

## **Next: Event of the Commoner**

We can see the city on a hill, but it seems so far off. We can imagine constituting a just, equal, and sustainable society in which all have access to and share the common, but the conditions to make it real don't yet exist. You can't create a democratic society in a world where the few hold all the wealth and the weapons. You can't repair the health of the planet when those who continue to destroy it still make the decisions. The rich won't just give away their money and property, and tyrants won't just lay down their arms and let fall the reins of power. Eventually we will have to take them—but let's go slowly. It's not so simple.

It's true that social movements of resistance and revolt, including the cycle of struggles that began in 2011, have created new opportunities and tested new experiences. But those experiments, beautiful and virtuous as they are, don't themselves have the force necessary to topple the ruling powers. Even great successes often quickly turn out to be tragically limited. Banish the tyrant and what do you get? A military junta? A theocratic ruling party? Close down Wall Street and what do you get? A new bailout for the banks? The forces piled against us appear so enormous. The monster has so many heads!

Even when tempted by despair, we should remember that throughout history unexpected and unforeseeable events arrive that completely reshuffle the decks of political powers and possibility. You don't have to be a millenarian to believe that such political events will come again. It's not just a matter of numbers. One day there are millions in the street and nothing changes, and another day the action of a small group can completely overturn the ruling order. Sometimes the event comes in a moment of economic and political crisis when people are suffering. Other times, though, the event arrives in times of prosperity when hopes and aspirations are rising. It's possible, even in the near future, that the entire financial structure will

come crashing down. Or that debtors will gain the conviction and courage not to pay their debts. Or that people will en masse refuse to obey those in power. What will we do then? What society will we construct?

We can't know when the event will come. But that doesn't mean we should just wait around until it arrives. Instead our political task is paradoxical: we must prepare for the event even though its date of arrival remains unknown.

This isn't really as mysterious as it sounds. Take a lesson from some of the architects and ideologues of the current neoliberal order. Milton Friedman and the economists of the Chicago school had studied neoliberal economic policies, trained students in them, and projected the policies and institutions of a neoliberal order long before the social and political conditions existed to put them into practice—and, indeed, long before the September 1973 military coup led by Augusto Pinochet in Chile. Naomi Klein recounts that when, a few months before the coup, the plotters appealed to Chicago-trained economists, the "Chicago boys," for an economic program, they were able quickly to put together a five hundred–page manual that detailed the necessary steps to implement a neoliberal economic and social order along the lines of Friedman's thought. Chicago economists did not plan the Pinochet coup nor did they foresee it, but they were ready when it happened. Indeed for the implementation of neoliberal policies in numerous other countries since that time, Klein maintains, which were all made possible by some form of disaster, there was ready at hand in each case an economic playbook.

What is instructive about this example is how useful and effective it can be to prepare for an unforeseen opportunity. But the circumstances the neoliberals found in Chile are nothing like the ones we face now. The nature of the opportunity, first of all, is completely different: no coup d'état or other military action will precipitate an event for a democratic transformation today. The subject that prepares, second, cannot be a vanguard or a cabal like the Chicago boys but must instead be a multitude.

This paradoxical task of preparing for an unforeseen event may be the best way of understanding the work and accomplishments of the cycle of struggles of 2011. The

movements are preparing ground for an event they cannot foresee or predict. The principles they promote, including equality, freedom, sustainability, and open access to the common, can form the scaffolding on which, in the event of a radical social break, a new society can be built. Moreover, the political practices that the movements experiment with—assemblies, methods of collective decision making, mechanisms for not only the protection but also the expression and participation of minorities, among others—serve as a guide for future political action. Much more important, though, than any of the constitutional principles or political practices, the movements are creating new subjectivities that desire and are capable of democratic relations. The movements are writing a manual for how to create and live in a new society.

We argued earlier that forces of rebellion and revolt allow us to throw off the impoverished subjectivities produced and continually reproduced by capitalist society in the contemporary crisis. A movement of organized refusal allows us to recognize who we have become and to set out on becoming different. It helps us free ourselves of the morality of debt and the work discipline it imposes on us, bringing to light the injustice of the social inequalities of debt society. It allows us to turn our attention away from the video screens and break the spell the media hold over us. It supports us to get out from under the yoke of the security regime and become invisible to the regime's all-seeing eye. It also demystifies the structures of representation that cripple our powers of political action.

Rebellion and revolt, however, set in motion not only a refusal but also a creative process. By overturning and inverting the impoverished subjectivities of contemporary capitalist society, they discover some of the real bases of our power for social and political action. A deeper debt is created as a social bond in which there is no creditor. New truths are produced through the interaction of singularities being together. A real security is forged by those no longer bound by fear. And those who refuse to be represented discover the power of democratic political participation. Those four subjective attributes, each characterized by a new power that revolts and rebellions have achieved, together define *the commoner* .

In medieval England, commoners formed one of the three estates of the social order: those who fight (the nobility), those who pray (the clergy), and those who work (the commoners). Modern English-language usage in Britain and elsewhere has preserved the meaning of the term *commoner* to designate a person without rank or social standing, an everyman or everywoman. The term *commoner* as we intend it here must preserve the productive character that stretches back to medieval England, while taking it further: commoners are not just common for the fact that they work but, rather and more important, because they work on the common. We need to understand the term *commoner*, in other words, as we do the designations of other occupations, such as baker, weaver, and miller. Just as a baker bakes, a weaver weaves, and a miller mills, so, too, a commoner "commons," that is, makes the common.

The commoner is thus an ordinary person who accomplishes an extraordinary task: opening private property to the access and enjoyment of all; transforming public property controlled by state authority into the common; and in each case discovering mechanisms to manage, develop, and sustain common wealth through democratic participation. The task of the commoner, then, is not only to provide access to the fields and rivers so that the poor can feed themselves, but also to create a means for the free exchange of ideas, images, codes, music, and information. We have already seen some of the prerequisites for accomplishing these tasks: the ability to create social bonds with each other, the power of singularities to communicate through differences, the real security of the fearless, and the capacity for democratic political action. The commoner is a constituent participant, the subjectivity that is foundational and necessary for constituting a democratic society based on open sharing of the common.

The action of "commoning" must be oriented not only toward the access to and self-management of shared wealth but also the construction of forms of political organization. The commoner must discover the means to create alliances among a wide variety of social groups in struggle, including students, workers, the unemployed, the poor, those combating gender and racial subordination, and others. Sometimes, when invoking

such lists, people have in mind coalition building as a practice of political articulation, but the term *coalition* seems to us to point in a different direction. A coalition implies that various groups maintain their distinct identities and even their separate organizational structures while forming a tactical or strategic alliance. The alliance of the common is entirely different. Commoning does not involve, of course, imagining that identities can be negated such that all will discover they are, at base, the same. No, the common has nothing to do with sameness. Instead, in struggle, different social groups interact as singularities and are enlightened, inspired, and transformed by their exchange with each other. They speak to each other on the lower frequencies, which people outside of the struggle often cannot hear or understand.

This is one lesson we should all be able to learn from the cycle of struggles that began in 2011. The protesters at the Wisconsin statehouse did not delude themselves into thinking they were the same as those in Tahrir Square or that they shared the same social conditions, just as those who erected tents on Tel Aviv's Rothschild Boulevard did not see their reflection in the encampments of Puerta del Sol. While firmly rooted in their specific local conditions, they borrowed practices from each other and transformed them in the process; they adopted each other's slogans, giving them new meanings; and most important, they recognized themselves as part of a common project. The political task of the commoner is achieved through these kinds of exchanges among and transformations of singularities in struggle.

Some of the more traditional political thinkers and organizers on the left are displeased with or at least wary of the 2011 cycle of struggles. "The streets are full but the churches are empty," they lament. The churches are empty in the sense that, although there is a lot of fight in these movements, there is little ideology or centralized political leadership. Until there is a party and an ideology to direct the street conflicts, the reasoning goes, and thus until the churches are filled, there will be no revolution.

But it's exactly the opposite! We need to empty the churches of the Left even more, and bar their doors, and burn them down! These movements are powerful not despite their

lack of leaders but because of it. They are organized horizontally as multitudes, and their insistence on democracy at all levels is more than a virtue but a key to their power. Furthermore, their slogans and arguments have spread so widely not despite but because the positions they express cannot be summarized or disciplined in a fixed ideological line. There are no party cadres telling people what to think, but instead there exist discussions that are open to a wide variety of views that sometimes may even contradict each other but nonetheless, often slowly, develop a coherent perspective.

Don't think that the lack of leaders and of a party ideological line means anarchy, if by anarchy you mean chaos, bedlam, and pandemonium. What a tragic lack of political imagination to think that leaders and centralized structures are the only way to organize effective political projects! The multitudes that have animated the 2011 cycle of struggles and innumerable other political movements in recent years are not, of course, disorganized. In fact, the question of organization is a prime topic of debate and experimentation: how to run an assembly, how to resolve political disagreements, how to make a political decision democratically. For all those who still hold passionately to the principles of freedom, equality, and the common, constituting a democratic society is the order of the day.