

A VIEW OF NORTH AFRICA FROM SOUTH AMERICA: A CONVERSATION WITH RAÚL ZIBECHI

Cristina Cielo

(Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias
Sociales en Quito, Ecuador)

Popular uprisings in the Middle East over the last months have transformed the political landscapes and possibilities of the region's diverse nations. The hope engendered by popular uprisings against long-term dictators has darkened as repression and violence has continued in the region. Uruguayan intellectual and journalist Raúl Zibechi gives us a South American perspective of the momentous changes taking place in North Africa.

Raúl Zibechi is one of the foremost political theorists writing on and working with social movements in Latin America. His work combines acute, generative and ethical analyses of socio-political developments in Latin America with collaborative efforts to support grassroots transformation in the region. He is international section editor of the acclaimed Uruguayan weekly *Brecha*, a lecturer and researcher with the Multiversidad Fransiscana de América Latina and a regular contributor to the Americas Policy Program and to *La Jornada* in Mexico. His recent books include *Dispersing Power* (2006, English translation 2010) and *Territorios en Resistencia* (2008). In order to contextualize the following interview with Zibechi in his wider body of work, our conversation begins, pauses midway and ends with selected translations from some of his es-



Cairo, 2011, murals
Flickr: Mejuan 

says previously available only in Spanish. The interview was conducted in July 2011 in Spanish.

As we seek to stimulate dialogue between analysts in Africa and in Latin America, we also offer a Spanish version of this article. Comments are most welcome and selected comments will be translated between languages.

From “The Revolutions of Ordinary People”
([First published](#) in *La Jornada* on 3 June 2011.
Translation of the entire article available [here](#).)

The inherited and still hegemonic conception of revolution must be revised, and in fact is being revised by current events. Revolution as exclusively focused on the capture of state power is being replaced by another concept of revolution, more complex and integral, which does not exclude a state-centered strategy but supersedes and goes beyond it. In any case, the conquest of state power

is a bend in a far longer trajectory, one which seeks something that cannot be achieved from within state institutions: to create a new world.

Traditional politics – anchored in forms of representation that replace collective subjects with managerial professionals, professionals of deception – are of little use in the creation of a new world. Instead, a new world that is different from the current one implies rehearsing and experimenting with horizontal social relations, in sovereign, self-controlled and autonomous spaces, in which no one imposes on or directs the collective.

a new world that is different from the current one ... in which no one imposes on or directs the collective

[To understand that spaces are] “spontaneous in a profound sense” ... we must acknowledge that there is not one *single* instrumental and state-centered rationality. Rather, each subject has his or her *own* rationality, and we can all be subjects when we say “Enough already!” It is a matter, then, of understanding alternative rationalities, a process that can only take place from within and in movement, starting from the immanent logic emerging from the collective acts of subjects from below. It is thus not a matter of interpreting, but of participating.

Beyond their diverse circumstances, the Tahrir Square and Puerta del Sol movements in Cairo and in Madrid, form part of the genealogy of “All of them must go!” declared in the 2001 Argentinian revolt, the 2000 Cochabamba Water

War, the 2003 and 2005 Bolivian Gas Wars and the 2006 Oaxaca commune, to mention only the urban cases. These movements all share two characteristics: the curbing of those in power and the opening of spaces for direct democracy and collective participation without representatives.

These movements all share two characteristics: the curbing of those in power and the opening of spaces for direct democracy and collective participation without representatives.

Cristina Cielo: Is such a concept of revolution based on horizontal relations similar to Hardt and Negri's concept of the multitude? What is the difference between their multitude and your idea of dispersed power?

Raúl Zibechi: Hardt and Negri's multitude is linked to post-Fordism and to non-material work in cognitive capitalism. This mode of production is still in the minority in Latin America and I believe in the Arab world as well. So while it is interesting, their idea of multitude cannot be employed to understand what is happening here. My take on the collective is quite different. We live in societies that are "variegated", an interesting concept developed by the Bolivian René Zavaleta Mercado to describe social relations in his country. These are societies in which many different types of traditional and modern social relations co-exist, as do formal and informal modes of work, ways of life, and a long etcetera, all of which assumes a superpositioning of links defined by competition, cooperation, reciprocity, solidarity.

The best example of this is the Andean market, or the urban market in the peripheries of cities like

Buenos Aires. These are spaces in which many families live together in a small area, with various businesses that combine production and sales in different fields, with diverse modes of employment – familial, salaried, in kind, commissioned – that is, a "variegated" mode that implies diverse and complex social relations that are interwoven and combined. In this way, if one of these relationships is modified, the rest are as well

My proposal of "dispersing power" is rooted in communities in movement, non-formal communities, which, once set into motion, can disperse state power. How? Simply because they are composed of mobile powers, rotational, as found in Andean Aymaran and Quechuan communities, as well as in Mayan and many other communities... There are, then, two issues. One is the internal power of communities, that in some cases may be more vertical; the other is how communities confront the State. They cannot confront it frontally, because they are annihilated. They surround it, embrace it, paralyze it, penetrate it subtly. That is what we saw in Tahrir when protesters slept under tanks, when women approached soldiers.

Cristina Cielo: The press has emphasized the role of women and of youth in the Arab mobilizations. Is this also a characteristic of Latin American mobilizations?

Raúl Zibechi: There has been a brutal deconstructing of the family in Latin America. Families have broken up, mothers are left with children without fathers, because adult men are the hardest hit by neoliberal structural adjustments. In working-class neighborhoods, there are two generations of

children without parents, children almost alone Sometimes mothers can barely cope with caring for their children, finding support only in grandmothers. It is very common to see families where the mother has five or six children, each by different and now absent fathers.

These mothers and their children are among the first to turn to urban mobilizations of the unemployed, because there they find a space of social safeguards, of support that is both material and affective. The youth also turn to mobilizations because they find in them a sense of belonging, they fit in, they are respected. The same reasons that families turn to pentecostal churches are often the same exact reasons that they might join popular mobilizations. What I mean is that there is a need The alternatives seem to be the church or the movements. I've read that in some Arab countries the mosque may play this role. The point is that among the poor and vulnerable, many are women and youth.

Cristina Cielo: Reports on Tunisia and Egypt's uprisings emphasized the use of Facebook, Twitter and the internet as media for the horizontal organization of the protests. Your own work has focused on the territorial character of Latin American social movements. What are the implications of the differences between the virtual spaces of Arab mobilizations and the physical territories of the Latin American movements?

Raúl Zibechi: I don't believe in virtual spaces, spaces are always material as well as symbolic. It's another matter to speak of virtual media of communication among people in movement. Not knowing

the reality in the Middle East, I can tell you what I see in Latin America, and from that point perhaps some points of comparison can be established.

The territories of social movements are those spaces that were created by collectives, particularly in cities, but of course also in rural areas. Over the last 50 years, urban popular sectors have appropriated peripheral lands, they have collectively occupied it and built homes, schools and social and health centers. The main actors have been peasants emigrating to cities and the unemployed who lived in formal urban areas but left these areas once they lost their jobs and were unable to continue paying rent. It's something like the urban "landless," who have sometimes occupied urban land individually and other times have carried out collective settlements that involved violent conflicts with the police.

At this point, I would like to differentiate between spaces and territories. Spaces are, for example, the premises used by a union or a cultural association. Movements can meet in these spaces for long periods, and sometimes quite often, as do counter-cultural youth groups. These are spaces that are occupied for limited amounts of time, even though some call these territories as well. For me, territories are those places in which life is lived in an integral sense, they are settlements, as we say in Latin America. These have existed for a long time in rural areas: indigenous communities or settlements of Brazil's Landless Movement, ancestral lands or lands recuperated in the struggle.

What was new in the 1970s onward was the proliferation of urban land occupations. In some cities, more than 70% of urban land, and therefore of households, are illegal yet legitimate occupations. In some cases, this marks the beginning of another

type of social organization, in which semi-craftwork production – including urban gardens – is combined with popular markets and informal modes of distribution. In the decisive moments of struggles against the State or at times of profound crisis, these territories become "resistor territories," that is, spaces that are in some senses liberated from state power and from which challenges to the system may be launched.

Cristina Cielo: What is the importance of urban spaces in popular mobilizations in both regions?

Raúl Zibechi: There is a double use of spaces. One is the daily spaces of the neighborhoods, the markets, all the spaces of daily socialization. The other is the space of protest, the mega-space such as Tahrir Square in Cairo or the Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires. These spaces are occupied for a time, sometimes for longer periods such as the Puerta del Sol in Madrid, but they are not permanent spaces in which people live their daily lives, because they have to go to work, go home to sleep, etc.

It seems to me necessary to make this distinction and at the same time to establish links between both kinds of urban spaces. I agree with James Scott's point that people tend to "rehearse" their public actions in spaces that are distant from power, spaces that they can control and in which they feel secure. In contemporary cities, those spaces are the markets, the churches or mosques, social or cultural clubs, youth gangs. Sometimes universities or high schools can play those roles. It is important to understand what is happening in those spaces, because it is from there that people come out to take Tahrir Square. It is in those spaces that powerful rebellions

are spun, that is why they are so important. And, of course, the family. The changes in family, the role of women, of children, the number of children, all of these are indications of what is to come. I don't believe that great popular uprisings can take place without some shift in the role of patriarchy in the home.

From "This is No Time to be Given to Distraction"

([First published](#) in *La Jornada*, 25 February 2011. Translation of the entire article available [here](#).)

With the Arab revolts, the global systemic crisis enters a new phase, more unpredictable and increasingly beyond control. Until now, the main actors have been the financial oligarchs, the powerful multinationals and the leading governments, particularly the United States and China, followed at some distance by institutions such as the G-20. Now, as popular sectors around the world – particularly the mobilized populace of the Middle East – enter the scene, a momentous shift has taken place. It implies a deepening and speeding up of the global transformations taking place

The activation of popular sectors modifies our analytic axes, and above all, imposes ethical choices. The scenarios of inter-state relations will increasingly collide with the scenarios of emancipatory struggles. Concretely: popular struggles for freedom may bring down governments and regimes that seemed poised against imperialism and the unipolar world headed by the United States and Western multinationals. When popular revolts



Sousse, Hósök / Heroes 2
Flickr: Deanka

threaten governments that are friendly to the West, as in the case of Egypt, wide fronts against tyranny are formed by the most diverse lefts. But when those same revolts take aim at tyrannies that are more or less anti-US, that front is fractured and calculations of convenience emerge. Such is the case with Libya

We are entering into a period of systemic chaos that at some moment will shed light on a new

order, perhaps better, perhaps worse than the capitalist order. This system was born with the demographic catastrophe of the Black Plague, which killed a third of the European population over the span of a few years. It will not surrender on tiptoes and with fine manners, but rather in the midst of chaos and barbarity, as with Gaddafi's regime.

From "The Arab Revolts and Strategic Thinking"

([First published](#) in *America Latina en movimiento*, 4 February 2011. Translation of the entire article available [here](#).)

It is a matter of understanding the lines of force, the relations of power, the strong and weak points in international relations understood as a system. It is like understanding which bricks in a wall sustain the structure; if those bricks are removed or affected, the whole building – despite its appearance of stability – could tumble

To say we are traversing a systemic crisis, however, is not to say that the capitalist system is in a terminal crisis. The point, rather, is that the international system will not continue to function as it has since its last great re-structuring, which took place more or less in 1945, at the end of the Second World War. While systemic analyses do not pretend to specify exact dates for such profound changes, they do indicate stages characterized by important tendencies. For example: the crisis of U.S. hegemony. [Some of these systemic shifts include] not only the decline of U.S. power, but also the growth of the BRIC (Brazil,

Russia, India and China, to which South Africa has now been added). Turkey's geopolitical shifts have also been noted, as it has slowly abandoned Washington's sphere of influence. But the Arab revolts constitute a pronounced turn of the screw.

Cristina Cielo: Why does the coverage and analyses of events in the Middle East portray these as 'revolts', 'rebellions' or 'uprisings' rather than as social movements, as popular mobilizations in Latin America tend to be portrayed?

Raúl Zibechi: Social movement is a Eurocentric concept that has been useful in describing what happens in homogeneous societies that revolve around the capitalist market, in which there is one basic form of social relations. In Latin America, the concept has and is used by academic intellectuals whose perspective is external to popular sector organization. If they were on the inside, they would see that in fact there are two societies: the official one, of the upper and middle-upper classes, and the other society, the informal one, of use values and of the popular sectors. When I say that there are two societies, I mean to say that each of these is shaped by different types of social relations, and as such, by diverse relationships of power. That is why when the alternative, popular society sets itself into action, it makes more sense to speak of societies in movement, or alternative societies in movement, rather than of social movements. The difference is critical.

In any case, I suspect that in the Arab case the international media has not spoken of social movements because of issues of racism, of colonialism, as if it takes some level of modernity – which they don't consider the Middle Eastern people to have achieved

– to have a so-called civil society, which is also a Eurocentric construction. I prefer to speak, along with Partha Chatterjee, of political society, because it is only by doing politics that it can exist.

Cristina Cielo: If socio-political transformations in both regions point to a global systemic crisis, how do particular events in one region influence the processes or possibilities in other regions? That is, are there ways in which such diverse and disperse forces can transform each other, or transform into something else?

Raúl Zibechi: Fundamental processes and situational junctures respond to different logics and views. There is no mechanical relation between the two, rather we must focus our attention on the longer processes, and insert events into those, as Braudel taught us. The fundamental tendency is: a crisis of the center-periphery relationship, a crisis of U.S. domination and of the unipolar world, and now, also, a crisis in Western hegemony. In this transition, which has been taking place over the last four decades, we must insert current processes.

What I mean to say is that the Arab and Latin American revolts disrupt previous equilibriums, or rather said, they accelerate the processes of the crises of older structures. And when there are cracks in the imperial Occidental construction, emergent tendencies are strengthened: for example, China, India, Brazil. At the same time, we can register changes in micro structures such as the family, school, health system, the city itself, that is, in spaces of discipline that are undergoing very powerful transformations. Macro and micro transformations must be jointly examined, included within the same description. If

we do that, we see a world in movement, one that enters into situations of systemic chaos at particular moments, such as the present one. We do not know what will come, but we are sure that it will be very different. All the cards say: Asia, multipolarity, emergent nations. I hope that some of the cards also say emancipation, but nothing is certain.

[the Arab and Latin American revolts disrupt previous equilibriums ... they accelerate the processes of the crises of older structures](#)

From “Everything Solid Melts into the Street” ([First published](#) in *America Latina en movimiento*, 15 February 2011. Translation of the entire article available [here](#).)

The people in the street are a spanner in the works in the accumulation of capital, which is why one of the first “measures” taken by the military after Mubarak left was to demand that citizens abandon the street and return to work. But if those in power cannot co-exist with the streets and occupied squares, those of us below – who have learned to topple Pharaohs – have not yet learned how to jam the flows and movements of capital. Something much more complex is needed than blocking tanks or dispersing anti-riot police. In contrast to state apparatuses, capital flows without territory, so it is impossible to pin down and confront. Still further: it traverses us, it models our bodies and behaviors, it is part of our everyday lives and, as Foucault pointed out, it shares our beds and our dreams. Although there is an outside to the State and its institutions, it is

difficult to imagine an outside to capital. Neither barricades nor revolts will suffice to fight it.

Despite these limitations, the hunger revolts that became anti-authoritarian revolts are a depth charge to the most important equilibriums of the world system. These will not remain unscathed by the destabilization in the Middle East. The progressive Israeli press was right in noting that what is least needed in the region is some kind of stability. In Gideon Levy’s words, reported in *Haaretz* on 10 February 2011, “stability encompasses millions of Arabs living under criminal regimes and evil tyrannies Maintaining Middle East stability means perpetuating the intolerable situation by which some 2.5 million Palestinians exist without any rights under the heel of Israeli rule”....

[the hunger revolts that became anti-authoritarian revolts are a depth charge to the most important equilibriums of the world system](#)

We are entering into a period of uncertainty and increasing disorder. In South America, the emergent power of Brazil has assembled a regional architecture as an alternative to the one that has begun to collapse. The Union of South American Nations is a good indicator of this. Everything suggests, however, that things will be far more complicated in the Middle East, given the enormous political and social polarization in the region, the ferocious interstate competition and because both the United States and Israel believe that their future depends on sustaining realities that can in fact no longer be propped up.

The Middle East brings together some of the most brutal contradictions of the contemporary world. Firstly, there are determined efforts to sustain an outdated unilateralism. Secondly, it is the region where the principal tendency of the contemporary world is most visible: the brutal concentration of power and wealth. Never before in the history of humanity has just one nation, the United States, expended as much in military spending as the rest of the world combined. And it is in the Middle East where that armed power exercises its supreme force to buttress the world-system. What's more: a small state of some seven million inhabitants has twice as many nuclear weapons as China, the second world power.

The Arab revolts may open a fissure in the colossal concentration of power that has been manifest in the region since the Second World War. Only time will tell if what is brewing is a tsunami so powerful that not even the Pentagon will be able to surf its waves. But we mustn't forget that tsunamis make no distinctions: they sweep up rights and lefts, the just and the sinners, the rebels and the conservatives. Nevertheless, they are in many ways similar to revolutions: they leave nothing in their place and they provoke enormous suffering before things return to some kind of normalcy, better perhaps than before, or maybe just less bad.

For the complete texts in English of Raúl Zibechi's essays that are extracted above, go to:

[The Revolutions of the Ordinary People](#)
[This is No Time to be Given to Distraction](#)
[The Arab Revolts and Strategic Thinking](#)
[Everything Solid Melts into the Street](#)