas, at Dzibilnocac, the colours continue to speak. They are like thoughts written on a rainbow.

As the long echoes, shadowy, profound,  
Heard from afar, blend in a unity,  
Vast as the night, as sunlight's clarity,  
So perfumes, colours, sounds may correspond.<sup>[23]</sup>

Isn't man one colour forever changing into other colours of which there is no limit?<sup>[24]</sup> If so, why have we in the West become so completely colourless? I am reminded of a painting by Osvaldo Guayasamin, that maestro of twentieth-century Latin American art, whose works are nothing less than 'brush strokes of humanity'.<sup>[25]</sup> It is a painting called *Rostras de América* (Faces of America). As nearly always with Guayasamin it is not a singular, unique painting but one of a

series. Even in his artistic production Guayasamin favoured collectivism (solidarity) over individualism (isolation). In many ways, it is a family portrait. It shows a face of many colours, all of which merge and blend in the bones, the structure, the features, and the expression of the face – one that could be either male or female. It is a face that has suffered untold, countless tragedies, but it is also one which refuses to bear the scars of resignation or despair. It is the face of determination; of someone walking upright, standing tall. It is a face of absolute, sheer human dignity; a dignity forcibly expropriated but which is now being regained.





Glean from the lands the shrouded  
throb of sorrow, the solitude,  
the wheat of the threshed fields:  
something germinates beneath the flags:  
the ancient voice calls us again.  
Descend to the mineral roots,  
and in the desolate metal's veins  
reach mankind's struggle on earth,  
beyond the martyrdom that mauls  
the hands destined for the light.  
Don't renounce the day bestowed on you  
by those who died struggling. Every spike  
is born of a grain seeded in the earth,  
and like the wheat, the innumerable people  
join roots, accumulate spikes,  
and in the tempest unleashed  
they rise up to the light of the universe.[\[26\]](#)

\* \* \*

It was Subcomandante Marcos who taught us all the significance of the postscript and the afterword; of how there are always some words that might have been overlooked and which will themselves insist on finding their own way into the communal sentence. With this in mind let me add not just one, but two afterwords. In the penultimate leg of his first – and most certainly last – carefully planned, orchestrated, whirlwind 'package tour' of several Central and Southern American countries in March 2007, President George W. Bush paid a hasty visit to

the ancient Mayan ruins of Iximché. One could not help wondering what on earth he was doing there. What did he make of it all? What was going through his mind as he was being shown around? Was he perhaps thinking that here would be a good place to construct a new Wal-Mart hyper-market? After all, having recently constructed one barely within a stone's throw of the ancient site of Teotihuacan in Mexico, why not set up a special Mayan and Aztec Pyramid chain of such stores? It is surely just what the local indigenous population have been really dreaming of, and preying to their gods for, all these past millenia. More than a century ago, the aristocratic idealist and spiritual modernist, José Enrique Rodó – hardly someone who you could accuse of having radical political tendencies – nevertheless made an assessment of the vulgarity of US hegemonic power, its insufficiency, its emptiness, and its fervent pursuit of material well-being that has no object beyond itself, which strikes a chord even more in tune today than it was back then.

Given the opportunity, they [the North Americans] would gladly revise *Genesis*, hoping to gain a place 'in the beginning'. But, in addition to the relative modesty of their role in the enlightenment of humanity, their very character denies them the possibility of hegemony. Nature has not gifted them either with a genius for persuasion or with the vocation of the apostle. They lack the supreme gift of *amiability*... the extraordinary power of sympathy that enables nations endowed by Providence with the gift and responsibility for educating to instil in their culture something of the beauty of classic Greece, [the] beauty of which all cultures hope to find some trace.<sup>[27]</sup>

Still, every cloud has a silver lining. So abused and insulted were the local population by Bush's presence amongst the ancient ruins of their ancestors, they immediately organised a 'cleaning brigade' to wipe away and purify every last trace of the scars and the stains that he and his entourage had left behind them. Isn't it from such acts that the very first foundations of (in this case, *counter*) hegemonic victory are constructed?

From Guatemala, Bush went on to visit his new 'lackey' in Mexico, Felipe Calderón. Let us follow his all too obvious tracks and go there as well. Down in the south of the country, in Oaxaca, a brief exchange of words – let's not call it exactly a dialogue – can be heard.

— "How old are you?", asked the soldier dressed in full battle-riot gear, prodding the point of his rifle into her ribs.

— "I am 515 years old", replied the young, fresh-faced girl dressed in full peasant costume.

— "And where are you going?", asked the soldier brusquely.

— "I am going to the future", the young girl replied with pride and tenderness.

'One can only laugh at the narrowness of spirit of those who believe that the power of the present can extinguish the memory of future times.'<sup>[28]</sup>

## Notes

- [1] Armand Gatti, *Premier voyage en langue Maya avec surréalistes à bord* (Paris: Éditions Syllepse, 2006).
- [2] The main influence on Gatti during his time in Guatemala was the guerrilla leader, Yon Sosa.
- [3] Gatti, *Premier voyage*, p. 123. See also Chloé Hunzinger, 'Entretien avec Armand Gatti', *La revue des ressources*, March 2002.
- [4] Régis Debray, 'Schema for a study of Gramsci', *New Left Review* [1], No.59, Jan-Feb 1970, pp. 49-50.
- [5] *Ibid.*, p. 51.
- [6] See, for example, René Zavaleta Mercado, *Las masas en noviembre* (La Paz: Juventud, 1983) and *Lo nacional-popular en Bolivia* (Mexico: Siglo XXI, 1986).
- [7] One recalls the so-called "Committee of Santa Fe", which grouped together academics and military officials, who wrote fairly frequent reports for the American State Department warning of the strong Gramscian influences at work in Latin America and of the absolute necessity to combat this influence in all possible areas. And to a large extent, of course, the Committee was directly responding to continued warnings that were voiced by Augusto Pinochet, even long after he had relinquished dictatorial power in his native Chile.
- [8] Antonio Gramsci, *The Southern Question*, trans. Pasquale Verdicchio (West Lafayette: Bordighera, 1995), p. 50.
- [9] See James Petras, *The New Development Politics: The Age of Empire Building and New Social Movements* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), chapters 7 & 8 *passim*.
- [10] Antonio Gramsci, 'The Revolution Against "Capital" ' in Quinton Hoare (ed.), *Antonio Gramsci: Selections From Prison Writings 1910-1920* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1977), pp. 34-35.
- [11] The most prominent international peasant organisation is *Via Campesina* which, after five hundred years of capitalist development, has at last achieved a real degree of world-wide peasant coordination, and has created the conditions for peasants to unite effectively against the global neo-liberal model. It is thanks to *Via Campesina* that along with 8 March (International Women's Day) and 1 May (International Labour Day) a new date has been added to the Left calendar of celebrations and festivals – 17 April, an international day to celebrate the peasant movement. It is a day when the cry, 'Peasants of the World Unite!' echoes around the globe.
- [12] John Berger, *Pig Earth* (London: Writers and Readers Publishing Cooperative, 1979), p. 197.
- [13] Savas Mikhail Matsas, 'To conquer the land – to rebuild life', *Counter-Hegemony*, Special Issue Zero, 1998, p. 44.
- [14] One cannot help but be reminded here of a comment that Gramsci himself made shortly after the defeat of the Turin Council movement in the early 1920s: 'the bourgeoisie lies in ambush in the heart of the proletariat.'
- [15] Berger, *Pig Earth*, p. 212.
- [16] *Ibid.*, p. 213.
- [17] As João Pedro Stedile, the leader of the 'Sem Terra Movement' of Brazil has noted in the context of the peasant struggle there, 'because so much of the rural working class has been absorbed into the *lumpenproletariat* living on the outskirts [of cities... we] have an obligation to them still, so we have to go to the favelas to try to organize them.' And as he goes on to explain: 'From the realities of organizing there, our activists have come up with a new proposal: what they call 'rurban' settlements – *assentamentos rurbanos*.' João Pedro Stedile, 'Landless Battalions', *New Left Review* [2], No. 15, May-June 2002, p. 92.
- [18] *Yo sí puedo* is the name of a Cuban-inspired literacy programme that is currently being applied in a great many Latin American countries in the struggle to combat adult illiteracy, and has been particularly taken up and applied by the new regimes in Venezuela and Bolivia. Indeed, so many are the educational schemes in operation in Venezuela at the moment that it has been calculated that 18 million people (out of a total population of 26 million) can currently class themselves as 'students' in one form or another.
- [19] See Tariq Ali, *Pirates of the Caribbean: Axis of Hope* (London: Verso, 2006), p. 10. It is I who have lent the name of 'Juan' to the soldier in question.
- [20] The notion of 'hegemony in reverse' is essentially where '[the] dominated realize the "moral revolution" – defeat of apartheid in South Africa, election of the Workers Party in Brazil – which is then transformed and deformed through capitulation to unfettered exploitation. The terms of the Gramscian equation "force + consent = hegemony" have been turned upside down: "force" has disappeared and the direction of consent has been reversed. For it is no longer the dominated who consent to their own subordination; now it is the dominant who consent to being ostensibly "led" by representatives of the dominated – on condition that they do not question the forms of capitalist relations. This new paradigm may prove to be a functional one for

globalized capitalism. It is an epistemological revolution before which all existing theories of politics pale.' Francisco de Oliveira, 'Lula in the Labyrinth', *New Left Review* [2], No. 42, Nov-Dec 2006, p. 22.

[21] Of the current 333.7 billion dollars spent by the US government on military expenditure, no less than 43 per cent of this is devoted to Latin America.

[22] See Donitila Barrios de Chungara, "*Si me permiten hablar...*" *Testimonio de Domitila, una mujer de las minas de Bolivia* (Mexico: Siglo XXI, 1977).

[23] *Comme de longs échos qui de loin se confondent / Dans une ténébreuse et profonde unité, / Vaste comme la nuit et comme la clarté, / Les parfums, les couleurs et les sons se répondent.*

Charles Baudelaire, *The Flowers of Evil*, trans. James McGowan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 19.

[24] See Gatti, *Premier voyage*, p. 44.

[25] The description of Guayasamin's art is that of Federico Mayor, former Director General of UNESCO.

[26] Pablo Neruda, *Canto General*, trans. Jack Schmitt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. 148.

[27] José Enrique Rodó, *Ariel*, trans. Margaret Sayers Peden (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1988), p. 87.

[28] *Socordium eorum irridere licet qui praesenti potentia aevi temporis memoriam extingui posse credunt.* The words are those of Tacitus. As cited in Ernst Bloch, *Natural Law and Human Dignity*, trans. Dennis J. Schmidt (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986), p. 316.