

The Communitarian Revolutionary Subject: New forms of social transformation*

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Acknowledgements:

This paper is a product of a collaborative effort of members of the “Sustainability Laboratory” in the Department of Economics. We are particularly grateful to the prolonged discussions during its lengthy gestation period; the active members of this group are: Wuendy Armenta, Erika Carcaño, and Ana Lilia Esquivel. Previous work on this line of research was conducted as part of a European Community Research Program (FP-7) in which we collaborated with colleagues from eight countries on the subject of Environmental Governance in Latin America; the results are summarized in the book listed in the bibliography (Barkin and Lemus, in: Castro, Hogenboom, and Baud). Funding for this work comes from our University and the fellowship programs of the National Council of Science and Technology (CONACYT).

We are very grateful for the constructive and comradely comments we received from many colleagues in Mexico and abroad; in particular, we would like to thank Radhika Desai, Maarten de Kadt, Dominick Tuminaro and the members of the University of Zacatecas Seminar in Critical Development Studies. The careful reading and perspicacious comments from the two anonymous readers were quite important for the final revision.

* Accepted for publication in *Third World Quarterly*, 2019, doi:10.1080/01436597.2019.1636370

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Abstract

The hope for a unique revolutionary actor in the XX Century evaporated as a result of the weaknesses of social organizations. This paper examines the potential of an almost forgotten group of revolutionary actors –collectively organized and deliberately involved in processes of social and productive transformation with a legitimate claim to territory– whose present-day activities involve them in concerted processes to consolidate a different constellation of societies on the margins of the global capitalist system.

Indigenous and peasant communities throughout the Americas are self-consciously restructuring their organizations and governance structures, taking control of territories they claimed for generations. They are also reorganizing production to generate surplus, assembling their members to take advantage of underutilized resources and peoples' energies for improving their ability to raise living standards and assure environmental conservation and restoration.

These communities are not operating in isolation. They coordinate activities, share information, and build alliances. Hundreds of millions of people are participating in this growing movement; they occupy much more than one-quarter of the world's land area. There is great potential for others to join them, expanding from the substantial areas where they are already operational. Global social networks are ensuring that this dynamic accelerates.

Keywords: revolutionary subject, collective, community, social transformation, surplus

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David Barkin and Alejandra Sánchez

Introduction

The model of a world economic system is promoted as the ideal of development and growth to improve well-being and quality of life to society. This idyllic vision promised equality, justice and freedom through the operation of the globalised capitalist market. From its inception, it was clear that this model of social and productive relations was generating insurmountable contradictions. Grounded in the assumptions of Western ideology and driven by powerful political and economic forces, it is trying to force all peoples and productive systems into a simplified mould conducive to privatized capital accumulation that transforms natural “resources” and people into commodities. In the process it is attempting to erase the extraordinary diversity of societies and cultures that survived through the centuries and that are attempting to flourish today. The logic of capitalist production is demanding new spaces for the accumulation of capital, generating greater inequality, accentuating the environmental crisis, and threatening the future production of food, the supply of drinking water, and life itself. In this context, it is worth asking: Are there political processes in operation capable of responding to present social and environmental crises?; How are processes of social transformation manifesting themselves?; and, Who might be the actors of these revolutions?

Not all societies are deluded by the chimera of progress promised by the high priests of globalization. Many peoples are searching for alternatives to ‘neoliberal’ domination, implementing diverse strategies to counteract the adverse effects of capitalist system. In this contribution, we examine actions of social groups that for generations tried to resist the looting of their resources, their social exclusion, and, often times worse, the terrible consequences of their integration into capitalism’s social and productive institutions. More recently, they are raising their voices, implementing profound processes of socio-economic transformation in diverse spaces. This analysis is firmly rooted in a burgeoning concern for the depths of the environmental crisis that the prevailing model is provoking¹ and the growing recognition that there are myriad indigenous and peasant groups fashioning alternative societies where people can enjoy palpable improvements in their quality of life while taking responsibility for conserving the ecosystems on which we all depend.²

Many indigenous and peasant communities, about whom we are reporting, including some with whom we are collaborating, are declaring themselves “anti-systemic” in the sense that they are generating social and political processes that challenge the logic of capitalism. These communities are important actors in international movements to confront today’s economic and environmental crises; their defining characteristic is their relationship to the land. The historical emphasis on the class nature of their struggle³ and the political identity of their mobilizations⁴ are inseparable.⁵ Their potential significance may be best illustrated by the fact that these communities occupy an extraordinarily large share of the world’s area; considering only part of this population, recent geospatial research shows that “indigenous Peoples manage or have tenure rights to more than one-quarter of the world’s land surface, and intersects about 40% of all terrestrial protected areas and ecologically intact

landscapes”.⁶ By embracing innovative approaches to social (re)organization, production, and environmental management, they offer practical solutions that other social groups in both urban and rural areas can learn from.

While forging their own paths towards social progress, they are demonstrating the fruitfulness of Harvey’s plea for learning from both the Marxist analysis of change and the anarchist’s call for direct action on the barricades.⁷ They are leading the way to open new routes for social progress, formulating strategies to improve their lifestyles, control their productive systems, defend their legitimate claims to significant territories, and conserve their natural endowments. These approaches are permitting them to generate surpluses and distribute them for individual and collective benefit, creating a new “social capacity” that is transforming them into “**collective revolutionary subjects**.”

1. The community: the collective basis of the revolutionary subject

The construction of alternatives leads to the possibility of an economic, political, social and ecological transformation. Our analysis is based on the history of many indigenous and peasant societies of Latin America. These societies generally possess worldviews that emerge from their Indo-American roots. These worldviews consist of complex systems of beliefs, values and traditions. Although not exhaustive, we might include the following characteristics: 1) their vision of a balance in relations between society and nature, where the bond with the natural environment entails responsibility; 2) a communitarian view of property, where the care and use of their ecosystem is determined collectively and usufruct rights do not imply the possibility of private property or sale; 3) community work requires the redefinition of labour, based on non-capitalist values; and, 4) participatory democracy, involving unique structures of governance, responsible involvement and collective commitment.⁸

The integration of their worldviews implies a constant redefinition of their identities and a renewed understanding of the significance of their cultural heritage under current conditions.⁹ That is, they are peoples who are transcending their historical heritage to redefine their collective identity, with a pluricultural character, that the community is aware of, preserving some characteristics that are functional while discarding those that are not of importance; specifically, the communities decide to enrich their knowledge of the society-nature relationship.¹⁰ The systematization of this knowledge allows them *to transform themselves as a community* (i.e. asserting their collective consciousness), generating models that become niches of sustainability and social justice.

Their productive systems are not archaic as conventional economic thinking often presumes. The communities have great capacities (in the logic of their social dynamics based on other rationalities) but these are not recognized by or valued in the globalized market system. In this sense, the production structures implemented by these societies are proving to be important sustainable projects insofar they combine ancestral knowledge of nature, the use of various technologies, modern productive techniques and social and moral principles, such as environmental and social justice. Intensifying climate change is accelerating the search for improvements in their productive systems and innovative strategies to solve future needs of society.

Guiding this process of moving towards a more resilient society (creating these niches of sustainability) are five principles that we generally find in these communities: 1) autonomy to govern themselves and manage their institutions and territory; 2) solidarity within the community and with other communities involved in similar processes; 3) self-sufficiency, to the degree that it is possible, considering available resources and the ecosystem; 4) productive diversification to provide goods for exchange with other communities to obtain products that cannot be produced locally; and 5) sustainable management of regional resources, that requires collaboration with other communities in the ecosystem.¹¹

Their cultural and historical heritages are a social resource that contribute to maintain their existence, as well as to restructure their internal social processes to respond to current challenges. Their societies are constantly being redefined as a result of interactions with the capitalist system; that is, they are not isolated and must continually interact with the societies of which they are a part. They know and understand their logics, and their community worldviews create the opportunity for maintaining non-capitalist economic and social relations and to limit their interactions with the capitalist economic system. In recent decades, these advances contributed to strengthening their political position, facilitating collective decisions that foster social change. With the recognition of the significance of these developments in the international arena (ILO Convention 169 and the UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples-DRIP), their demands are increasingly being accepted as legitimate in national political systems.

The revolutionary subjects are capable of changing their situation, transcending capitalist relations; they are born and reproduced in the community. *“The community is an ethical project that has been proposed for a long time and acts as a guide for social transformations”*.¹² The community has fundamental characteristics that give meaning to its construction as collective revolutionary subjects. These include: a) the community formed by individuals which recognizes them as part of a totality; b) the community based on service to advance the common good, a result of the sum of individual contributions in which reciprocity is inherent; c) the community does not renounce individuality (personal identity) since people find their fulfilment when contributing to the collective (by their own free decision); d) in the process, it deepens common values respecting plurality and individual values; and e) the community promotes the growth of social virtues such as solidarity and fraternity, in which a consensual process prevails.¹³

The community is the result of two principal influences: 1) a historical trajectory that includes colonial subjugation and periods of apparent independence under various governance systems (characterized by enslavement, deception, theft, exclusion and inclusion with discrimination); and 2) a worldview founded at the collective level –in which language plays a fundamental role in shaping a different understanding of people’s relationship to nature.¹⁴ In other words, we are collaborating with societies historically constituted and developed in the collectivity: the common good prevails over individual interest. The community establishes a social contract (quite different from the Hobbesian Social Contract (1651) that defines a political order that creates the basis for civilization, for authority); it is formulated and accepted by the collective in which the individual is subsumed by decisions and the will of the community.¹⁵ This social contract implies unity among the members of

society, in sharp contrast to the individuality characteristic of the alternative prevailing in Western societies.

To summarize, the community is a project of collective life, linked to new forms of social and political praxis –other realities, other rationalities.¹⁶ The conjugation of this praxis appears as the creator of new relations of production aimed at improving community and individual welfare. These expressions of organization are not new; on the contrary, they are the product of generations of resistance during which time values and collective goals were modified and transmitted by tradition and reaffirmed and reconfigured by custom. As part of this evolution, "being indigenous" has become an important issue for the success of their movements, the acceptance of their social demands, and the forging of alliances, as well as the transformation of their economic, political, social and ecological spaces.

Today, the communities are consolidating societies based on a different logic, in spaces that they occupy within the global system. They are well informed about the epistemological critiques that question the dominant system and its development model; alternative proposals for conducting research and systematizing information about their experiences is burgeoning across the globe.¹⁷ Part of their strategies are aimed at understanding and implementing programs for local and regional progress¹⁸ that take into account their collective visions and environmental justice. This is the context in which the collective revolutionary subject is born.

2. The collective revolutionary subject and transformative action

The potential for social transformation of the collective revolutionary subject is based on its *social capacity* to continually strengthen and deepen its organization. This social capacity is forged from the intangible resources that communities possess and use for consensual actions to establish strategies to consolidate their well-being.¹⁹ These are the attributes that communities put into practice through their worldviews, including principles of reciprocity, mutual aid and support networks to strengthen social cohesion and community benefit. In this context, we can speak of "collective attitudes" as: *"Dispositions common to the members of a group, (...), are expressed in beliefs about society according to preferences, promoting consistent behaviours that... involve adherence to certain values and rejection of some situations."*²⁰

This social capacity allows the community to mobilize its resources to achieve collectively established goals. On the one hand, these needs are based on the vision of the community and not on those determined by the marketplace, and, on the other hand, involve the establishment of the economy within society, in other words, an economic process that is subsumed to the needs of society rather than of the market.²¹ This entails a rethinking of the notions of progress, development and quality of life, based on the communities' value systems and collective principles; other meanings of well-being are developed, based on qualitative and intangible dimensions (rather than quantitative measures). In this way, this social transformation reflects the consolidation of the communities as governing bodies capable of negotiating with the institutions of the nation-state of which they are a part. In the following sections, some elements that are fundamental for this social transformation are examined, elements that create the social capacity of the collective revolutionary subject.

Territorial management of productive systems

The base of the economic sustenance of this type of society is the territory, considered as a common good or property; as a result, its appropriation is collective. These societies have a strong attachment to their territory, evident in their special (harmonious) relationship with the natural environment of which they are part. The territory is not conceived as a commodity, it is the giver of life (*Pachamama* or Mother Earth), a place where history, culture, social organization and nature are encapsulated. Its management has a strong relationship with the construction of collective identity (a socially constructed space). The territory is more than a biophysical space, it is a social, political, cultural, spiritual and economic space that gives meaning to the collective.²² Productive systems are established by defining a bond with nature, including a commitment to conserve natural endowments and/or promote their restoration. If communities have the capacity to control and manage their territories then they can determine their productive systems, and therefore their social structures.

The territory is an organizing structure for the existence of these societies. In many cases, it has been the object of struggles and conflicts for its defence –struggles that have intensified because of the current form of the expansion of capital. In strict sense, indigenous and peasant communities should have total control over the territory which they inhabit. However, the State, in complicity with the powerful economic interests, often tries to impose decisions about its use.

In this regard, many new concessions for the exploitation of natural “resources” are being granted to capital. In some cases, the State has recognized the collective legal ownership of the territory by communities; although in Mexico there are legal figures such as the “*ejido*” and communal property recognized for native peoples, the Constitution grants the State authority to assign all subsoil and water rights. In spite of this, indigenous communities are insisting on their rights, as recognized by the Mexican State with its accession to the ILO Convention 169 that calls for the “prior, informed consent” of all projects in their areas. As in other countries, this is an important point of contention, that sometimes can be resolved through negotiation, but often times it leads to violence as private interests attempt to impose their might; this is the case, for example, in Ecuador and Brazil, where peoples in the Amazon continue to suffer greatly from invasions and murder, and in Honduras, where a globally recognized leader was brutally assassinated.²³ To prosecute these demands and defend themselves, the communities are developing alliances, support networks, educational processes on legal issues, and, above all, political negotiation strategies, to assert effective territorial management for their organizations.²⁴

Surplus management

With the consolidation of these new forms of organization, communities are able to create new activities and identify and mobilize their available resources for their collective benefit. As a result, they are generating increasing volumes of “economic surplus” that offers them a greater capacity to attend their needs; these new forms of surplus often do not only assume a conventional quantitative (monetary) form, but also, and perhaps more importantly, include many material and social resources that are not ‘priced’ by the market, such as the contributions of knowledge, skills, voluntary labour, and shared tools and spaces. Collective management for the production and management of this surplus consolidates the

community's social capacity. There is an intangible dimension to this process of generation, appropriation and use that reflects the values and principles of the community, rather than those defined by market dynamics.

From an analytical perspective, this surplus generation begins by discarding the concept of a labour force defined as a commodity in traditional Marxist analysis or in the marketplace. In most communities, this involves mobilizing the considerable productive potential of their members through *voluntary or solidarity work* ("*mano vuelta*" and "*tequio*" in some indigenous communities), forms of work not mediated by salary, based on reciprocity and cooperation. To these activities, we might add those of community leadership and administration as well as the tasks of caring (education, health care, social services, etc.) normally attributed exclusively to women that are also often collectively managed; an essential component is the reconsideration of the role of women in society, a factor that has been historically neglected and denigrated in the market.²⁵ This is akin to tapping the *potential surplus* central to Paul Baran's analysis of economic growth, values that are disregarded in the capitalist organization of society.²⁶

A crucial element in the appropriation of these resources is the exercise of collective ownership and responsibility, involving the assumption of social control of decision-making, on the basis of the same principles of reciprocity and mutual aid. Although part of the surplus is distributed individually to satisfy particular needs and reward individual efforts, the process of collective decision-making about its distribution is one of the pillars on which the communities sustain their autonomy. Generally, we observe that the criteria for generating and distributing surplus are directly evaluated in terms of the strengthening of community life, while responding to diverse social, economic and ecological needs.

This form for the mobilization of surplus is vital for understanding social change, because it undermines the centrality of the market. In its place, there is a system of production planning, management of surplus funds, and an administrative structure to allocate resources to areas that benefit society. This allows the communities to decide and direct their resources, making decisions an explicit part of the process of community consolidation, and developing alliances with other communities as well as with social and political organizations. Mobilizing the surplus also depends on the social capacity to organize work, the productive process, the exchanges and the sustainable management of natural resources. In other words, it is about *political capacity* (autonomy, self-management, bargaining power).

A significant dimension of the use of surpluses is its ecological impact. Many strategies have been undertaken to confront environmental challenges. Throughout the Americas (and elsewhere) communities are facing threats created by "projects of death" (as they are called) such as transnational mega-projects in mining, hydro- and wind-power, as well as by land and water grabbing on an international scale. In Mexico, as elsewhere in Latin America, there has been some advance in developing administrative and legislative strategies to strengthen their social organizations to defend their territory and ecosystems against such proposals.²⁷

Political position

The communities cannot implement programs for social transformation on their own. Although many have strong historical and cultural roots that are the source of their strength

and internal cohesion, their ability to resist the powerful institutions that the nation-states have arrayed against them is limited. In the face of this unequal confrontation, many communities throughout the Americas are forging alliances among themselves, with international non-governmental organizations, and some official international bodies to prosecute their demands for self-government and other forms of autonomy. This ability to resist is considerably enhanced by the ratification of international agreements by their governments, such as the Convention 169 and the UNDRIP, mentioned above.

The collective revolutionary subject must develop a political position that promotes broader strategies and projects, reinforced by implementing the five principles mentioned above. Considering the limitations on the scope for political action within the capitalist system, the capacity for action of the collective revolutionary subject is based on its ability to exercise an increasing degree of autonomy, through its control over its territories and its surplus. When the State recognizes their capacity for self-management (its legal framework), then the communities acquire a greater capacity for social transformation.

The social mobilizations that emerged in Mexico and Latin America in recent decades is playing a crucial role in generating and expanding this capacity. Communities throughout the region are joining in national and international networks to create regional alliances that reinforce their claims as individual communities. In particular, their defence of territory and demands to protect their ecosystems were triggers for these strategies of political organization. In Mexico, these national groupings include the “Mexican Network of People Affected by Mining” (REMA – Chiapas, México), “Movement of People Affected by Dams and in Defence of the Rivers” (MAPDER), “Civil Society Organization de la Sociedad Civil ‘Las Abejas De Acteal’” (The Bees of Acteal) and the “National Indigenous Congress” (CNI).

The collective revolutionary subject is aware of the *power* that it acquires as its social capacity allows it to build an autonomous system of governance, controlling its territory and managing the surplus that it produces. However, these collective revolutionary subjects are not seeking to seize state power (through electoral or violent processes); rather they are focusing on the exercise of *popular power*²⁸ and *social power*.²⁹ The former derives from a collective organization that exercises its claim for the (expanded) control of the territory; therefore, this type of power is consolidated in indigenous and peasant communities and is quite different from the traditional conception of power centred in the State. This popular power emerges from processes of struggle (both internal and external), sanctioned by the broad support generated in the local assemblies. In contrast, social power results from an emancipatory process to reconstitute and strengthen the social fabric, to restore the natural and planetary environment, and to recuperate and ‘modernize’ the “dominated, excluded and exploited cultures of the peripheral worlds... [It is a] force that emerges independently of and autonomously from civil society, seeking to distance itself from the State and capital.”³⁰ This social power becomes embodied in alternative projects developed by organized groups that include communities, cooperatives, unions, and associations, among others.

The inability of nation-states to exercise their sovereignty in the face of international corporate and political pressures to grant investment concessions (for extractive activities or other ‘mega-projects’) further discredits the possibility for radical social change from within.

In contrast, the assertion of the ability and right to govern local spaces is advancing throughout the Americas, reflecting an important step towards the construction of new social relations based on the recognition of human dignity and the abandonment of subordinate relationships. The evolving body of international agreements protecting indigenous rights and their claims as guarantors of biodiversity is proving to be a powerful bulwark against the unfettered incursions of capital during the recent past. This experience is becoming well-documented in a growing literature on the concrete experiences of the individual communities and their alliances.³¹

3. Some expressions of the social transformation by the collective revolutionary subject

Today there are many expressions that can be called revolutionary, but their definition is a subject for great debate. The traditional vision of a violent revolution as a reaction against repression by the State is now being reassessed by detailed analyses that document the revolutionary potential in the notion of "everyday struggles"³² or political negotiation and reconciliation.³³ The crisis of revolutionary politics has led to new formulations in *resistance* and *rebellion*; these have gained prominence in recent decades,³⁴ but are more difficult to define with regard to the concept of "revolutionary". We consider a *revolutionary expression* to include actions involving important social transformations in defined contexts, including fundamental changes in the social dynamics of social and productive structures, political life, and ecological conservation; these often involve repudiating the initiatives by capital and the state to limit their autonomy or ability to manage their territories. Neil Smith, building on the celebrated Trinidadian anticolonial historian, C.L.R. James', definition of revolution, presciently characterised it as coming "like a thief in the night," adding that "the thief needs to come with a few tools. Some of these tools are intellectual ideas; others are tools of the imagination about other possible worlds; still others are our human bodies." In consonance with the thesis of this article, he added: "most importantly they [require] social and political organization for a more humane future."³⁵

Historically, many analysts characterised Latin American indigenous movements during the 500 years from colonization to establishment of the neoliberal system as "*resistance*". The perseverance of hundreds of cultures, along with their languages and cosmovisions (belief systems) is transcending this *culture of resistance*,³⁶ to become a demand for recognition of and support for their inherited lifestyles; in this change in their role in society and on the world scene, these peoples are claiming a new place in the world order, and with it, in the nation-states in which they live. These revolutionary subjects are the indigenous, rural and peasant communities involved in formulating strategies to *resist* the economic rationality of globalized market, adding ethical, moral and cultural dimensions of sustainability, demonstrating that their activities are part of processes of social appropriation of nature with social and environmental responsibility,³⁷ generating surpluses that contribute to their quality of life and the conservation of their ecosystems.

Resistance is related to *rebellion*, assuming many different forms to demonstrate its rejection of the dominant system that implies the *use of power from below*, in contrast to classical revolution that seeks to conquer state power for social transformation. *Rebellion* entails a social organization to transform the context of those who are below.³⁸

But these social movements are going further, recently described as "*r-existence*", in Latin America. It offers a new perspective of emancipation and the construction of sustainability. Their struggles are legitimizing the rights of peoples to their ancestral territories, in the face of policies to appropriate and transform nature to accelerate the expansion of the global economy. The distribution the benefits of the re-appropriation of nature and technology is not the issue; rather the "*r-existence*" of these traditional populations aims to consolidate renewed social formations, new ways to organize society and assure its respect for nature.³⁹

It might appear that indigenous and peasant social movements are simply opposed to capitalist economic expansion. Our formulation suggests that they are going further by finding ways to improve the members' quality of life within their social organizations, re-appropriating their cultural identity in the process (language and ancestral knowledge of the past generations). This "*r-existence*" involves recuperating ancestral knowledge and/or reinventing it as well as combining scientific knowledge and new ways to solving problems, in order to remain in their territories while assuring social and ecological balance.⁴⁰

Grounding the analysis

These alternative projects encompass all aspects of life and are creating new social initiatives. The projects combine concerns for protecting the environment and its biodiversity while also enriching inherited skills and knowledge with those acquired in social practice and contacts with others. Water management is a significant area for social mobilization; in Mexico and elsewhere in Latin America; there is a long history of innovation in resource conservation and use, going back to the irrigation systems constructed in the period before the conquest;⁴¹ even today, new appropriate technologies are evident.⁴² Similarly, over the past half-century peasants' militant actions earned them a world-wide reputation for outstanding forest management practices, combining attention to the health of their trees with strategies for cutting and transformation that contribute to social well-being and cohesion.⁴³ The diversification of productive activities is increasingly evident as these groups begin to take over activities that were previously the realm of government or the private sector that simply employed their members and encroached on their territories without consideration for benefit sharing (e.g., ecological and cultural tourism; handicraft production; agroecological practices).⁴⁴

Perhaps the most far-reaching of the transformations involve the realization of the significance of biological and cultural diversity as a patrimony to enhance community welfare and improve ecological management. It is increasingly clear that the wealth of knowledge and skills that people in peasant and indigenous communities command are an important potential fount for solving some of the world's pressing ecological, climatic, productive and social problems.⁴⁵ For example, a quite spectacular but increasingly contested environmental management system is the Maasai pastoralist practice in Kenya.⁴⁶ Like this one, the inherited storehouse from thousands of peoples around the world will be of extraordinary significance in finding ways to increase food production on a scale that assures maintaining the productivity of their ecosystems while making food accessible to the large segments of society that the capitalist organization is not willing to or capable of supplying. The world's largest peasant social organization, with 200 million members, La Vía Campesina, is achieving remarkable advances in pursuing its agenda for food sovereignty

using agroecological approaches, in spite of considerable opposition from some international organizations and industrial/commercial agricultural interests.⁴⁷ Similarly, the Indigenous and Community Conservation Areas Consortium integrates a network of regional organizations with tens of millions of people in more than 80 countries (<https://www.iccaconsortium.org>);⁴⁸ the New Rural Reconstruction Movement in China is strengthening hundreds of communities, increasing production, and implementing environmental conservation practices for as many as 200 million peasants.⁴⁹ Examples abound of other organizations and networks that are also advancing in this direction, such as the Landless Workers' Movement (MST) in Brazil⁵⁰ and the Zero-Budget Natural Farming System in India.⁵¹ Two more comprehensive but controversial experiences involve the efforts to create an autonomous region for the Kurdish people⁵² and the commune movement in Venezuela (<http://orinocotribune.com/>), both in the midst of wartime conditions.

As we search for more examples of communities and Peoples shaping alternative ways to restructure their societies, a wealth of experiences appears.⁵³ Two Mexican experiences offer vivid illustrations of these profound transformations. The Zapatista (EZLN) movement (1994) is an enduring process of community construction, reaffirmation of indigenous identities, and the consolidation of a diversified productive system. It is guaranteeing palpable improvements in the quality of life of the half-million people living in the hundreds of communities in the region; their commitment to environmental conservation is also remarkable in the present conjuncture of continuing low-intensity aggression from the Mexican State. Although the EZLN steadfastly rejected governmental 'development' programs, it promoted a national indigenous alliance by participating in the 2018 presidential election; the official system rejected this, leading the group's to reaffirm its founding principles: to not remain passive under capitalism; to struggle for power from below; and to strengthen collective organization.⁵⁴

The second example involves the region where about 40,000 indigenous peasants, organized in cooperatives (Tosepan Titataniske) in the mountainous areas of Puebla, are protecting their ecological and cultural diversity. Known for its mineral reserves, the group developed an effective legal strategy to thwart advances by outsiders while reinforcing its social and productive strategies. The improving quality of life and ecological protection are contributing to consolidating autonomy and local governance institutions.⁵⁵

This essay was written in Mexico, where communities are consolidating their ability to forge autonomous societies from below, capable of implementing the five principles mentioned in the first section. By deepening their political capacity to build alliances and create support networks they are modifying legal frameworks to facilitate their ability to manage their territories and resources. There are perhaps 20 million people living in these areas, who control as much as one-third of Mexico's territory. Elsewhere in Latin America there are as many as 120 million people who are engaged in similar activities, increasing their ability to define their collective goals and implement strategies to achieve them. These social organizations offer tangible evidence that there are, indeed, alternatives to development.⁵⁶

4. Marx's revolutionary subject vs the collective revolutionary subject

Marx's theoretical-methodological approach is fundamental to study the revolution and the revolutionary subject. This framework offers diverse postulates that shaped the ideological construction motivating the revolutions of XX century, most of which were peasant revolutions (most analysts recognize that this concept generally also includes indigenous peoples)!⁵⁷ In this last section, we examine the distinction between the conceptualization of Marx's revolutionary subject and our proposal of the collective revolutionary subject.

The Marxist tradition has important elements for understanding present-day social transformations led by the communities. Looking at the preface to the Russian version of Communist Manifesto in 1882, Engels noted that the Russian rural community could be a starting point for a new communist revolution moving from its primitive forms of common property to a superior communist form. This was clear in Marx' letter to Vera Sassulitch in 1881, opening the possibility of different forms of social organization coexisting, such as the Russian peasants' commune, with the capitalist system.⁵⁸

In this sense, Marxist thought can enrich our understanding today's dynamics, where the subjects are transforming social reality, reinforcing their unique identities and capacity for change. David Harvey recognized this more than twenty years ago, arguing that it is "vital to hold fast to the principles that (1) all projects to transform ecological relations are simultaneously projects to transform social relations, and (2) transformative activity (labor) lies at the heart of the whole dialectics of social and environmental change." He went on to highlight that these social relations must encompass the "whole spectrum of sociality. Issues of gender, of reproduction activities, of what happens in the living space as well as in the workspace, of group difference, of cultural diversity and of local autonomy deserve careful consideration. A more nuanced view of the interplay between environmental transformations and sociality is seriously called for."⁵⁹ This "spectrum of sociality" is being enriched by the active participation of the rural peoples, left behind in many progressive doctrines of previous decades.

In order to further define our contribution, we compare the Marxist position with our proposal of the revolutionary subject:

- The notion of *social classes*. In the capitalist mode of production, Marx and Engels define two emblematic antagonistic social classes: the proletariat and the bourgeoisie,⁶⁰ whose relation is defined by wage labour, which "masks" exploitation. In our case, we do not propose a social class, but rather *indigenous and peasant communities* that may or may not embody basic capitalist relations (wage labour). That is, a specific (non-egalitarian) society with particular social dynamics outside the dominant system.
- The *class consciousness* of the proletariat arises as a political consciousness, a knowledge that implies the awareness of its existence and its action, that is, its power of transformation,⁶¹ to later promote the organization of working class. In the context of this analysis, this awareness is found in *explicit collective decision* to **not** reproduce capitalist dynamics; in many communities this decision stems from an historical peasant/indigenous identity as a referent of their worldview, which motivates its protection and defence.

- The consolidation of the working class into a *political party*, through class consciousness. For Marx, the proletarian organization starts from small groups that form a single front, until consolidating a political party that represents them all. From this emerges the fundamental role of State, where its conquest is the objective of revolution. In our proposal, we suggest a *political position* of the communities that entails a series of negotiation strategies, alliances and agreements to consolidate legal frameworks that allow them to expand their autonomy and territorial and surplus management on the margins of the sphere of State action. The seizing of state power is not an objective of the collective revolutionary subject; rather these actors seek to create political 'space' to implement their strategies of social and productive reorganization.
- The conception of *revolution*. The proletariat class, organized and consolidated in a political party, overthrows the bourgeois class and establishes its domination⁶² through the political control of state. As stated above, the revolution in our proposal does not generally assume a violent process, since we show that there are revolutionary expressions such as *resistance*, *rebellion* and "*r-existence*" that generate the possibilities of forging societies on the margins of the nation-state.

These distinctions do not imply an idealistic conception of the collective revolutionary subject. Commonly, when we think of indigenous, rural and peasant communities, our ideas are skewed in many ways: ranging from a romantic vision of the primitive to an outright rejection of traditional social practices as perhaps too fanciful. Whatever the stereotype, outsiders tend to dismiss these communities as not being significant in political terms or relevant as a fount of knowledge for productive or environmental management.

This ready dismissal of their potential ignores the objective reality of today's communities. The transformation by the collective revolutionary subject does not mean going back to the past, because it integrates traditional knowledge with present-day scientific knowledge and technologies, generating mechanisms, procedures and tools that serve to advance towards diverse productive, social and ecological goals of the community; this process is now described as a "dialogue of knowledge systems"⁶³ or "post-normal science."⁶⁴ Within the communities numerous conflicts remain, a product of centuries of adaption and resistance to conquest and the innumerable forms of injustices they suffered;⁶⁵ but the remarkable dynamics of conflict resolution is contributing to important advances in collective self-awareness and well-being.

The recent histories of the collective revolutionary subject discussed in this article clearly demonstrate its capacity to effect social change and challenge the power structures of the societies within which these peoples are immersed. They demonstrate consciousness and agency as part of an explicit program to modify and strengthen their societies and change their relationship with the capitalist world system.⁶⁶ When and where possible they are participating in projects of "national reconstruction", as might have been the case during a short period in Ecuador or in Bolivia, or in ambitious local proposals, such as the Zapatista movement in Mexico.⁶⁷ Throughout the Americas, however, myriad groups are restructuring their own relationships with the larger society, as is evident in the flourishing of efforts to implement programs of environmental justice as they become more steadfast in their

opposition to the “projects of death” proposed by international capital (cf. <http://www.ejolt.org>).

Although the “revolutionary” character of these societies remains to be determined, we suggest that the peoples involved in the dynamics described above are clearly cutting new paths for their social and productive organizations that are directly challenging the structure of the State and the capitalist form of social organization. They are laying the foundations for the convivial society of which Ivan Illich wrote about almost one-half century ago.⁶⁸ In the face of the substantial threat to human society posed by environmental deterioration and climate change, formulated as the “Second Contradiction of Capitalist Production,”⁶⁹ they are at the forefront of the profound transformations that humanity requires. All this makes it essential that we reconsider the significance of these revolutionary forces that are effectively challenging the reign of capital.

5. Conclusions

We suggest that the Marxist aspiration of a revolutionary movement to overthrow the capitalist system as a whole or even in individual states is not a realistic process, in spite of the depths of the economic, social and environmental crises facing humanity. Instead, our analysis suggests that numerous social movements, incorporating hundreds of millions of people, are involved in consolidating social and political institutions as well as productive structures to attend to the well-being of their members and the conservation of their ecosystems.

The search for alternative approaches to achieve these objectives is the most pressing task facing the peasants and indigenous peoples analysed in this article. They are rapidly moving to the margins of their societies because the priorities of the current capitalist system are directed towards the concentration and appropriation of political and economic power, leaving aside the well-being of humanity and planetary equilibrium.⁷⁰ The social initiatives to try to change the behaviour of large companies (the main emitters of greenhouse gases globally) are limited by their ability and that of other dominant groups to paralyze transformative initiatives. Instead, the communities are strengthening their autonomy and ability to supply their own needs, directly or through exchanges with others in their networks.

The revolutionary processes with which we are associated or that we offer as examples in this desultory panorama are interacting with the phenomenon of *resilience* of the planetary system. This capacity for resilience is noticed in the collective revolutionary subject that we describe; the revolutionary subject is capable of implementing processes of social reorganization to face the environmental challenges. This interdisciplinary analysis of the revolutionary subject reveals their adaptability in the face of today’s multiple social, economic and ecological crises. If we further consider that just the indigenous Peoples occupy more than one-quarter of the world’s land area⁷¹ – peasants occupy other substantial areas – there is great potential for forging spaces where alternative social organizations can expand from the substantial areas where they are already operational.

In this context, starting from the perspective of an “ecological economics from below,”⁷² our proposal involves a collective revolutionary subject, the indigenous and peasant societies

that are trying to transcend the capitalist relationship. Their collective political decision not to participate in the logic of capital does not imply that they are isolated societies, outside of capitalism. They were victims of the system and suffered terrible forms of inclusion and exclusion; now they are reconstructing their dynamics and social structures to recuperate valuable parts of their culture, identity and knowledge, linking them with scientific, political, economic and ecological knowledge to manage their territories

This is the very essence of "*r-existence*". They are creating spaces where they can exercise their autonomy, re-appropriating nature, based principally on their ability to reinvent and control their territories and manage their surplus. This intrinsic capacity of the collective revolutionary subject contributes to diverse dimensions of well-being, such as improvements in working conditions as well as material, social, cultural and environmental conditions, including health, education, spirituality and leisure.

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The collective revolutionary subject is a social actor that constructs and reconstructs itself, transforming its realities or creating new ones. Although it aims for a virtuous future, it protects its heritage to forge a balanced relation between society and nature, learning from the past and the present to create new alternatives. In sum, the myriad revolutionary involve different processes according to their contexts, reinforcing the conviction that "*other worlds are possible*" (and are under construction!)

Notes

- ¹ E.g., Meadows et al., *Limits to Growth*.
- ² Berkes, *Sacred Ecology*.
- ³ Petras and Veltmeyer, “Are Latin American peasant movements still a force for change?”
- ⁴ Esteva, “The Zapatistas and People’s Power,” and Álvarez et al., *Culture of Politics, Politics of Culture*.
- ⁵ Bartra and Otero, “Movimientos indígenas campesinos en México.”
- ⁶ Garnett et al., “A spatial overview,” 369.
- ⁷ Harvey, “Listen, Anarchist!”
- ⁸ Huanacuni, *Buen Vivir/Vivir Bien*; and Bengoa, *La emergencia indígena en América Latina*.
- ⁹ Barkin and Lemus, “Local Solutions for Environmental Justice.”
- ¹⁰ Wolf, *Europe and the People without History*.
- ¹¹ See Barkin, “Overcoming the Neoliberal Paradigm” for the details of how they are operationalized
- ¹² Villoro, *De la libertad a la comunidad*, 41-42, our translation.
- ¹³ Villoro, *De la libertad a la comunidad*.
- ¹⁴ Lenkersdorf, *Cosmovisiones*; and Nations, “Naming the Dragonfly.”
- ¹⁵ Villoro, *De la libertad a la comunidad*.
- ¹⁶ Barkin, “Communities Constructing Their Own Alternatives.”
- ¹⁷ See: Kovach, *Indigenous Methodologies*; Wilson, *Research is Ceremony*; and Smith, *The Challenges of Kaupapa Maori Research, and Decolonizing Methodologies*.
- ¹⁸ Barkin and Lemus, “Local Solutions for Environmental Justice.”
- ¹⁹ Barkin et al., “Social capacity for surplus management.”
- ²⁰ Villoro, “Sobre el concepto .de revolución,” 278, our translation
- ²¹ Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*.
- ²² Martínez Luna, *Comunalidad y Desarrollo*.
- ²³ Arsel et al., “The extractive boom in Latin America.”
- ²⁴ Boyce et al., *Reclaiming Nature*; Zermeño, *Reconstruir a México en el Siglo XXI*; and Toledo and Ortiz-Espejel, *México, Regiones que caminan hacia la sustentabilidad*.
- ²⁵ Wrenn and Waller, “Care and the Neoliberal Individual.”
- ²⁶ Baran, *The Political Economy of Growth*; and “On the evolution of economic surplus,” and Gibson-Graham et al., *Take Back the Economy*.
- ²⁷ Carcaño, *Las mujeres indígenas en la Nueva Ruralidad Comunitaria*; Petras and Veltmeyer, *Extractive Imperialism in the Americas*; and Armenta, *Acumulación de capital extra-económica*.
- ²⁸ Vergara-Camus, “The MST and the EZLN Struggle for Land.”
- ²⁹ Toledo, *Ecocidio en México*.
- ³⁰ Toledo, *Ecocidio en México*, 144-145, our translation
- ³¹ See Gonzales and Gonzalez, “Indigenous peoples and autonomy in Latin America.”
- ³² E.g., Scott, *Weapons of the weak*.
- ³³ Borrini-Feyerabend et al., *Sharing Power*.
- ³⁴ Baschet, *Resistencia, Rebelión, Insurrección*.
- ³⁵ Smith, “The Revolutionary Imperative.”
- ³⁶ Bonfil Batalla, *México Profundo*.
- ³⁷ Barkin, *De La Protesta a La Propuesta*, Ch. 27, 485-497.

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- ³⁸ Baschet, *Resistencia, Rebelión, Insurrección*, 7.
- ³⁹ Porto y Leff, "Political Ecology in Latin America."
- ⁴⁰ Participación de la Comisión Sexta del EZLN, *El Pensamiento Crítico*; Beaucage, "Belleza, placer y sufrimiento"; and Rodríguez, *Defensa comunitaria del territorio*.
- ⁴¹ Palerm, *Obras hidráulicas prehispánicas*; and Palerm, "A comparative history, from the 16th to 20th centuries, of irrigation water."
- ⁴² Barkin, *Innovaciones Mexicanas en el Manejo del Agua*.
- ⁴³ Stevens et al., *Securing Rights, Combating Climate Change*, and Oldekop et al., "Reductions in deforestation and poverty."
- ⁴⁴ Silva Rivero et al., *Casos Exitosos*; Toledo and Ortiz-Espejel, *México, Regiones que caminan*; and Toledo and Barrera-Bassols, "Political Agroecology in Mexico."
- ⁴⁵ Barkin, *De La Protesta a La Propuesta*, Ch. 29, 512-538.
- ⁴⁶ Farrell, "Snow White and the Wicked Problems of the West;" Amescio et al., "Pastoral Resilience among the Maasai."
- ⁴⁷ Desmarais, *La Vía Campesina*; Borrás et al., *Transnational Agrarian Movements*; Shattuck et al., *The Politics of Food Sovereignty*; SOCLA, "Scaling up agroecology"; Val et al., "Agroecology and La Vía Campesina I"; Rosset et al., "Agroecology and La Vía Campesina II."
- ⁴⁸ CALG, *Defending Commons' Land*.
- ⁴⁹ Wen et al., "Ecological Civilization, Indigenous Culture, and Rural Reconstruction."
- ⁵⁰ Borsatto and Souza-Ezquerdo, "MST's experience."
- ⁵¹ Rosset and Khadse, "Zero Budget Natural Farming in India."
- ⁵² Saed, "Rojava;" and Fenelon and Hall, "Revitalization and Indigenous Resistance."
- ⁵³ E.g., Lönnqvist, *Morral de experiencias*; Pimbert, *Food Sovereignty*.
- ⁵⁴ Enlace Zapatista, *What is missing is yet to come*; Fitzwater, *Autonomy Is in Our Hearts*.
- ⁵⁵ Carcaño, *Las mujeres indígenas*; Serna de la Garza and Garcés, "Integralidad en la responsabilidad social empresarial"; Armenta, *Acumulación de capital extra-económica*; and Linsalata, "De la defensa del territorio maseual."
- ⁵⁶ Lang et al., *Alternatives in a World of Crisis*; Esteva et al., *The Future of Development*; and Escobar et al., *Pluriverse*.
- ⁵⁷ Wolf, *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century*.
- ⁵⁸ Marx, *Precapitalist Economic Formations*.
- ⁵⁹ Harvey, "Marxism, Metaphors, and Ecological Politics.": 27
- ⁶⁰ Marx and Engels, *Communist Manifesto*, Ch. 1.
- ⁶¹ Caycedo, "The historical subject and its complexity."
- ⁶² Marx y Engels, *Communist Manifesto*.
- ⁶³ Barkin and Lemus, "Local Solutions for Environmental Justice;" Anderson, et al., *Everyday Experts*.
- ⁶⁴ Funtowicz and Ravetz, "Science for the post-normal age."
- ⁶⁵ Wolf, *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century*, and *Europe and the People without History*.
- ⁶⁶ Little, "Marx on peasant consciousness" in a comment on Engels' comments on Marx' essay, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte."
- ⁶⁷ Baronnet et al., *Luchas "muy otras"*; Enlace Zapatista, *May the Earth Tremble at its Core*.
- ⁶⁸ Illich, *Tools for Conviviality and* Esteva, "Time To Enclose The Enclosers."
- ⁶⁹ O'Connor, "Capitalism, Nature, Socialism."

⁷⁰ Barkin, *De La Protesta a La Propuesta*: ch. 5: 127-135.

⁷¹ Garnett et al., “A spatial overview of the global importance of Indigenous lands.”

⁷² Barkin, “Radical Ecological Economics.”

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