

Ecuador earthquake: power from below amidst great adversity

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Crises and disasters, like the recent earthquake in Ecuador, show that real solidarity comes not from opportunistic politicians but from society itself.

It is a well-known fact that, unfortunately, in natural disasters the ones most affected are always the common people, the same people who suffer disproportionately from the calamities of capitalism. It seems as if the impact of the imbalance between nature and human beings — an imbalance caused by a predatory economic system — falls on the shoulders of the most humble and those least responsible for provoking it, given their limited access to material and consumer goods.

Apparently, the lower social strata are more harshly affected by natural and human disasters, including the burden of sustaining the system that dominates them with their labor — and not only that. Most soldiers and policemen — the ones who defend those above — stem from a similar background. And so do the industrial workers, who produce in the factories for the benefit of a tiny part of the population.

And when we say that they only pay the greatest part of the cost, it is because at the end of the day any problem that arises on our planet has to be paid by all of us anyway, from above or from below. In this sense, work itself, as a source of appropriation for capital in its demented development, is one of the greatest misfortunes that we have to suffer.

We live in times in which humanity faces an implacable fate of accelerated decomposition, because of the equally implacable development of a system whose nature is to produce commodities non-stop, to the extent that it jeopardizes the very existence of the planet. The impact of this absurd race is evident in the multitude of natural imbalances that provoke disasters, as well as, of course, in the processes of ceaseless geological movement, whose effects are unpredictable and difficult to measure. In any case, the greatest impact is felt by the lower social strata.

But not everything is dark. Under critical circumstances, such as the earthquake that recently devastated many parts of Ecuador, there are also manifestations of the noblest aspects of human nature. A good example is the earthquake in Mexico City in 1985, which turned from a seismic movement into a social movement. The inability of the state to respond to such a natural disaster propelled people to spontaneously and efficiently organize the biggest part of the rescue operation and relief work, managing to become conscious of their own power and understanding the state as an obstacle.

Manifestations like these — and many more — formed among the parts of the population that have suffered the most. In this respect, the numerous instances of solidarity, such as the cases where people deprived themselves in order to anonymously provide for their fellow human beings, stand in stark contrast to those who take advantage of others' misfortunes in order to offer their so-called

assistance, making sure they leave a mark that guarantees them all kinds of returns.

A case in point are the politicians. In Ecuador today everyone is getting ready for the general elections. It is pathetic to see how political leaders twist their words to accommodate justifications that allow them to win the vote — from “yellow socialism”, opportunistically disguised as revolutionary, all the way to the right-wing, seeking to form alliances.

Thus, the misfortunes caused by the earthquake are followed by the misfortunes caused by the politicians, at a time when everything is part of an electoral campaign; when all they aspire to is to snatch the vote by any means possible.

Today, the electoral campaign gives rise to the exploitation of the earthquake for political ends. And since there is a total absence of arguments, efforts are made to win over the voters through the deceitful use of images: disasters from other times and even places are presented as current, aiming to benefit both those who have the prerogative of coordinating the relief efforts — such as the NGOs and the state itself — and those from the opposition who try to attract attention to the legitimate claims of the population for not having been cared for.

In both cases one has mixed feelings of grief and helplessness together with rage and disgust at the hypocritical manipulation of the assistance to the survivors and to those affected by this terrible earthquake.

But, as we have already said, not everything is dark — or to put it differently, in the midst of this misfortune there shimmers a power from below, an essence completely alien to that of the ones who try to make political gain out of this. Contrasted to the t-shirts with the figure of a renowned right-wing politician among a pile of clothes destined for the relief of the victims, there is the poor lady who brings a single can of tuna to a relief site for those affected by the earthquake. Hiding the pain in her eyes, she silently shares all that she has.

Contrasted with the courageous response of hundreds of young people who signed up as volunteers, there are those who try to cause a stir in the social media by detecting errors in the organization of the governmental assistance and the rescue efforts. The aim is to accuse them and to take advantage of the feelings of distress of the population by presenting them as responsible for the misfortunes, due to neglect or whatever.

Social media are covering everything, because this is their moment. That is a fact in Ecuador as well as in any other part of the world. But they are also a double-edged sword and the contrasts there are overwhelming. Among all the “likes” and comments, the event itself languishes, dangerously diluted in the logic of virtual reality. The people who really suffer from this misfortune feel that in times of distress, the only ones they can count on are themselves, that is to say their own people. This is why they don’t trust the policemen to guard what is left of their homes, but they have to do it themselves.

Among them are many young people — preserving their innocence of not ever having supported any of the politicians, those organic predators of life. Of course many have come to alleviate their guilt with a convenient “relief tourism”, but the majority are young people who are motivated by true feelings of solidarity, because they recognize themselves in the victims. And thus, even though it is still very early, amidst the adversity, hope has started to weave itself into a possibility.

In those gestures of authentic disinterested solidarity, in this doing instead of talking in moments of emergency, in that sense of gratitude on behalf of the affected population, a different kind of bond is woven, a far cry from the mean-spirited politicking of the effective totality of the Ecuadorian political spectrum. Beyond the state, as it is expressed both by the government and by the opposition, there

is the manifestation of a power from below, which has to sustain itself in order to become an alternative of a new world.

In this new world, in the natural disasters that will inevitably take place, nature and humanity will prevail, not their negation. That is the essence of Marx's ideas that John Holloway reworks in his latest book *Contra el Dinero* (2015).

During this adversity and numerous others, foreshadowing what is yet to come in the whole world, the alternative is to do things ourselves, without any kind of mediation. We will procure our own means of subsistence in all possible areas of life and we will self-manage them, and thus add the energy of our own self-determination to our antagonism to capitalism, as a struggle against it. Our spaces of anti-capitalist resistance are constructed on the solid foundations of the power from below.

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P.S.

* Roarmag. June 1, 2016:

<https://roarmag.org/essays/ecuador-movements-earthquake-response/>

* This article was originally published in Spanish:

<http://kaosenlared.net/ecuador-en-las-desgracias-la-potencia-de-abajo-para-renacer/>

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