

Social reproduction, rebellion and the problem of the state

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Our recent coverage of elections in Paraguay in *Ojalá*, and the vote for representatives who will ensure the continuity of the Pinochet-era constitution in Chile has allowed us to begin to explore the profound contradictions between electoral politics and other political forms that are revealed through social struggle.

These “official,” state-centered events show both **the strong pull of the right at the ballot box and the indifference towards electoral processes**, as expressed by those who don’t vote or who spoil their ballots.

Elections are superimposed on social struggles through a process that obscures and disorganizes them, and that recodifies grassroots demands, altering and distorting their language and content. Government policy either promises incomplete solutions, or positions demands made from below as a threat to be repressed. Gladys Tzul Tzul and Simón Antonio Ramón have clearly documented how this occurs in Guatemala.

Public debate in Mexican media over the last few weeks has been saturated by two state-level electoral processes: in Coahuila—where a coalition around the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which has governed the state without interruption for almost a century, won—and in the State of Mexico, where the candidate for Morena, currently Mexico’s ruling party, prevailed. The dramatic increase of violence in Chiapas, where armed attacks perpetrated by paramilitary groups against Zapatista support bases and displaced Indigenous people received relatively little attention.

Grassroots organizing attempts to understand and discuss the most pressing problems related to the reproduction of life, as well as to build collective capacities and channel them towards interventions in how decisions are made. There is a constant and systematic effort from the world of politics to disorganize that work.

We believe it is useful to continue to think through what this means.

Struggles against disappearance, injustice, precariousness, dispossession and harsh living conditions are re-positioned from above during electoral processes, as different fragments of the elite compete for votes.

Today, we are experiencing an increasingly obvious disconnect between the activities and practices of what is known as “politics,” which revolves around law-making, the organization of government and the administration of justice, and the broad and contradictory mosaic of issues connected to the reproduction of life.

Over and over again, immense administrative and media pressure is exerted to present the arena of formal politics as the only space where “public issues” of all kinds can be discussed and resolved. The relationship between those who govern toward those who have to deal with the consequences of their decisions is one of contempt and ignorance.

In this system, those who make decisions about the increasingly difficult conditions in which the majority carry out the constant tasks that guarantee material life are part of closed and hierarchical structures known as political parties. This is how the political sphere has been organized throughout the long and bitter history of patriarchal, colonial capitalism. Today, this structure is becoming increasingly rigid.

The trap of state-centrism

There is a radical separation between formal political activity and the needs and demands that emerge from the reproduction of life. We have already heard a series of flawed arguments that claim it is possible to bridge that separation through a charismatic leader who claims he represents a “solution” to all of our problems. This is the path taken by progressivism, which copies mechanisms of political delegation and representation *in absentia*, according to Uruguayan scholar Diego Castro. Over the longer term this leads to disdain and ignorance towards the diverse social weavings that are contesting power, weakening their organizational forms and concentrating their capacities in politicians and full time experts faithful to their ‘leader’ and their party.

The promises of the Latin American progressives who have been in government over the last two decades have followed this logic: asking—or forcing—the unconditional support of “voters” by offering to “improve” the general situation, and then failing to deliver on their promises. The performance of these governments has at times been insufficient, at times contradictory, and in other cases, has can be considered an abject failure.

It is true that “progressive” governments have been attacked by global financial capital as well as by the wealthiest segments of society within which privileges—including concessions for land and water use that overlap with and contradict the needs of the majority—are concentrated.

The problem relates not only to the intentions of such governments, but in the practices, strategies and means they implement to achieve their goals. They act arrogantly, ignoring the very strength that nourishes them, which has always come out of the vast realm of social reproduction. When they barricade themselves in their government offices, they become aware of their impotence and insist on hiding it. They then follow a fraught path of fragile pacts with former enemies. This is a path of no return.

In almost every country governed by “progressive” parties, the most difficult problems that occur in the social world—which Ojalá has begun documenting—find no solution even when our supposed “allies” are occupying the sphere of politics and the state. This makes for a very confusing political scenario.

In some cases, perhaps, under progressive parties the pressure exerted on the reproduction of life is slightly lessened, although always in a fragile way and often amid despicable and asymmetrical conditions of exchange: loyalty for limited benefits.

To date, few of those who opt for electoralism and consolidate themselves via political practices based on delegation and reinforced through recurrent electoral processes **dare name the limits to capitalist depredation** that are being established through struggle.

Nor have they succeeded in limiting the industrial-scale theft of water, in reorganizing the ways in which land ownership and use are established, or in ensuring access to housing. They have not meaningfully limited the super-exploitation of precarious workers, stopped the criminalization of migration or renewed the practices through which justice is administered.

There are also serious problems in the way education is organized and the amount of resources allocated to it, as there are in the ways in which medical attention and health care is—or is not—provided to an immense number of people.

All this occurs against a backdrop of increased military and security spending, shielding states—whether led by left or right parties—from actions of feminist protest and struggle, as well as from the community-level defense of common goods under constant threat of privatization.

When viewed from the perspective of everyday life, which is intertwined with the difficult processes of sustaining social reproduction, these issues generate struggles and demands for change. But these same struggles face walls of disdain from institutions, in addition to openly violent actions that have a fierce dissuasive and disciplining effect.

This is something that takes place under both right-wing and left-wing governments.

For their part, **electoral processes often reappear in acute moments of struggle, replicating the difficult knot of state-centric politics.**

Is the left-in-power responsible for the advance of the right?

State-centric politics organized around elections and government plans—even if they presume to be progressive—have been, to say the least, **insufficient** in relation to the size and scope of the ongoing crisis of social reproduction.

In order to understand the growing problem of the expansion of the right wing in recent electoral processes, progressivism must stop denying the structural violence expressed in extractivist policies as well as in the overexploitation that tears societies apart. They must recognize how counterinsurgent violence is spread in a confusing manner, plundering daily life to ensure the continuity of capitalist expansion.

If the left does not acknowledge its impotence and the inadequacy of its actions, the right will continue to advance in the electoral arena.

When progressivisms deny their impotence and attempt to seduce us with justifications about what they cannot achieve because they are under attack (which indeed they are), they too become caught in a state-centric trap.

In many cases it is progressive governments themselves that expand the boundaries established by the internal dynamics of capital.

To illuminate this immense problem in a different light, it is useful to formulate as a premise what we see repeated over and over again: electoral processes—and a large part of the public policies implemented by elected governments—are **a trap that disorganizes our ability to intervene in public life and organize our struggles.**

Procedural democracy and the party system through which it operates are, in fact, mechanisms that brutally reduce political life. We cannot ignore the fact that politics organizes public life and structures day-to-day conditions; barely satisfying basic needs in a way that makes us dependent and indebted.

Struggles cannot remain fixed in place only to continue to trigger this mechanism of electoral repetition.

Electoralism is an effective disorganizing apparatus, sustained in the midst of the immense confusion induced by the superimposition of a political dispute which reduces the field of action to administrative mechanisms which are supposedly designed to resolve the most critical problems.

The concentration of multiple political capacities in the state is a problem that must be resolved. **Refusing the negation of other political practices generated and renewed in defense of collective life** is a starting point for our efforts to find an antidote to help us to avoid falling in to the trap of state-centrism.

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