



# In the wake of the plebeian revolt: Social movements, 'progressive' governments, and the politics of autonomy in Latin America

**Sandro Mezzadra**

Department of Political and Social Science, University of Bologna, Italy

**Verónica Gago**

Faculty of Social Science, University of Buenos Aires, Argentina

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## Abstract

The article takes the debates surrounding the 'politics of autonomy' in Latin America as its point of departure and investigates the transformations of the political notion of autonomy against the background of developments that have characterized the so-called long decade of the new 'progressive governments' in the region. Moving beyond the alternative between 'conflict' and 'cooptation' that has shaped academic and political debates on the topic, the authors analyze the relations between 'social movements' and 'progressive governments' from the angle of the transformations of capitalism in Latin America and of emerging new forms of activism rooted within everyday life (particularly within 'popular economies'). The article critically discusses such notions as neoliberalism and neo-extractivism in order to build an analytical framework within which to reconstruct the history of Latin American social movements since the early 2000s and to test the productivity and the limits of the very notion of 'social movement' in the present political conjuncture.

## Keywords

autonomy, extractive capitalism, Latin America, popular economies, social movements

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## Corresponding author:

Sandro Mezzadra, Department of Political and Social Science, University of Bologna, Strada Maggiore 45, Bologna, Italy.

Email: [sandro.mezzadra@unibo.it](mailto:sandro.mezzadra@unibo.it)

## On autonomy

What is a politics of autonomy? This is a question that continues to be asked within social movements in many parts of the world. In Latin America, the debates surrounding this topic have been particularly lively over the last few years. The backdrop for these discussions has been the unfolding of struggles and movements which have shaken up the region since the early 2000s and established the conditions for the emergence of so-called new ‘progressive’ governments—including such diverse instances as the ones epitomized by the names of Lula in Brazil, Chavez in Venezuela, Kirchner in Argentina, and Morales in Bolivia within a regional political cycle (see Mezzadra and Sztulwark, 2015). Under which conditions are social movements able to prompt processes of social transformation beyond the moment of their insurgence? What is the relation between autonomous forms of mobilization, political parties, and possibly ‘left’ governments? Latin American experiences have circulated widely at the global level, and sometimes have been taken as ‘models’ or simply as ‘sources of inspiration’ in Southern Europe, in Greece and most notably in Spain with the rise of Podemos. While we focus on Latin America in this article, we take these ‘resonances’ into account, as consistent with the styles of dialogue across the Atlantic that we have been trying to promote for several years now.

Our emphasis on the current timeliness of a politics of autonomy is shaped by an evaluation of the developments of the last few years, and at the same time, it is a perspective we try to flesh out in light of diverse experiments and struggles sharing common elements that we will develop further in this article in respect to Latin America. Within several ‘social movements’ there is the perception of a concrete need to redefine (to re-qualify and re-launch) autonomy as an eminent criterion of political action and organization. This means moving beyond the definition of autonomy in exclusively ‘social’ terms—usually associated with hostility toward engaging and confronting institutions in principle—as well as by its definition in static terms as a series of immutable and identitarian principles. The former interpretation characterizes autonomy as a mere (and often ideological) ‘independence’ from any kind of ‘formal’ and established institution, fostering a sort of ‘isolationist’ understanding of social movements, which is reinforced by the latter through an ‘identitarian’ emphasis. On the one hand, we are convinced that autonomy needs to be reframed as a more explicitly political concept, capable of challenging the boundaries between established social movements and driving processes of social transformation writ large. On the other hand, we think it is crucial to explore the mutations of autonomy in popular life and economies in Latin America, where the political dynamics of struggle of the last few years have in a way ‘deborded’ and nurtured complex and interesting forms of subaltern organization and cooperation. The aim of this article is to develop this double focus on autonomy.

We need to be very clear at this point. We both share a perspective on autonomy that is linked to the development of so-called ‘autonomist Marxism’ (see Mezzadra, 2009). Our use of the notion of autonomy is predicated upon a long history of

workers' struggles and insurgency, which built bridges across the Atlantic connecting autonomous organization in factories, workers' councils, and experiences of proletarian self-management in metropolitan territories in Europe and in Latin America (particularly in Argentina and Italy). These experiences nurtured intense political debates and theoretical elaborations on such topics as workers' power, dualism of power, and the prospects of revolutionary politics. This is not the occasion to reconstruct that history, but it is necessary to stress that what we are evoking here is not a sort of 'theory export' from Europe to Latin America. It is rather a process that has been shaped by several, diverse, and in a way 'aleatory' encounters, translations, and reciprocal influences against the backdrop of a specific cycle of struggles and movements. Crucial moments in this cycle occurred in 2001, both in Europe (with the mobilizations against the G8 in Genoa in July) and in Latin America (with the Argentinean uprisings on 19–20 December). This was when our dialogues started, at first involving experiences such as the *Colectivo Situaciones* in Buenos Aires and the editorial collective of the magazine *DeriveApprodi* in Italy. The notion of autonomy figured prominently in these dialogues since their beginning, with respect both to specific instances of movement, struggle, and organization and to the strands of political theory usually associated with 'autonomism' in Europe and in Latin America.

We are of course aware of the multiple meanings of the notion of autonomy – and most notably of its crucial relevance in liberalism and neoliberalism (see in particular Gago, 2015, 2017). In our use of the term, autonomy continues nevertheless to be strictly linked to a specific interpretation of concepts such as labor, labor power, and the working class. It points to the fact that, to put it in the classical terms employed in the 1960s by Mario Tronti (2006), labor power is at the same time within the capital relation and always against that relation—in very concrete terms even 'outside' of it. This scheme requires, nonetheless, a radical revision under the present conditions, which are characterized, to put it short, by the crisis of 'free' wage labor as a standard for the development of capitalism (see Mezzadra, 2011; Gago, 2017). Regarding the question of 'social movements,' our notion of autonomy is therefore a critical tool that leads us—consistent with the aims of this issue of *Anthropological Theory*—to emphasize the need to bring capital and labor 'back in' to debates on the topic. It also helps to understand the notions of capital and labor beyond any 'economicist' reduction, stressing the relevance of issues of subjectivity, social and cultural transformation, forms of life, as well as specifically political dimensions (see the editors' introduction to this volume).

The problematic horizon within which our analysis is located is shaped by our participation in current debates over what has been called 'realism of *potencia*' in Argentina and 'institutions of the common' in Italy.<sup>1</sup> This means that we understand our intervention as a contribution to the search for a politics of radical transformation that, on the one hand, is not centered on the state (see also Gutierrez Aguilar, 2013), while on the other, does not 'ideologically' refuse to enter into variegated relations with 'institutions'. This implies an attempt to test

the notion of autonomy against the background of a rethinking of the whole question of power – realistically taking stock, in the case of Latin America, of both the achievements and the limits of ‘progressive governments.’ This is particularly important in the current conjuncture, which is characterized – against the background of the electoral defeat of *Kirchnerismo* in Argentina, the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff in Brazil, the ongoing economic and political crisis in Venezuela—by debates on the ‘end of the cycle’ of ‘progressive’ governments and a more general turn to the right in the region (see Gago and Sztulwark, 2016).

What we have in mind is a politics in which autonomous struggles and practices of self-organization spur an accumulation of forces that is not bound to be sealed and closed off by the constitution of a party or the action of a government. In this perspective, the production of subjectivity and modes of life emerge as a potent field for political radicalization. *Poder and potencia*:<sup>2</sup> this classical formula re-emerges here and leads us to reconsider a set of basic political topics, including the relation between ‘social movements,’ ‘power,’ and ‘government.’ The analysis we propose in the following pages of the nexus between ‘social movements’ and ‘popular economies’ in Latin America is to be read within this framework, since it points to a field of daily practices within which the stakes of a politics of autonomy are concretely played out. Therefore, for us, the notion of autonomy is a conceptual razor that enables an analysis that cuts through different struggles, movements, and social practices without proposing abstract generalizations, but rather attempts to single out common problematics and potentialities. It is from this point of view that a critical discussion of the notion of ‘social movements’ is important, since as we will show it often tends to obscure some of the most important characteristics of new struggles and practices of activism and social mobilization. We are convinced that the established sociological notion of ‘social movements’ can even become a limit for the attempt to map the emerging landscapes of struggle and conflict within the new Latin American conjuncture and to grasp the ensuing political stakes and challenges.

### **Beyond the alternative between conflict or co-optation**

We cannot dwell here on the genealogy of the concept of social movement. Suffice it to say that its roots lie in the history of workers’ struggles since the 19th century, as well as—especially in Latin America—in popular and indigenous revolts that have continuously overflowed and broadened the category of class itself. What interests us for the purposes of this article is rather to locate social movements and struggles in Latin America since the late 1990s as material forces whose action translated into a mandate for a series of anti-adjustment, and anti-austerity policies, opening up an institutional plane for negotiating certain demands and social conquests in the region. The analysis of the relations between movements and the ‘progressive’ governments that came to occupy that plane is therefore an important aspect for the investigation of social movements in Latin America over the last few years. Our gaze here is in a way retrospective, since we are writing from the

perspective of a conjuncture that is characterized, as we already mentioned, by the crisis of several 'progressive' governments and by important mutations in the landscape of movements and struggles in the region. One crucial example in this latter regard is the powerful wave of feminist mobilizations that swept the region in 2016, finding provisional culmination in the impressive *paro de las mujeres* (women's strike) in Argentina on 19 October and again on 8 March 2017 at a regional and even global scale (Gago, 2016; Fernández-Savater and Malo, 2017). As far as the 'progressive' governments are concerned, their current multiple crises are well known and we will shortly come back to them. Our hypothesis, however, is that the more general turn to the right that we have previously mentioned was anticipated by a crisis of the productive interaction between movements and the progressive governments. This crisis shaped the last phase of the political cycle of the 'progressive governments,' and we are convinced that it is to be considered as one of the root causes of those governments' current impasse or defeats.

In our reading of the relation between social movements and 'progressive' governments, we attempt to go beyond the binary of co-optation and conflict, which has shaped academic literature and political debates in recent years (see Prevost et al., 2012). The new social policies, deployed in similar ways by 'progressive' governments in various countries, were the principal axes of this disjunctive. For those who speak of a linear relationship of co-optation, social policies have been the privileged instrument. On the other hand, for those who demanded an organic relationship linking the 'popular' governments with the movements (another form of linearity), these policies represent the fundamental conquest of recent years. The limits of both hypotheses are clear to us (see also Gago et al., 2014). The first point of view loses sight of the richness of relationships and experimentations that, in contradictory ways, was made evident with the 'progressive' governments' social policies. Meanwhile, the second perspective ignores the *quality* of the development that provides the resources that finance the social programs, which they depend on as the source of a limited and partial redistribution.

What is needed from this point of view is to reflect on the nature of contemporary Latin American capitalism and its development pattern, which became apparent in the regional frame in recent years. It is in order to grasp the specificity of contemporary processes of valorization and accumulation of capital in the region (and beyond) that we propose to expand the notions of extraction and extractivism. This argument, which we have developed elsewhere (Gago and Mezzadra, 2015; see also Mezzadra and Neilson, 2017) and builds the backdrop of our analysis in this piece, can be summarized as follows: while the progressive governments' rhetoric has pointed to a reactivation of a 'neo-developmental' imaginary and the continuity of historical projects of political and economic development founded on import substitution through industrialization policies,<sup>3</sup> the model that has been deployed in Latin America in recent years is instead based on the hegemony of rent and growing processes of financialization. This is first of all apparent as far as the 'extractive rent' in a strict sense is concerned, through the intensification of mining and other extractive industries (soy agriculture included).

Being one of the primary sources of funds for redistributive politics, these accumulation processes have attracted severe criticism in recent years from both activists and scholars (see for instance Svampa, 2015). However, it also applies to dependency with respect to the global financial and monetary dynamics that govern the price of 'commodities' and exchange rates. Most importantly, it applies to the processes, which are increasingly evident in many parts of Latin America, of finance's penetration into 'popular economies,' especially through an unprecedented growth of consumer credit (see Gago, 2015).

This implies an expansion of the notions of 'extraction' and 'extractivism' and their decoupling from the simple denouncement of the 're-primarization' of Latin American economies. The notions of 'extraction' and 'extractivism,' from our perspective, are especially useful for indicating how financial capital presides over the 'seam,' the connections and articulations of profoundly heterogeneous forms of social cooperation that constitute the basis of the extraction of surplus value within economies that are presented as heterogeneous, motley, or 'baroque.'<sup>4</sup> In this way, the rhetoric and even some real aspects of 'neo-developmentalism' are combined with ongoing processes of 'neoliberalization' of economies and societies. The financialization of popular consumption and economies becomes from this point of view a crucial field of experimentation. Spaces and subjects that were traditionally considered as 'peripheral' (from the perspective of the waged norm, the urban structure, and legal regulation) acquire a new centrality. Importantly, these experimentations then reverberate throughout society as a whole.

In our use, the categories of extraction and extractivism offer, on the one hand, a particular point of view from which to read the transformations, the composition, and the productivity of labor in Latin America. On the other hand, they demonstrate the persistent relevance of the region's insertion into the global market and, especially, of the relatively recent intensification of relations with China. The state-form itself is immersed in the new constellation of capitalism referenced by these categories and each government's action is therefore subjected to specific limits and parameters. The nature of these limits and parameters is different with respect to the ones that characterized the history of relations between the state and industrial capital. Both in its relation with capital, and from the point of view of its intervention to discipline the reproduction and socialization of labor power, the state is increasingly put under duress by a set of crucial operations of capital that eschew containment within national boundaries (see Mezzadra and Neilson, 2014; Sassen, 2014). Furthermore, highlighting the 'extractive' character of these operations means emphasizing an operative logic of capital that tend to establish social relations that challenge established forms of political dialectics and mediation. The lack of recognition of these conditions, of these limits, and of these compatibilities, was a crucial problem for the region's 'progressive' governments and is at the heart of the crises they confront today.

The slowing down of processes of regional integration (one of the key aspects of the first phase of Latin American 'progressive' governments) since the late 2000s

has not simply weakened each government from the perspective of its confrontation with global dynamics. As is especially clear in the cases of Venezuela and Ecuador, the consequent withdrawal into their national dimension was also translated into a closure of those spaces of conflict and negotiation, of reciprocal action between government politics and social mobilization, from which the processes of transformation had derived their very force and efficacy. Other instances could be easily added through an analysis of the crisis and defeats of 'progressive' governments in such crucial countries like Brazil and Argentina.

The violence of rent and extraction, in the multiple ways in which they are manifested in rural as well as metropolitan territories, is also the origin of a large number of new social conflicts in Latin America. Let us list some of them: demonstrations against mining companies in Peru, protests for public services in Brazil, conflicts around the privatization of education in Chile, confrontations in Bolivia and Ecuador linked to advances into indigenous (Tipnis and Yasuni) territories, disputes related to land occupations in Argentina, and privatizations and dispossession of communities in Mexico. 'Progressive' governments, when they do not intervene in a purely repressive way, have carefully avoided taking on these conflicts as a signal of the limits of policies of 'development' or of 'social inclusion.' The 'social movements' themselves are constantly surprised and displaced by how these conflicts manifest themselves, frequently delegating intervention to the Church.

Confronted with the substantial exhaustion of the political productivity of the cycle of 'progressive' governments (as well as with their loss of power in such important countries as Argentina and Brazil), we should take these new conflicts as a privileged terrain for relaunching a politics of autonomy in Latin America. However, rather than looking at existing 'social movements,' we must start from the elements of *excess* – elements with political originality in terms of posing a radical challenge to existing forms of class, racist, and sexist consensus – that have characterized the social and political action of 'movements' in recent years. In what follows we will try to shed light on at least some of these elements of excess, which build for us the material basis for rethinking the notion and politics of autonomy. We think that this is an important task, since it is precisely these elements that frequently remain outside of the most common conceptualization of social movements in Latin America. The material sediments of the movements' actions are still very present, and a new politics of autonomy must take them up as a basis for imagining a set of ruptures to the continuity of a process that is moving toward the conservative stabilization of a new capitalism of an essentially 'extractive' nature. These material sediments are also the necessary point of departure for new experiments in the terrain of the construction of institutions of counter-power, potentially capable of contributing to the opening of a new political conjuncture and articulating with processes of government that are renewed and novel in their democratic nature. It is here that the political notion of autonomy we mentioned at the beginning of this article becomes strategically important.



## The continent of social movements

Current discussions about ‘social movements’—and also within movements—are profoundly conditioned by the streams of studies (in sociology and political science) that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s in Western Europe and the United States, and in the late 1990s in Latin America, dedicated to what have been identified as ‘new social movements’ (see della Porta and Diani, 2006; Tilly and Tarrow, 2007; for a critical review, see also footnote 1 of Cini et al., 2017, this special issue). Independent of the importance and richness of those studies, we want to note—in a necessarily schematic and sharpened way—two aspects that we find problematic regarding their development. Firstly, focusing on social movements whose ‘novelty’ was essentially identified by their distance from the labor movement, studies of social movements have progressively excluded the issue of labor and its relationship with capital from their field of investigation (Barker et al., 2013). This happened precisely at a moment when the relationship between labor and capital was beginning to radically change, going beyond its traditional form around which the labor movement had developed (see also Cini et al., 2017). Instead, those studies have privileged issues of ‘identity,’ culture, ‘repertoires,’ and symbolic resources for collective action. Secondly, they contributed to consolidating the image of a ‘division of labor’ between social movements and governments according to which (to simplify) the first are responsible for more or less prolonged and structured campaigns to affirm specific issues and ‘demands’ that governments can later take up or manage (with a more or less significant role of mediation played by political parties).

In an important sense, which is reflected in the abundant academic literature on the topic, Latin America can be considered *the* continent of social movements. However, the development of movements and struggles in Latin America presents a series of characteristic elements that challenge the conceptual language and taxonomy elaborated by the studies of movements to which we have synthetically referred above. In addition, while we stress the common characteristics of movements on the regional scale, we must always keep in mind the differences between countries, which can be traced back to the heterogeneous colonial and postcolonial foundations of the nation state in Latin America.

In Latin America, at the beginning of the 21st century, the action of social movements effectively determined a change of era and a radical transformation of political grammar and vocabulary (see for instance Obarrio and Procupez, 2013). Their force appeared as the most practical consistent replacement—and critique—of the party form. It was even the movements themselves that renewed party forms (such as the PT in Brazil, founded in 1980 in the wake of powerful workers’ struggles, particularly in the so-called ABC, the industrial region south of greater São Paulo) or that created space for the formation of ‘new instruments’ for politics (such was the origin of the MAS in Bolivia in 1992). There were a number of key features in these forms of intervention: to start with, the idea of ‘the social’ as a direct ‘political’ force, within struggles and practices that attacked the



'corruption' of existing institutional structures (as much for their relationships with the dictatorships of previous decades as for the transformations mandated by neoliberalism during the Washington Consensus) and that prefigured constituent horizons. On the other hand, there was a complex temporality to their novelty: while new struggles, movements, and practices articulated an effective critique of traditional organizations (labor unions as well as political parties), they also reactivated histories and currents of radical politics that had their origin in the 1960s and 1970s, even while emphasizing apparent programmatic differences.

The issue of power was not absent from the movements' practices and discourses: however, it was mainly articulated in a 'critical' way, starting with radical challenges to any understanding of politics that centered the state as its privileged site. Social movements critiqued representation as a mechanism of democratic participation, and questioned the codification of rights as the final and privileged crystallization of social benefits for the majority of the people. An emphasis on the movements' autonomy allowed, however, for relating to institutions, winning rights, and nevertheless not getting caught and inscribed within an institutional politics centered on the state, since there was an awareness of the fact that winning rights and especially their implementation are predicated upon the popular power to make them effective. *Zapatismo* has been a landmark in prompting this awareness (see for instance Kaufman and Reyes, 2011; Muñoz Ramírez, 2004; Rabasa, 2010). The mutations and circulation of this awareness cannot be understood without taking into account a cycle of popular, urban, and indigenous movements across Latin America as a whole. These movements were particularly visible in moments of crisis, deploying an anti-neoliberal agenda and nurturing several attempts of articulation and coordination—from the forums held in Porto Alegre to the many gatherings and networks that confronted the initiative known as IIRSA (Initiative for the Integration of the Regional Infrastructure of South America) and the Plan Puebla Panamá (PPP).

It is furthermore relevant to emphasize that the movements at the beginning of the century expressed both the transformations and the growing difficulties of forms of 'industrial citizenship' that had structured workers' power in previous decades through the action of trade unions. Far from developing outside of those transformations and more general reorganizations of the world of work (linked to the decomposition of its traditional forms), the movements offered a first expression and conflictual interpretation of those mutations. Considered from this angle, Latin American social movements of the early 2000s have, on one hand, responded to processes that, under the mark of neoliberal hegemony, privatizations, and de-regulation, made work even more unstable and precarious than it had basically always been in the region; and, on the other hand, they established an opening based on forms of politicization, situated experiences, and subjective figures that do not necessarily have work as their exclusive reference, but that, in the context of those same processes, were progressively invested in and valorized by capitalism. Importantly, our perspective is different from the theories that, since the 1960s, have talked about a 'marginal mass,' an 'informal economy,' or an 'informal

revolution' (see Hart, 1973; Nun, 1969). Our analysis stresses and combines three important points: 1) a critique of any victimization of these sectors, instantiated by the use of such notions as exclusion and marginality; 2) an emphasis on their (differentiated but real) capacity to confront the neoliberal agenda and not simply on their subordinate adaptation; 3) a critique of the idea that the subjectivation of informal sectors is completely reducible to an individual 'property desire' tailored to the political anthropology of 'possessive individualism' classically described by Crawford B Macpherson (1962).

Struggles for 'human rights' (particularly related to the recent history of dictatorships), the development of new *campesino* ('peasant') movements around the 'right to land,' neighborhood fights over the appropriation of urban resources, and the innovations of movements of the unemployed—to name four fundamental initiatives, which took distinct shapes but characterized the regional frame as a whole—are important instances of practices and experiences that have radically expanded the political horizon of struggles. These experiences opened up new spaces and perspectives that, within the Latin American debate, have been conceptualized as 'plebeian democratizations'—as part of a collective theoretical and political effort articulated starting in the early 2000s by the Comuna Collective in Bolivia (see Gutiérrez Aguilar et al., 2002).<sup>5</sup> In the intersection of these dynamics, a conflictual politicization of social cooperation, the production of new spaces, and fundamental resources for the organization of common life began to appear, for which we must again stress the relationship with the transformations that were produced—over the same terrain of work—during the years of neoliberal hegemony.

The unfolding of these and many other movements took place within a process that can be retrospectively reconstructed in terms of the continuity of a 'new type' of insurrectional dynamic. There is at least a medium-term history to this 'insurrectional' moment. The year of the last great military offensive of the FMLN guerrilla in El Salvador, 1989, which – it is important to add – did not end in a defeat, was also the year of the great insurrection in Caracas of the poor against the policies of Carlos Andrés Pérez's government: the *Caracazo*. The successive indigenous *levantamientos* ('uprisings') in Ecuador (starting in 1990), the insurrection of 19 and 20 December 2001 in Argentina, the 'water wars' in Cochabamba in 2000, and the revolt of El Alto and the *sierra* against the privatization of natural gas in 2003 in Bolivia are crucial moments within a process of regional circulation and continuity in an insurrectional movement that would be responsible for decreeing the end of neoliberalism's legitimacy. Since 1994, as noted above, the Zapatista rebellion in Mexico has played a fundamental role within this process, marking an enormous point of resonance with the leading role of indigenous movements, which should more generally be considered as an essential element of Latin American social movements.

The analysis of the gathering of different actors, struggles, and practices within these uprisings allows us to return to an important point. There is a need to highlight how the forging of a common power within these dynamics includes elements

of heterogeneity and multiplicity that compel us to reshape the classical notion of accumulation of power through processes of homogenization and simple ‘unification’ (see Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013: chapter 9). The point, with regard to Latin American social movements since the late 1990s, is not to prompt an aggregation of scattered elements through a theoretical (or political, for that matter) abstraction irrespective of their singularity. We take the feminist lesson very seriously: the power of these movements is not rooted in their unity but rather in their ubiquity (see for instance Gibson-Graham, 2007). Our analysis and conceptual elaboration resonate, for instance, with Judith Butler’s in her *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, where she stresses the heterogeneity of the movements that developed in many parts of the world in the wake of the square occupations in 2011 (Butler, 2015: 10–11). At the same time, she emphasizes that what she calls ‘precarity’ seems ‘to run through a variety of such movements’ (Butler, 2015: 17), pointing to a common plane of analysis of their politics that does not deny the element of heterogeneity.

In any case, the regional insurrectional dynamic described above is also crucially important because it opened up the spaces within which the emergence of new ‘progressive’ governments in several countries became possible. The governments themselves, even if they have not always had the ambition of ‘representing’ this dynamic, have recognized its *potencia*, accepting its power to *destitute* the legitimacy of neoliberal policies, but also its persistent ‘veto power,’ exercised again and again in the streets and in the squares, against any ‘return’ of those neoliberal policies. The movements have thus become an essential reference point for the legitimacy of ‘progressive’ governments, which have selectively adopted a political agenda forged from within the struggles and resistances that managed to open up new programmatic political spaces beyond their *destituent* dimension.<sup>6</sup> In countries such as Ecuador and Bolivia, in particular, this ‘veto power’—as an expression of the autonomy of social movements—has profoundly conditioned the constituent processes themselves and has found significant recognition in the new constitutions approved since 2008.

## Weaving the fabric of the common

This combination of insurgency and ‘veto power’ is a first element characterizing the action of diverse movements in Latin America since the late 1990s that challenges the most widespread conceptualizations of ‘social movements’ as primarily structuring demands. We want to note at least one more aspect, which is the insertion of the most significant of these movements (from the indigenous movements to the ones of the urban poor and unemployed, from the experiences of the ‘recovered factories’ to *campesino* and women’s struggles) into a rich, dense, and heterogeneous tapestry of everyday social practices, through which the material reproduction of the lives of thousands of women and men unfolds. The debates and initiatives of many Latin American governments around matters of the ‘cooperative,’ ‘popular,’ ‘social,’ or ‘solidarity’ economy are symptoms of the register of the

enormous importance of this fabric of everyday practices in the production and reproduction of collective life (see for instance Coraggio, 2011). Also regarding this point, it should be further noted that such formulas have been incorporated in various ways into the new constitutions of Bolivia (Article 307), Ecuador (Article 283), and Venezuela (Article 70) (see Coraggio, 2013).

Precisely through this ‘immersion’ in daily life, the web of struggles that we briefly named cannot be reduced to the formulation of a set of demands that would be more or less satisfied by public policies in a second moment. Certainly, this reading is widespread in Latin America and can even find—on a descriptive plane—significant verification in the experiences of recent years. However, what is lost in this reading is the moment of *deviation, overflowing, rupture, and excess* in the action of movements—what Luis Tapia (2008) terms *política salvaje* (‘savage politics’). This moment is precisely what explains the specific political productivity that, based on this everyday fabric of practices, has enabled movements to open up and problematize a series of issues and terrains of struggles that are not reducible to specific ‘demands.’ We are speaking of a type of empowerment that is not only democratic but also productive; or, in other words, that takes the democratic question to the terrain of production itself.

We are interested in highlighting the material sedimentations of these practices: the construction and collective management of urban infrastructure and logistics, through truly ‘subaltern’ networks; the rejection of any ‘miserabilist’ management of the issue of the right to an income and to work; the politicization of forms of economic activity beyond wage labor (from the experiences of ‘recovered factories’ to the mobilization and unionization of workers in ‘informal’ sectors); the critique of the notion of the ‘minority’ (recognized by the ‘neoliberal’ multiculturalism in many Latin American countries since the 1990s) based on expansive webs of relationships that have reopened the perspective of a universal political construction in an original way beyond and against any ‘ethnic’ limitation; and the new intersections between environmental issues, struggles for the ‘common,’ the right to land and housing, and ‘food sovereignty.’

Due to these experiences and practices, the metropolitan landscape of many Latin American countries has been profoundly transformed. This has also impacted the relationships between urban, suburban, and rural spaces. *We believe that an intertwining of subjectivity, of modes of life, and of material infrastructures has been forming around the point of conjunction between political dynamics of struggle and ‘popular economies’ that escapes the imaginaries and the languages of established ‘social movements’ as well as the policies of ‘development’ or ‘social inclusion’ that have been deployed in recent years by new progressive governments.* These popular economies, which are always in the making, build a terrain on which crucial aspects of social movements’ practices are ‘metabolized’ and reorganized within a landscape that has been significantly and ambivalently transformed by the expansion of social policies in recent years. At the same time, the motley composition and pragmatic ‘vitalism’ of these popular economies (Gago, 2017) challenge any irenic image of social inclusion and conditioned institutional inscription. In the

future, they are definitely to play crucial, although hardly predictable roles in the multiple crises that loom behind the current turn to the right at the regional scale (see for instance Abeles and Valdecantos, 2016).

The complex and heterogeneous fabric woven around 'popular economies' is very important as much from the analytical point of view as from the political point of view. This is not because it opens perspectives on 'idyllic' worlds, which could be taken as models, but because it allows for shedding light on processes of intense politicization in Latin America that have taken the form of the organization and regulation of life and social cooperation on the basis of experiences and figures of labor significantly different with respect to those of classical wage labor. Women, the 'unemployed,' and migrants often take a leading role here. These experiences and figures of labor, far from being 'residual' or 'marginalized,' destined to be reabsorbed by 'development' policies, have been multiplying and strengthening in recent years, transforming both the concepts of labor and exploitation (see for instance, on Argentina, the ILO report by Bertranou and Casanova, 2013; and more generally, Basualdo and Morales, 2014). What makes the situation unprecedented is the presence of finance, particularly due to the huge expansion of consumer credit we mentioned above, as an invigorating element of these forms of labor exploitation, which manages to articulate a heterogeneity that is already far from being marginal. Importantly, this heterogeneity of labor and life has a double genealogy: on the one hand in neoliberal labor reforms, and on the other in the ways in which these reforms were challenged and confronted, producing new forms of organizing devices of 'social inclusion.'

Innovative 'institutional' experimentation (that brought into play and radically modified pre-existing 'communitarian' structures) and a necessary expansion of the concept of labor clearly emerge as cornerstones of Latin American political dynamics from the point of view of the conjunction between struggles and 'popular economies.' It should be repeated: the important questions rotating around these two axes remain substantially outside of the field of political visibility organized by the 'progressive' governments themselves. At the same time, these questions point to new, often extremely violent, forms of social conflict that develop according to a logic that is different from those of 'movements' as traditionally understood. However, it is around these questions and within such social conflict that both the possibility of re-qualifying a revolutionary perspective, of *rupture*, and—not paradoxically—of evaluating the very efficacy of expansive and radical reformist policies are at stake. A politics of autonomy has crucial roles to play from both points of view.

## Laboratories of subjectivity

We have thus far noted some characteristics of recent Latin American social movements that seem to exceed the conceptual language and taxonomy elaborated by the studies dedicated to them. The temporal dimensions of social movements' action are particularly relevant in this regard. On the one hand, we 'genealogically'

underscored the importance of a new type of insurrectional dynamic, that was translated into a 'veto power' (an autonomous capacity to establish a NO to neoliberal politics) and whose action has been prolonged beyond the specific temporality of the events that distinguished it. On the other hand, it is important to call attention to the inscription of Latin American movements within a dense and heterogeneous fabric of everyday social practices, whose temporality is completely different from those campaigns and platforms with specific demands. It is within this fabric that what Raquel Gutiérrez Aguilar (2014, 2015) has defined as the 'operative principles' of common organization of social cooperation take form in often contradictory and even conflictive ways. The conjugation of this heterogeneous temporality gives rise to a kind of peculiar *political rhythm*, reorganizing the very *spatial* coordinates within which people cooperate, struggle and experiment with new forms of popular organization. Old workers' neighborhoods, for example, were radically transformed by the activity of neighborhood councils and communitarian assemblies that propelled the occupation, the reinvention, and the 'recovery' of productive spaces following the closure of mines, factories, and other economic activities.

Taken together, these characteristics of struggle, action, and the composition of movements refer to processes and experiences that challenge the modality under which political subjectivity was thought and organized, and not only in relation to the traditional leftist parties and labor unions, but also to the diverse combinations of nationalism, 'development,' and populism as they have been configured on the continent since the second half of the 20th century. From this point of view, the case of Bolivia is exemplary for many reasons (see García Linera, 2004, 2014; Stefanoni and Svampa, 2007). Since the end of the 1990s, the rhythm and the continuity of the Quechua–Aymara indigenous revolt in the country has been characterized by uncontainable dynamics, sustained by the reactivation of communitarian structures and a long history of anti-colonial resistance, that, as Sinclair Thomson has shown in a remarkable book, are actualizing in the present a perspective that runs through the whole history of Indigenous resistance to colonialism and postcolonial arrangements of power: *the Indians alone will govern* (Thomson, 2006).

The indigenous revolt, which has also materially determined the reopening of the colonial archives in other countries in the region, has not only played an essential role in blocking neoliberal programs and policies in Bolivia. It also had a radical impact on the hierarchical violence that ordered economic, political, and social structures, and was sedimented in a secular history marked by colonialism and racism. Thus, it has at the same time profoundly reorganized what Luís Tapia (in Stefanoni and Svampa, 2007: 171–188) calls the 'structures of rebellion,' erupting in the 'national-popular field' defined by the 1952 Revolution and opening up the moment that has been baptized as the 'communitarian-popular horizon.' In Bolivia during those years, the concept of *plebeian potencia* or revolt, often combined with a peculiar reference to the term 'multitude,' in an attempt to emphasize the political productivity and force of this collective emergence, was especially



relevant for shedding light on the eruption of experiences, languages, and subjectivities that had been systematically excluded from the field of politics.

The new Constitution formally includes an emphasis on the multiplicity of 'nations' and 'peoples' that 'jointly constitute the Bolivian people' (Art. 3), at the same time as it expresses a type of recognition of the political productivity of the plebeian revolt. Yet, that moment must still be linked to the current debate over the merely 'symbolic' use of identities and the reductivist character that Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui (2014) identifies in relation to using the idea of 'native' peoples to refer to the indigenous or merely the rural, or rather to an 'identifiable' prototype (which can be easily recuperated within a predominately statist project). At the same time, we must recognize that posing the problem this way raises the question of the continuity of a *constituent process* capable of assuming that 'plebeian' revolt as an expansive principle of opening and innovation on the terrain of institutions and government as well as on the terrain of the formation and expression of political subjectivity. It is precisely in this respect that, in Bolivia as well as in various other countries in the region, a series of blocks emerged, eventually calling into question the political productivity of the cycle of 'progressive' governments.

We want to stress that the use of the term 'plebeian' here is not linked to an apology of some condition of 'marginality' or of 'exteriority' in respect to modernity. On the contrary, it is based on the awareness that what the Bolivian sociologist René Zavaleta Mercado (1986) termed in the 1980s *sociedad abigarrada* (usually translated into English as *motley society*) has been violently invested and reshaped by processes of capital accumulation and valorization during the neoliberal moment and nowadays figures as an essential productive force. Today the notion of the motley society puts the 'communitarian-popular horizon' in tension with the return of the neo-developmental imaginary and the closure of decision-making in the state and its rhetoric of national sovereignty. This is key for the entire region.

In any case, it is within this field of tensions that communitarian structures and forms flexibly adapt and mutate as popular technologies, exhibit a series of organizational updates, and materialize a transversal space of cooperation capable of combining diverse temporalities and territories. *What we are confronted with is a passage from social movements to an extension and incorporation of their premises into certain popular economies. This implies the establishment of the materiality of an ensemble of apparatuses of urban management, the construction of authority over territories, and the coordination of transnational commercial and productive networks 'from below.'* These cannot be seen as strictly 'alternative' or 'solidarity,' or as purely 'autonomous' spaces. As one of us has suggested, they are rather 'baroque economies' (Gago, 2017) because they assemble, in the variegated and 'motley' Latin American metropolises, a set of forms of doing, negotiating, working, and conquering power and space that are not exempted—and herein lies the source of their expansive force as well from a constitutive ambivalence. This ambivalence has its roots in the fact that a swarm of 'proletarian micro-economies' and 'popular illegalities' (to use this phrase in a Foucauldian sense) is intertwined with a new

mode of articulating economic activities to state resources and institutions. The term 'baroque' aims precisely to grasp the motley composition of these economies, where micro-entrepreneurial work blurs the boundary between 'legal' and 'illegal' to enable processes of upward social mobility for popular and subaltern sectors while raising fundamental questions regarding the very meaning of 'prosperity' and 'well-being.' These emerging economic and social formations are often particularly effective in negotiating and disputing state resources under neoliberal conditions. They weave together family and kinship bonds, forms of loyalty linked to territory, as well as 'informal' contractual arrangements, while extending their reach within the transnational spaces opened up by migration on the regional scale (see Cordero et al., 2017). Those dynamics are expressions of a social-political-economic present that recuperates and re-assembles long-term memories, while they are shown to be unabashedly flexible in making the city, businesses, politics, and thus, make visible a dispute over the very idea of progress in its purely accumulative and linear sense.

### **Fields of struggle: Autonomy in movement**

We can now return to our attempt to go beyond the alternative between conflict and co-optation to define the relationship between progressive governments and movements. By now it should be clear why this is necessary: under that logic, the reference remains confined to a very traditional 'governmental reason,' according to which 'social movements' are identified with strictly defined actors, which are always imagined as *already constituted*, and where the possible modalities of relationship are *already given*. *Again*: this stabilizes the binary between conflict or co-optation as a choice without an exit. However, in this schema, the question (clearly instantiated, for example, by the June 2013 movement in Brazil and the cycle of student revolts in Chile between 2011 and 2013) of a radical politicization of the conditions produced by the action of progressive governments (and social movements!) themselves remains unconsidered. And this question is particularly important since analyzing it leads to the point of transversally cutting off the allocation of parts between governments and movements. In particular, within the framework of the alternative between conflict and co-optation, the 'government' continues to be thought of more as a 'thing' than as a process and a set of relationships. However, we are convinced that it is necessary to rethink the very notion of government along these latter lines, following Foucault but also taking stock of recent debates regarding 'governance' (see Chignola, 2015). It is along these lines that 'autonomy,' in its capacity to equip itself with institutional moments conflictedly rooted in social cooperation, can function as a constitutive moment of a renewed *potencia* of the very action of government.

Laclau's theory of 'popular reason' (2007) and his reformulation of the concept of hegemony can be considered a sophisticated theoretical expression of the reduction of social movements to a 'governmental category,' in the sense that we

explained above. In Laclau's perspective, which here we are interested in discussing primarily because of its influence over certain sectors of Latin American 'progressive' governments, movements are valued for the 'social demands' that they express, but the properly political moment of 'articulation' of these heterogeneous demands, through the production of 'chains of equivalence,' is frozen in its autonomy and is monopolistically assigned to subjects such as the party and the state (see also Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013: 284–291). Consequently, the reference to Laclau's theory is often associated with an emphasis on the 'autonomy of the political' that ends up re-proposing the centrality of completely traditional images of the state, the people, and even the 'mother country.' We want to ask ourselves, in a simple and yet 'realistic' way, if these images are adequate for the political challenges that we face today.

Current debates about the so-called 'end of the cycle' of progressive governments often repeat these oversimplifications in the evaluation of electoral defeats and political impasses. Above all, these debates rarely address the need to reflect upon the material articulations and constitution of the 'popular' in Latin America in recent years, which are quite different from the imagined discursive figures of the people expressed by the theory of 'populist reason.' In studying and even deconstructing the 'popular,' one should never forget the lesson of Stuart Hall, who emphasizes 'the double stake in popular culture, the double movement of containment and resistance, which is always inevitably inside it' and therefore cautions against the usual framing of debates on the topic between 'two, quite unacceptable, poles: pure "autonomy" or total encapsulation' (Hall, 1998: 443, 447).

Over the last long decade, the state has actually become a 'field of struggle' in various Latin American countries, to mention the title of a book co-authored by García Linera (2010). However, it seems to us that a careful investigation of the processes, which contributed to the emergence of this field of struggle, demonstrates that today the state presents itself with very different clothes from those celebrated by traditional modern political theory. It is crisscrossed and torn by global processes that call into question its unitary figure, pressured by a regime of capitalist accumulation based on financialization and rent and, at the same time, disputed by popular movements that, in specific circumstances, manage to crystallize contradictions and moments of counter-power within the state itself—while recent developments show how fragile and contested such accomplishments remain. The conquest of government can in fact represent a moment of great importance in the construction of a counter-hegemonic strategy and from the point of view of a new politics of autonomy. However, to the extent that the state is imagined under forms far from what it has effectively turned into, the action of 'progressive' governments risks being emptied of *efficacy*. Simply by pointing to the strengthening of the state, by re-centering the entire political process around it, a provisional victory can be achieved on the terrain of political rhetoric and, occasionally in electoral competition. But recognizing that it does not contribute to building the necessary power to sustain a process of transformation in

the medium term is a matter of realism, as has already started to be clearly seen in various Latin American countries.

The phenomenology of extraction that we attempted to sketch in the section ‘Beyond the alternative between conflict or co-optation’ of this article (expanding the notion of ‘extractivism’) seeks to highlight the complexity of the contemporary moment of capitalist development and accumulation in Latin America. Our analysis of the financialization of ‘popular economies,’ in particular, emphasizes capital’s attempt to appropriate and valorize the productive power of the fabric that, as we have noted, is organized at the conjunction of popular economies and the political dynamics of struggle. This conjunction, to repeat it once again, puts in tension and challenges the notion of autonomy itself. It is (not exclusively, but in a very pronounced way) over this field where resistances to the ways in which neoliberalism persists as political command and as extractive norm are at stake, and also where the efficacy of the ‘operative principles of the common’ that nurture social cooperation are measured. The development of our own work on what we call a ‘realism of *potencia*’ and ‘institutions of the commons’ implies taking up this new plane of complexity, which also has its own instantiations in Europe—although under different conditions. The turmoil of capitalist crisis, struggles, and resistance have played a prominent role in bringing about this plane of complexity, within which—as we have attempted to show—the dynamic of capitalist valorization itself has been taking on new characteristics in Latin America. In this respect, the actualization of the ‘plebeian revolt,’ which has been so fertile for the language and images of social transformation in recent years at the regional level, requires returning to debating a *programmatic horizon* and the formation of *coalitions* capable of translating it into practice in a context shaped by the emergence of new social conflicts and a right-wing offensive. It is within this programmatic horizon and these coalitions that realism of *potencia* and institutions of the commons may be able to conjure a subversive whisper from a quite distant past, giving new meaning to what Rosa Luxemburg once called *revolutionäre Realpolitik*—a ‘revolutionary political realism’ (see Haug, 2009).

If here we have submitted the notion of social movements to a critical scrutiny, it is to avoid any nostalgia that would foster the well-known disorder of ‘left melancholy’ and ultimately freeze the images of collective subjects of a different time. But it is also to account for a dynamism that takes up and involves a good part of the premises deployed by the movements within a process of the continuous *overflowing* of their practices and struggles. We refer to the *intersection* that we detect between politics of struggle and ‘popular economies’ as a way of naming a more complex, but also more realistic field for thinking about the political challenges of the present. It is in this ambivalent and motley fabric where, as we have noted, modes of doing, constructing and working are affirmed that do not fit into the imaginaries and languages of mainstream social movements studies, as well as the progressive governments’ rhetoric and policies of ‘development’ and ‘social inclusion.’ Yet it is here where the question of a democratization of production, of an efficacy of social cooperation to demonstrate other criteria of organization, a new

definition of well-being and even of ‘happiness,’ is experimented with and put to the test. This motley fabric and its practices challenge the boundaries of what is politically thinkable and therefore must be met with extraordinary as well as concrete exercises in political imagination. It is over this clearly more complex terrain that a new synthesis between autonomy, its institutional translation and rootedness, and the forms of resistance to exploitation must be invented and debated.

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### Notes

1. This is the problematic horizon in which the formulation of a ‘realism of *potencia*’ proposed in Argentina by the Institute of Political Investigation and Experimentation is inscribed, as well as the work around the issue of ‘institutions of the common’ developed in Italy by the Euronmade network. Both spaces, in turn, are involved in intensive exchange with experiences in other places on both sides of the Atlantic. See <http://anarquiacoronada.blogspot.it/2015/04/realismo-de-la-potencia-por-una-nueva.html>; and <http://www.euronmade.info/>.
2. Translating into English the distinction between the Latin terms *potestas* and *potencia* (the former referring to established forms of political domination, the latter to a different form of power, whose potentialities cannot be contained and exhausted by any institutional political arrangement) verges on the impossible. In his ‘Translator’s foreword’ to Toni Negri’s first book on Spinoza (*The Savage Anomaly*, originally published in Italian in 1981), which is an important source for contemporary uses of that distinction, Michael Hardt (1991: xi–xii) writes: ‘Whereas the Latin terms used by Spinoza, *potestas* and *potentia*, have distinct correlates in most European languages (*potere* and *potenza* in Italian, *pouvoir* and *puissance* in French, *Macht* and *Vermögen* in German), English provides only a single term, *power*. To address this difficulty, we have considered several words that might serve for one of the terms, such as *potency*, *authority*, *might*, *strength*,

- and *force*, but each of these introduces a significant distortion that only masks the real problem.'
3. The notion of 'neo-developmentalism,' widespread across Latin America, refers to a set of political experiences and theoretical elaborations in the 1950s and 1960s, which include on the one hand such governments as, for instance, the one of Getúlio Vargas in Brazil (1951–1954) and the one of Arturo Frondizi in Argentina (1958–1962), and on the other hand the several variants of 'dependency theory' that emerged both inside and outside of CEPAL, the UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean established in 1948. Within these developments the role of the state was of course a crucial topic (see, for instance, Escobar, 1995, Míguez and Santarcángelo, 2010).
  4. We use here the word in the sense that it has taken in critical Latin American debate in recent years, based on the work of authors such as Bolívar Echeverría (1998), who has associated the 'baroque' with an art of resistance and surviving characteristic of the colonial moment. See also Gago (2017).
  5. Among the founding members of the collective were Raquel Gutiérrez Aguilar, Álvaro García Linera, Raúl Prada, Luis Tapia, and Oscar Vega; for a review of the development and accomplishments of the Comuna collective, see Stefanoni (2015).
  6. Our use of the verb 'destitute' and of the phrase 'destituent' dimension of struggles refers back to the analysis of the uprising of 19 and 20 December 2001 pursued by the Colectivo Situaciones of Buenos Aires in a book originally published in Spanish in 2002 (Colectivo Situaciones, 2011: 51–53). The concept of *poder destituyente* that they forged in that book has widely circulated in Latin America in the following years, to make sense of the political effects of 'insurrections of new type' in several countries.

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**Verónica Gago** is Professor of Social Sciences at the University of Buenos Aires, Professor at the Instituto de Alto Estudios, Universidad Nacional de San Martín, and Assistant Researcher at the National Council of Research (CONICET). She is the author of *Neoliberalism from Below. Popular Pragmatics and Baroque Economies* (Duke University Press, 2017).

**Sandro Mezzadra** teaches Political Theory at the University of Bologna and is currently Visiting Professor at the New School for Social Research, New York (Department of Politics). With Brett Neilson, he is the author of *Border as Method, or, the Multiplication of Labor* (Duke University Press, 2013).