

Ecosystems of Revolt

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As the struggle to defend the Atlanta forest against the construction of a new police training facility stages its fourth week of action, we are publishing an excerpt from Peter Gelderloos's recent book, *The Solutions are Already Here: Tactics for Ecological Revolution from Below*, recently published with Pluto Press. As Gelderloos shows, whereas governmental and market responses to the ecological crisis have an "almost perfect record of failure," a global current of resistance movements over the past decade have already developed other methods of responding to the overlapping ecological and political crises that engulf us, and have accomplished "stunning victories and concrete, real gains across the world." In the following excerpt, Gelderloos outlines some of the key features that have made this insurgent response to governmental ecocide successful. At the same time, his new book highlights the serious challenges and obstacles that must be confronted and overcome if an autonomous future is to be wrested from the control of police and paramilitary violence, the media, and NGOs that either naturalize the repression of decentralized ecological movements or turn a blind eye to the catastrophe of late capitalist life.

As I finish up this manuscript, the tenth anniversary of a great victory at Cherán K'eri has come around. On April 15, 2011, the people of this small town in the Mexican state of Michoacán rose up to defend their forests, their water, and their lives. Cherán K'eri, with a population of 14,000, is one of the principal towns in the territory of the P'urépecha people. Thanks to the last hundred years and more of struggles by Indigenous peoples from Baja California to Chiapas, large swathes of territory throughout Mexico are officially recognized as communal lands, including 15,000 hectares around Cherán K'eri. However, nothing is safe under capitalism, and much of the communal lands were being despoiled by the drug cartels, which are largely integrated into the state and which have diversified into other industries like lumber.

Several men in the town had spoken up against the out-of-control logging, and they usually ended up dead. As the killings continued, unpunished, and as the logging approached the source of the town's water, the women rose up and took several cartel truck drivers and loggers hostage. There were several days of intense fighting against the cartel's mercenaries and the local police, but the people of Cherán K'eri put up barricades, set fire to trucks, and held their own with stones, Molotov cocktails, and whatever firearms they could get their hands on. On April 17, they created a "popular assembly" that would be the first step towards their self-government. From the assembly arose a dialogue commission consisting of rotating representatives from each neighborhood. This structure served the egalitarian aspirations of the people of the town, and it was also far more effective than having leaders who could be co-opted, kidnapped, or assassinated.¹

Around the barricades and the *parhankua*, the communal cooking fires, a sense of community was rekindled, overcoming divisions, antagonisms, and scarcities implanted through hundreds of years of colonialism. P'urépecha traditions and language were revitalized and became a cornerstone of their practice of autonomy. One such tradition was *kuájpekurhikua*, a word that translates as "taking care of the territory" and that refers indistinguishably to the social and ecological territory, therefore including everything from education and improving the situation of

¹ Rafa Arques, *La Fuerza del Fuego*, Editorial Milvus, 2019, 15, 35–38, 43– 44.

women in the community, to repairing relations between neighbors, to massive efforts at reforestation. By 2015, the nursery they established for growing trees—starting out with seeds they had gathered in the forest just four years earlier — surpassed the figure of one million trees and shrubs germinated a year, with an 80 percent survival rate, making it the largest greenhouse in the state and possibly in all of Mexico. The people of Cherán K’eri also developed a communal justice system focusing on mediation rather than punishment. By winning their autonomy from the state and the forces of extractive capitalism, they have gained the ability to begin undoing colonization in all its dimensions.²

We can find examples of reforestation all over the world. The distinction between a true forest and a tree plantation that looks good on paper but in actual fact destroys the local territory is qualitative. The key factor in determining whether a reforestation effort belongs in the first category or the second is whether it is under local control and designed by localized knowledge, as opposed to being under control of the state. [...]

From cities to habitats

The urban-rural divide is a central dynamic of capitalist accumulation and the ecological crisis. There is a differentiated regime of extraction, accumulation, and social control between rural and urban space. Just as rural struggles are rediscovering their potential for blockades and sabotage, urban struggles are learning that they are not limited to protesting and destroying; they can also transform. In order to reclaim cities as habitats, ecological struggles in cities merit special attention.

As a first step, that means keeping cities from killing us. For poor people, urban life is often a death sentence, even as medical infrastructure under capitalism is concentrated in cities.

In the 1970s, New York City officials and business interests began planning to build a trash incinerator at the Brooklyn Navy Yards. The incinerator would have plagued local neighborhoods like Williamsburg with dioxin and other lethal forms of pollution, but Puerto Rican and Hasidic neighbors fought back using a “by any means necessary” approach, taking on the city government, the utility company, and major media that all supported the plan. They definitively blocked the incinerator in 1995.³

What should not be elided is that subsequent to this neighborhood victory, Williamsburg and much of the rest of Brooklyn have been aggressively gentrified, with property values going through the roof, and many working-class residents and people of color pushed out in favor of disproportionately white young professionals. In other words, many of those who fought for a cleaner neighborhood were not allowed to stay around to reap the benefits. This kind of story is systematically typical, and a reminder of why the supposedly pragmatic position of partial reform is hopelessly naïve. As long as capitalism remains intact, whatever gains we happen to win by pressuring existing institutions will be enjoyed by economically privileged strata and those who are best able to assimilate to the racist codes and culture of a colonial society.

Another struggle that links environmental concerns with the economic needs of poor urban residents is the defense of public transportation. These can include Critical Mass bicycle protests from San Francisco to São Paulo that oppose car culture and in many cities have led to the cre-

² Arques, *La Fuerza*, 52–53, 68, 86–87, 90.

³ Randy Shaw, *The Activist’s Handbook: A Primer for the 1990s and Beyond*, University of California Press, 1996.

ation of bicycle lanes and increased access for poor residents to bicycles and bicycle repair. More than a lifestyle question, cities designed for cars are lethal, especially for residents in denser neighborhoods. Cities that are organized in such a way that workers have to rely on automobiles are simply increasing indebtedness and funneling wages to corporations in two of the wealthiest sectors in the Global North: the automobile and petroleum industries.

The defense of public transportation has also sparked full blown revolts. In Barcelona and the San Francisco Bay Area, mass refusal to pay or public actions to neutralize ticket checkers and open up metro stations for free, whether organized by neighborhood assemblies or anarchist organizations, and sometimes in tandem with labor strikes by transport workers, have temporarily reduced financial strains faced by working class commuters and also generated tremendous pressure on municipal governments against further fare hikes.

In both Brazil and Chile, major insurrections grew out of movements that initially formed in response to fare hikes. Both the 2013 movement in Brazil and the 2019–2021 uprising in Chile counted on a decisive anarchist participation, defeated the proposed fare hikes, and were able to identify a much broader social horizon, expanding to address deeper issues of injustice including police repression, inequality and austerity, and the right to the city.⁴

Urban movements often feel doomed to failure: those who live in a city rarely have any chance to resist changes to their own neighborhoods that are imposed from above. In part, that is because throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, cities have represented the concentration of capital accumulated on a global scale. Legally, houses and other buildings are not places for people to live or carry out their professional activities; they are essentially bank accounts where major interests can safely park the trillions of dollars they have made through currency speculation, private equity marauding, the underpaying of workers, the overcharging of tenants, and the stripping of complex ecosystems to sell for parts. It does not matter who lives there and what they need, or even if these buildings are left empty for decades.

So when we fight for our right to the city, we are going up against capitalism at the point where it is strongest. Furthermore, police departments in major cities today tend to be larger, better financed, and more heavily armed than national armies were a century or two ago. The fact that decentralized urban movements can rise up and force the state to back down (Soweto 1986, Hamburg 1987, Cochabamba 2000, El Alto 2003, Paris 2005 and 2006, Oaxaca City 2006, Athens 2008, Oakland 2009, Tunis and Cairo 2011, Istanbul 2013, São Paulo 2013, Barcelona 2014, Santiago 2019, Minneapolis 2020, Lagos 2020...) is extremely significant, and should be a central consideration in any strategy for social change today. However, urban rebellions are frequently excluded from the official conversation. Sadly, cynically, this is a reflection of the disorder and sacrifice they entail — inimical to the culture and class interests of the experts who control the conversation — and a reflection of the difficulties around controlling these movements. Urban rebellions tend to move from single flashpoint issues to ever broader and more revolutionary horizons. Would-be politicians cannot control these movements while they remain active; on the contrary, their main form of influence is a partial ability to demobilize in exchange for short-term reformist gains or, failing that, to encourage internal conflicts in the movements.

By focusing on technological or administrative solutions rather than the decentralized and often combative responses social movements themselves keep offering up, most academics and

⁴ CrimethInc, “The June 2013 Uprisings in Brazil. Part I,” June 27, 2013. Online at en.crimethinc.com. CrimethInc, “Chile: Looking Back on a Year of Uprising,” October 15, 2020. Online at en.crimethinc.com.

writers from the Global North fail to tailor their technocratic proposals to the immediate need for survival, dignity, and direct control by people and communities over our own lives. Social justice and decolonization have become buzz words, but most of the people today who are getting paid to make proposals or write about the problem evince a practice that is deeply colonial. Fortunately, we don't need them. Proposals for dignity, survival, and self-organization are popping up like mushrooms after the rain, originating in affected communities themselves. [...]

[T]he technologies to transform cities into healthy habitats already exist. We are not lacking inventors, we are lacking control over our own lives and vital spaces. Until we can directly organize and transform our neighborhoods to meet our own needs, and break the monopolies that control the world's resources — including intellectual property — new technologies will be of two varieties: bootlegged, autonomous ingenuities developed *in situ* that make the most out of scarce materials; or engineered technologies developed by professionals, well-meaning or otherwise, that will only increase global inequalities.

A thousand worlds struggling to be born

The struggles and initiatives described in th[is book] constitute a revolutionary wave that can be found in nearly every country across the world. They are just a tiny sample of an extensive web of obstruction, sabotage, demolition, healing, cultivation, creation, learning, and communication that represents the best hope for our planet. It is the only force currently in existence that meets all the following criteria: a structural independence from the bodies responsible for ecocide and colonizing capitalism; a capacity to force the state to back down in key conflicts; access to the locally specific knowledge necessary for real and intelligent responses to the unfolding climate catastrophe; a tendency to break through barriers and create an increasingly global consciousness that centers an awareness of the intersection of all forms of oppression and all the unfolding crises; access to traditions of organization and ecosocial relation that open the possibility for a world without capitalism, without ecocide.

Please do not mistake my glowing review for optimism. This is still a battle that pits David against Goliath, and if we were to approach the ecological crisis as though it were a wager in a casino—as the economists do, for example—then our money would be more wisely placed backing the forces of the apocalypse. However, if we wager our lives—they're on the line already, whether we've realized it yet or not—this motley network of underdogs is our best hope. All the other proposals for responding to the ecological crisis are some variation of the strategy in which David becomes Goliath's shield bearer with the hope that, over time, Goliath will begin using his spear for good.

What are the limitations of this revolutionary wave?

The primary external limitation is the counterinsurgency being waged against us, from moments of hard repression — all the people we have lost, all the people currently sitting in prison for their struggles — to the soft repression and invisibilization that mainstream environmental groups, media, and experts participate in, willingly or unwillingly. If at least some of those who are currently throwing their energies into redeeming Goliath were to shift their resources to supporting this revolutionary wave—which would also mean losing their considerable institutional privileges—then our chances would be considerably improved. There is a lack of a revolutionary imaginary and a lack of consciousness that these different movements constitute seeds for future

worlds. Basically, this means withdrawing our remaining faith in the dominant institutions and believing more in ourselves and the future we are trying to move towards. This is a limitation that is already being overcome within and between these movements themselves, and this book represents one small effort in that direction. It is, in other words, neither fatal nor insurmountable.

There is a go-to mischaracterization that is used to dismiss the revolutionary potential of this wave, and it is very much an expression of the dominant institutions' need to monopolize society-wide organization and problem-solving. It is the aspersion that these movements have no solution to offer that would be feasible on a relevant scale. To name one iteration, Holly Jean Buck characterizes the phenomenon Naomi Klein names as "Blockadia" as "reactive."¹ I won't go into whether this dismissal is the result of a misreading by Buck or of the limited view Klein utilizes to present Blockadia as more palatable (begging the question, palatable to whom). I will offer the observation, though, that experts are trained to silence their subject of study, so it does seem both systematic and symptomatic that, in looking at such a rich phenomenon, ranging from the resistance at Standing Rock to Hambach Forest, one would see something "reactive." In any case, the broader, more global, less respectable view of the resistance that I have tried to present makes it clear that we are dealing with something intelligent, creative, strategic, proactive, and with a whole hell of a lot of proposals that will not be silenced.

The movements and projects that form this global web are marked by their heterogeneity, heterodoxy, and plain ornery refusal to be easily categorized. I do not think this *many-headed hydra* of resistance should be named; after all, a being with a thousand heads would come up with a thousand different names for itself.² However, I do want to name common characteristics in the most flexible way possible, to encourage what I see as strengths and to aid more people in transforming their own activities so as to be able to connect, rhizomatically, with this greater whole. The following characteristics are not bounded containers that can govern inclusion or exclusion in a delimited phenomenon; rather they are tensions that vibrate throughout the entire web.

Territoriality

A relationship with the specific local territory constitutes a main source of power for these struggles and projects. We develop our practices and histories in dialogue with the territory such that "the environment" is neither inert surroundings nor a neutral field on which to impose an ideology that is the same from place to place.

Rooting struggles in a specific territory walks a line between two forms of isolation. In nearly every struggle, there will be people who limit themselves to their territory, who do not look for common ground with other struggles or seek inspiration from their own experiences that could have a wider, perhaps global, significance. And on the other hand, there are those who are alienated from any territory even as they participate in "local activism." They draw ideological lines for solidarity; either they restrict solidarity to their own small sect, or they read the values of their sect into all of those with whom they would like to solidarize. Such people are a part of the mix, and this is a complication in territorial struggles, but also a form of openness, presenting the possibility to weave in a wider body of people.

Ecocentrism

While many of those who constitute this revolutionary wave prioritize human needs, we tend to reject the pretension that human needs can sustainably contradict, outrank, or detach themselves from ecological needs, and at one level or another, we challenge or reject definitions of humanity stemming from the European Enlightenment and human/nature dichotomies.

Survival

We articulate our activity in relation to situations that directly affect us and we center this struggle as a question of survival, our own and that of other people and forms of life we care about. Having a voice, therefore, does not come down to expertise or institutional legitimacy, but to being affected and personally engaging with the problem and its solutions.

Lawlessness

To a greater or lesser degree, these projects enter into conflict with established legal regimes. They may actively seek the subversion and destruction of existing governments, they may claim traditional and Indigenous systems of law (that paradigmatically have nothing in common with punitive or property-based law originating in states), or they may seek as much as possible to pass unnoticed or mold themselves to existing legal regimes, but they will always value the needs of their community and the needs of the earth more than the authority of the government or the ostensible sanctity of its law.

Communal being

Individualized or atomized views of human beings are eroded in favor of practices that emphasize and revitalize relationships between people (sometimes including relationships that break down the division between humans and other forms of life). There is always an element of struggle against the alienations imposed by states and capitalism, and a tendency to practice mutual aid and solidarity. This means that this web of resistance is fundamentally creative: of different social relations, different subjectivities, and emancipatory infrastructures, practices, and cultures.

Heterogeneity

As mentioned, this “movement of movements,” to use the Zapatista’s terms, is extremely heterogeneous. This does not mean simply diverse, but that it is constantly producing differences and that it will not submit to ideological or cultural unity. This salient feature makes any technocratic proposal for solving the crisis extremely ignorant, which is probably why the technocrats tend to ignore or selectively silence movements that already exist when designing solutions. It should be noted that this heterogeneity is not just a cultural preference of the network, it is an inalienable feature of the network’s territorialized nature. This is why ideologies or named traditions of struggle that are structurally capable of assuming diversity rather than unity of practice—such as *Zapatismo* or anarchism—would never be able to absorb all the iterations of this revolutionary wave. The only reason these traditions of struggle are tolerated and encouraged throughout much of the network is precisely because they have no ideological need to convert others to their way of thinking or to achieve theoretical unity.

Intersectionality

The movements that participate in this wave tend to break down single- issue containers and instead recognize the interconnectedness of different forms of oppression and, therefore, solidarity. This intersectionality allows us to recognize one another even though we come from very different places and lack uniform identifiers. The process of recognition, it should be noted, is conflictual rather than pacifying—people often fight to get recognized on their own terms, a struggle that is not made easier by the ways in which we have been differently socialized within oppressive systems—meaning the self-definition of struggles is crucial to the possibility of solidarity across the network: people are implicitly trusted to define their own oppressions and lead their own struggles. This is another death blow to any pretensions of imposing uniform solutions.

Anticolonialism

All of these initiatives and movements exist in contradiction to the project of development, which is the most active manifestation of colonialism in the age of the International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organization, the United Nations, and all the attendant NGOs. Beyond this common negation, there is a great deal of distance between fully anticolonial movements, movements that identify capitalism as the enemy without exploring colonization as a historical and ongoing process integral to the globalization of capitalism, and even movements that use the language of development in a bid to access resources or legitimacy. Even among the former currents, there are very different experiences of colonialism across the world, but the heterogeneity of the resistance means those differences do not have to present a problem. I would argue that, despite the broad differences in language and scope, these movements' practices open up possibilities for complementarity, and that an expansive anticolonial consciousness is a priority for increasing their potency.

In a use of these terms that is far from universal, I think it is useful to make a distinction between “decolonial” and “anticolonial.” The latest buzzword, “decolonial” is now frequently used in academic and activist texts that make no mention of the restoration of Indigenous lands and don't even have the decency to so much as hint at the possibility of abolishing settler states that owe their existence to colonialism, like the United States or Canada. What exactly is decolonization supposed to mean, if the fruits and vehicles of colonialism are grandfathered in and accepted as eternal? The distinction I would make is between movements that seek reconciliation and disarmament, and those that seek to destroy forces that have been accepted as universal. These latter movements hold out hope for a victory that will undo some of the defeats of the past 500 years (or 2,000 years, or longer, depending on the territory we are looking at).

Autonomy

People who constitute this international network may be actively trying to subvert and destroy the state, or they may be looking for some breathing room from state repression in which to carry out their activities; some may even support an alternative government that might reduce the degree of repression. We may believe that the contest with the state is central to our struggle, or that the state will disappear if people gain some form of economic self-sufficiency. We may

reject any contact with the state, or we may try to win access to government resources. Whatever the case, a general practice of autonomy is what allows us to work together and to form cohesive networks of resistance. Autonomy means we write our own rules, we make our own decisions independently of oversight by any party or government, whatever the provenance of our resources we make the final decisions about how those resources are used, and we practice self- organization and avoid the centralization of the movement.

If one element of these movements maintains a relationship with a political party or a government, they take care not to let that relationship condition their activity in the movement or convert them into a lever by which the government and party can exert influence over the movement; if they fail to uphold either of these minimums, it is widely seen as a breach of solidarity by the rest of the movement. Without autonomy, it is impossible to create a movement of movements, a world in which a thousand worlds can flourish.

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