

State, power and society in Latin America: an interview with Raúl Zibechi

Saturday 5 June 2021, by [YGARZA George](#), [ZIBECHI Raúl](#) (Date first published: 21 May 2021).

From state violence and neoliberal extractivism to Colombia's general strike and Zapatismo: militant journalist Raúl Zibechi reflects on the state of Latin America today.

On May Day 2021, hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets of Colombia during one of the country's darkest periods in recent memory. Four days earlier, a [general strike](#) — which is still ongoing as we speak — had been called to denounce the neoliberal package proposed by the government of Ivan Duque. The state responded to these protests with an [unprecedented use of violence](#), killing dozens of demonstrators.

This comes during the so-called post-conflict period, following the signing of a peace accord with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in 2016. And yet, the increase in assassinations of environmentalists and land defenders across the country shows that the response to the protests is in fact very much in keeping with patterns of violence and militarization.

Meanwhile, in the Atlantic Ocean, seven Zapatistas are aboard a ship named *La Montaña* as part of their [Journey for Life voyage](#), the first stage of which will bring them to Europe. The delegation, having accepted invitations from numerous organizations, is on its way to share the “histories, pain, rage, successes and failures” of the Zapatistas with the continent of Europe.

These two stories embody the two opposing realities of Latin America in the 21st century. In one, you have the consolidating power of the state and a rights regime in crisis. And on the other, you have the new futures of solidarity and community being forged by societies adjacent to the state.

The COVID-19 pandemic temporarily upended the anti-austerity rebellions, the movements against patriarchy and other contentious politics that emerged at the end of 2019. However, they have now resurfaced in different ways, from being channeled into new transformative electoral campaigns to the growing autonomous turn seen across Latin America.

The militant journalist Raul Zibechi is one of the most prolific writers and political thinkers on social movements in Latin America. From the *caracoles* in Chiapas to the barracks of Aymara community members in El Alto, Bolivia, for many years Zibechi has walked the paths made by those who are living and organizing in opposition to state power.

Today, Zibechi continues his practice of accompaniment, covering societies in movement during the COVID-19 pandemic. He explores the elements of quotidian encounters among groups and peoples on their own terms, defying the dominant institutional and state-centered frameworks of the social sciences that see the state as the only operative site of power. The following is an excerpt of our ongoing dialogues, providing a broad and nuanced analysis of this current epoch, exploring power from above and below alike.

This interview was completed prior to the most recent escalation of Israeli aggression in Palestine,

which is why it was not part of this dialogue. Zibechi does, however, offer the statement regarding Israeli state violence:

[The situation in Palestine] highlights the double standards of the West, which rants against Venezuela but looks the other way when the dead are Palestinian children, as if those lives did not matter. Do they matter? Perhaps, for Biden and the state as a whole, the lives of Palestinians matter as much as those of Black people in America's suburbs. It is important that we understand how crimes against Black people in Brazil, against Indigenous peoples and pueblos in Colombia, against Palestinians, and against Black people in the USA, are not separate but connected. There is only one crime: the war of capital against the peoples and Mother Earth.

George Ygarza: In your most recent critical writing on global/macro level politics, you have described the last few years as a “junctural moment,” with the world at the cusp of a new hegemonic order that is shifting over to Asia, particularly centered in China. The rise of China has been rather unique in that it has not relied on a massive war economy and underwent industrialization of an unprecedented scale and speed.

At the same time, China is enhancing a massive surveillance apparatus that has allowed the state to expand its presence and power. Similarly, while the West's overall economic growth has relatively stagnated, its military expenditure continues to grow. Today, militarized borders and notions like Fortress Europe are no longer fringe ideas.

How do you see China's version of authoritarian capitalism responding differently to the pandemic compared to the liberal democracies of the West? And what does the expanding presence of the surveillance state mean for grassroots movements?

Raúl Zibechi: I am not so clear on the difference between the Chinese response and that of the Western democracies. In the West there have been very different responses, varying from those of the United States and Brazil to that of European and many other countries, which have been far more restrictive with regards to containment measures.

What sets China apart, in my view, is the combination of large-scale control with the support of digital technologies and facial identification that has developed a network spanning nearly every home, all in the hands of the Communist Party's military. This hasn't been possible in Western countries, except in some cases where the population has policed each other and denounced those who do not obey sanitary measures.

The growing surveillance state presents a major and unprecedented challenge for society and social movements. The last comparable mechanisms of social control were over 80 years ago under Nazism and Stalinism and therefore no living memory exists of that reality today. Today, activists must learn from scratch and forge new movements and tactics under states of exception.

However, beyond governments and regimes, the pandemic is an enormously challenging situation in places all across the globe. In Latin America, it has been the Indigenous peoples who have been able to respond in a more or less comprehensive manner, given that their territories are far from large urban concentrations, where they can rely on both their relationship with nature and in their own history and worldview. On the contrary, here in big cities, we feel like prisoners and are essentially paralyzed.

The pandemic, as you write, has exposed the fragile foundation of the neoliberal global economy. It is no surprise that we find the global centers of the outbreak in the economies

upholding the most stringent neoliberal policies, also headed by strongman reactionaries, such as in Brazil and India and the United States under Trump.

Violence is still very much the language of the state. Historical continuities of femicide, anti-Black violence, dispossession and other forms of repression can be observed in places like the US, India, Colombia and elsewhere. How has the role of violence within the state changed over the last couple of decades in your mind and how do you see the state remaking itself on the other end of the pandemic?

In order to answer this, we have to look at what has happened over the last 30 years since the start of the neoliberal turn. What we can observe today — albeit provisionally and incomplete — is the strengthening of the repressive apparatuses and a growing privatization of the public and social services, from health to education. In Latin America, we find the increasing militarization of societies. In some countries this is taking place in alliance with drug trafficking groups and paramilitaries, as is clearly the case in Brazil and Colombia and increasingly so in the Andean countries. We can also see this in the Global North, such as in Europe and the United States, where there is a growth in internal militarism — in the latter most notable since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

I think we owe ourselves a rigorous analysis of how states and ruling elites coexist alongside narco elements without the slightest problem, without thinking that their very existence is a threat to social cohesion and the survival of something that we can consider a society. In Brazil, the most important country in the region, we are witnessing the creation of militias with the support of conservative governors who, in turn, forge alliances with evangelical churches and drug traffickers. Of course, this is not made public, but there is a lot of research that corroborates it. The sociologist José Cláudio Souza Alves, who has been researching paramilitary groups for 26 years in Rio de Janeiro, synthesizes it in [one sentence](#): “[the militia] is not a parallel power. It’s the power of the government itself.”

This is the hidden part of the state, which is given little attention, otherwise a good part of the political class and the business community would fall. In Brazil, the militias emerged during the military dictatorship along with the military police, which today is one of the greatest problems of the state. It is from here where death squads emerge, groups which no one wants to touch. Not even Lula dared to do that.

I believe that we are facing deep state reconfigurations. These reconfigurations begin to dominate within the state apparatus as a logic of subordination of the popular sectors on the one hand and forceful domination on the other. In other words, in order to deny rights to certain sectors of society, logics of policing and militarization must be implemented. In that sense, we are heading towards a kind of apartheid of class, skin color and geographic zones. It is already happening in countries with democratic traditions, such as we see happening in France. Rights are replaced by social benefits and targeted aid, just enough so that these marginalized groups do not die of hunger, all the while being unable to exercise their rights.

For at least a decade now, it can be said that the rights regime in Latin America has eroded. While states in Latin America had earlier in the century aspired to develop strong multicultural democracies on the foundation of liberal republicanism, today it seems like Latin American states are embarking on a different kind of path. The new relationships — not just between the private and public sphere but with the narco entities that you describe above — have led to increased use of violence and repression, as recently took place in the streets of Cali and other cities in Colombia at the end of April and early May.

How would you describe this contemporary cycle? Is there evidence of a new turn in doing politics within the state beyond the deep state reconfigurations? Are we witnessing a transformative period in the late stages of capitalism or is the state simply showing its true essence?

It is my impression that the political and the economic should not be separated. I'll elaborate. I don't believe the ruling classes turn to repression out of pure evil. The subject is much more complex. In our region, neoliberalism takes the shape of open-pit mining, monocultures, large infrastructural works and fierce urban real estate speculation. This model has serious social consequences: it doesn't integrate, it disintegrates, generating huge pockets of poverty that leave 50 to 70 percent of the population unable to access a decent and stable job. In addition, peasants, Indigenous peoples and Afro-descendants are evicted from their lands or their central neighborhoods in order to gentrify them. Everything is speculation and, as if that were not enough, this model destroys the environment.

As this current extractivist model settles into place, we are beginning to understand two fundamental truths. The first is that that dispossession implies a harsh hand of repression. You can't steal a person's wallet without using force. Second, that this model strengthens patriarchy and colonialism, since it is the Indigenous peoples that are the most affected — especially women and girls.

This commodities model — which we can also call extractivist neoliberalism — needs the state, because in order to implement this model, laws and the entire legal system must be modified in a way that allows these mining companies to act as a state within the state. They have complete autonomy to enforce their laws, for example in their relationship with workers and the environment. The role of the state is fundamental, since these laws could not be installed without the direct support of municipal, regional and central governments.

Narrowing our focus, I want to turn to what this moment means for alternative or “unexceptional politics,” as the scholar Emily Apter has coined it. That is, the politics from below, the movements and perturbations that do not speak the language of the dominant polity but have nonetheless remained influential throughout time. These politics are often ignored, only to finally be recognized during periods of contestation and crisis. What have been the unique features of Latin America's civil societies that have produced such widespread and often sophisticated “unexceptional politics?”

Accumulation by dispossession, as conceptualized by the economic geographer David Harvey, is a defining feature in Latin America. Across Latin America, the material basis of this dispossession is essentially unhindered in a region that hasn't seen true democracy since its independence.

As Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano analyzed, in this continent there is what he called a “coloniality of power,” which suggests that the state was founded on the pattern of colonial oppression, where social classes coincide with skin color. As a result, Indigenous peoples, Black peoples and mestizos occupy the lower income scale. They occupy the worst jobs and are violently dispossessed, as happened in Colombia in the last two decades, where five million mostly Afro-descendent people have been displaced, while seven million hectares of peasant land have been expropriated in alliances between paramilitaries and drug traffickers, who control much of the countryside.

In general terms, many movements continue to ask the state to comply with its laws, to treat them as citizens, to recognize that they have rights and that they be respected. But other movements are growing that simply say: “leave us alone, do not get into our spaces. If we do not have the right to health or real education, then we do it our own way and don't mess with us anymore.” But the state

does not want to accept that — it neither complies with their rights nor lets them control their lands and territories.

In Latin America, 50 percent of the cultivable land legally belongs to Indigenous and Black peoples and to small farmers. It is on these lands that mining, hydrocarbon exploitation and monocultures want to advance. So, the companies advancing an extractivist neoliberal model seek to take the land that they do not yet control, which are a fundamental part of the territories of each country. To do so, they need the support of the state and the police forces.

At the end of 2019, the world witnessed a spectacular new wave of anti-austerity protests across Latin America that today continue in countries such as Haiti, Chile and Colombia. The pandemic momentarily upended their contentious movement, only for them to return to the public stage once again. However, much of the dominant analytics of power and politics remain state-centric, with much of the attention returning to elections and what can be salvaged of the progressive parties.

Conventional political frameworks continue to read politics as an oscillation between conservative and progressive poles. What is missing from this framing and how is the robust politic beyond this binary obscured by other elements of the state?

The people are lost, we're human beings, nothing more and nothing less. The most curious thing is that people who do not include human groups in their analysis, or leave them for the end, are at the same time those who say that "history is made by the people." They come from the left, are Marxists and anarchists, but they do not see the people — they only see the multinationals, the states, the police and the dominant classes as the main agents of change and history.

This is a problem of limited paradigm. The Marxist and anarchist currents are inspired by ideologies that in fact are part of the Enlightenment and capitalist modernity. But people are inspired by their own worldviews, their ancestral traditions and ways of seeing the world — completely different from modern ideologies. For example, Mother Earth must be cared for, not exploited. Individual rights are balanced with collective rights as peoples and so on, in every aspect of life.

These days I am astonished to attend debates that say that in Colombia there is nothing to celebrate, that nothing was achieved because neoliberalism is still there. These dominant frameworks are unable to see that a whole generation of young people has taken to the streets, that they conquered fear, cornered the government and initiated a general strike that as of writing has been going on for two weeks! [*Four weeks at the time of publication, ed.*]

Since then, there have been around 40 deaths and more than 400 disappeared, according to Human Rights Watch — people who went out to demonstrate and never returned to their families. The only thing the government has done is to remove the military in Cali and encourage the rich neighborhoods to take up arms, which they have done, with serious violence reported by protesters. In fact, the government openly promotes paramilitary groups.

That is why I sympathize with Zapatismo, which puts people first. That's why they say "enough!" Because everything begins with the cries of dignity and rebellion, not with an analysis of how Wall Street is doing.

Many communities across the continent are increasingly losing faith in the state, seeing it as not only inept but often complicit, recognizing the partnerships you outlined above. For decades now, you have covered these communities, describing them as societies in movement, which tries to capture the way they propose, build and sustain life adjacent to

the state.

How do you understand these movements as responses to the presence of the state as much as to its absence?

In the presence of the state, which is increasingly repressive and in some countries, genocidal, they respond with forms of self-defense, which are spreading across the continent. While they are non-violent and non-armed, these modes nevertheless assert their power. In the absence of the state, these societies respond by building health and education spaces, creating the infrastructures that are needed.

Since the state works against the population, many [in Colombia] have taken it upon themselves to protect their communities. First, the Indigenous people created their Indigenous Guard, without arms, to defend themselves peacefully. They have been expelling armed groups, paramilitaries, guerrillas and the army from their territories for over 20 years. Then, the peasants and the Black communities began to organize their own guards. Now, the students and the popular neighborhoods of Cali are calling on the Indigenous Guard to come and protect them. There are two ways of seeing the world: one through the use of violence as seen by the state's militarization, and the other through a grounded presence of community where people rely on one another and only have their bodies to defend themselves.

Over the last several months, you have written about the ways in which these movements have responded to crisis, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, turning inward and across, relying on previously established networks to form autonomous zones. For example, you have highlighted the community closures taking place in urban centers, such as in Las Cumbres settlement on the outskirts of Montevideo, Uruguay and in the southern region of the Cauca valley in Colombia. What are some notable trends you have seen over the last few years and what are some underlying characteristics shared by all of these distinct inward turns?

No one can be autonomous if s/he is always acting and looking outward. Autonomy requires a balance of the inside/outside. Movements and peoples need to turn inward in order to restore balances that have been lost prior to and during the pandemic. They do it like the Nasa (Indigenous community of south-western Colombia), who called an inward *Minga*, or inner collective work, bringing together traditional doctors and elder wise men across campsites and sacred places to regain harmony between people and nature. Afterwards, they are in a better position to face other tasks, such as being able to multiply and diversify their crops in order to avoid hunger and to strengthen the defense of their territory in the face of external threats.

In the Cauca region of Colombia, they have held barter fairs without money, in which everyone takes what s/he needs and brings what s/he has. The recently initiated Zapatista tour should be understood, I think, as part of this mode of collective defense, as it seeks to link with other peoples. The massive mobilizations across the Mapuche territory are also part of this same process of peoples' defense.

Let's talk about pluriversalism. Numerous projects of conviviality have been present across the continent since long before the crisis. The Zapatista's notion of "un mundo donde quepan muchos mundos" ("a world where many worlds fit") has been a project of reciprocity, communality and the aspiration of building towards deeply relational social ecologies. The Zapatistas learned much and continue to learn from the Indigenous communities in the southwestern region of Mexico.

These alternative politics, informed by cosmovisions outside of the urban centers, have provided far more engaged social practices than anything the institutional left has provided over the last few decades. How have popular politics come to embrace these practices of pluriculturalism and how can we continue to build and support them?

In the hegemonic political culture of the West — and in a very particular way in the left — one still thinks in terms of totality, of the unity of all in order to achieve an end and of the state as a synthesizer of collective unity. This form of thinking leads to extremisms on the right and on the left that have never been overcome. Capitalism dreams of a homogeneous world in the image and likeness of capital — ultra modern cities, uniform fields with large tracts of monocultures and so on.

When I was in the Zapatista school in 2013, I saw the heterogeneity of the communities. There are Zapatistas and non-Zapatistas, Catholics and non-Catholics and so on. The Zapatistas who do not accompany them are called “partisan brothers” because they belong to a party that is against Zapatismo, from the government (left establishment) or from the right like the PRI [Institutional Revolutionary Party, center-right]. But they live in the same community, as the only thing required of one to be a Zapatista is to not receive alms from the government, since that makes many not want to work as much, preferring to receive food and money from the government.

It is a bit crazy, because it is like saying “enemy brother,” because there are strong ideological struggles. Even so, non-Zapatistas go to their clinics and to their courts to resolve problems. Violence is the limit in this heterogeneity. Yet, when the community is under attack, they respond en masse, with firmness and without violence or weapons. They choose to be non-violent because they do not want to replicate the violence of the state. For us, with our western urban logic, this sounds unbelievable, but this is how they carry it out.

Raúl Zibechi is a writer, popular educator and journalist who accompanies organizational processes in Latin America, received an Honorary Doctorate from Universidad Mayor de San Andrés (La Paz, Bolivia) in 2017. He has published 20 books on social movements in which he has criticized the old “state-centered” political culture. He publishes in various media in the region, among others *La Jornada* (Mexico), *Disinform*, *Rebellion* and *Correo da Cidadania*.

George Ygarza is an organizer, accomplice and PhD candidate dwelling within the undercommons.

[Click here](#) to subscribe to ESSF newsletters in English and/or French.

P.S.

Roar Magazine

<https://roarmag.org/essays/zibechi-latin-america-interview/>