Dissidence: Facing the disorder of the open-ended—Mexico, a brief and precarious map of the impossible

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The only way of making justice to those texts and the event they constitute, is weaving a fabric of writing that manages to abolish the hierarchy of discourses. Thus I built, with their words and itineraries, the plot of a story that is the story of the sentimental, intellectual and political education of a generation. And I could only do so with my own sensibility, keeping in mind all the novels, poems, songs, operas, or dramas that allowed me establish resonances with their own lived experiences. — Jacques Ranciere (2010)

A Postcard for Thinking About Dissidence

It is Mexico during May 2012; its hot, the rain takes a while to announce itself and the monochord scenario of some foretold electoral results—the return of the PRI—structure time. Something opens its way through the spring stupor. They are youths, they come from different places: from the capital, from Guadalajara, from Ciudad Juarez, from Puebla, Cuernavaca, the South, and the North. They call themselves #Yosoy132. They are united already by the certainty that things are not going well in a country that bleeds daily and that boasts more than 70,000 deaths because of drug trafficking, more than 35,000 young people killed between 2000 and 2008, and that is controlled by powerful media monopolies that organize, wield, direct and orient what we know about ourselves. In line with the multiple social uprising that began in 2011, from Tahrir Square to Russia, passing through Spain, Greece, and United States, Mexican youths took the streets, plazas and social networks.

The night of June 13th, riding on a pickup truck with an LCD projector and a loudspeaker, they projected a 5-minute video on the walls of Televisa—that giant that condenses the disdain of millions of Mexicans young and old—that begins with the phrase "What is being manipulated behind these walls?"

Now they were telling their own truth, outside, with new ideas and new certainties about the meaning of truth.

The night came to a close with a symbolic act offered by the weather. Hundreds chanted “informed students, never manipulated (¡estudiantes informados, jamás manipulados!)”, when a young fine arts student lit up a paper balloon that took flight in the middle of the night. The rain had finally decided to shower upon this very dry country. The balloon flew over the multitude,
which appeared moved as it followed its flight. Its course was unpredictable and its final moment, as if propelled by a spring breeze, the balloon entered the balcony of Televisa, where a few minutes before the reflectors had been turned off to hide the protest—a faint light in the silence of so many years.

“If we don’t burn together, who will illuminate this darkness?”, says the giant placard they installed in UNAM’s main square. It has become an emblem and symbol of the movement: Dissidence, seduction and resistance.

Dissidence: From Resistance to Imagination

In a relatively long timeline, it could be said that dissidence in Mexico is an old story with periods of high intensity that can take us back to the colonial period, later to The Reform War, then to the Revolution of 1910 and to particular moments in our history across the 20th Century. In this brief essay, however, I would like to begin with a foundational moment in the contemporary history of Mexico, the eruption in 1994 of the indigenous Zapatistas in the national scene, because it is a moment that marked the meaning of “dissidence” in its deepest sense, which is derived from dissidere, which means “separate, not settled, not desiring”.

Zapatismo constituted itself precisely as a call to an insurrection that “dissents,” in other words, one that calls for not remaining within the same dominant model and that, much to the contrary, marks its distance and its non-desire to inscribe itself within the system. Maybe this is one of the least debated aspects of Zapatismo, in so far as the living conditions of its constituents quickly moved the debate towards the issue of inclusion-exclusion. The poverty, the historic offences, the injustice and the terrible inequity that the indigenous Mexicans have suffered, in this case from the country’s southwest, foreclosed the more dramatically eruptive dimension of the indigenous uprising which was precisely their call to think in another way, to construct a different space, away from the centers of power.

The dissident is not in the opposition—she, he or they have decided to separate (“not reside”, from the Greek meneeo). Therein lies its transformative potential, in the revelation of another possible order. The dissident articulates resistance and seduction (as Rodrigo Dorfman subtitled his documentary). Thus, in the face of Zapatismo’s call to action, the proprietary powers became paralyzed and could only respond with force and proposals for “inclusion”; repression to contain the heretical outbreak and illusory inclusion to avoid the rupture that dissidence announces in its seductive becoming. Seduction approximates the definition of dissidence in the sense of “separating” (seductio). By dissociating itself from a model or center, from a mode of thinking, from a dominant representation of the real, dissidence seduces, hailing its others to that other space from where it articulates a different “we.”
In the face of the discursive order of modern democracy and its devices, supported on the notion of consensus, equilibrium, stability, and of agreements by any means necessary, dissidence irrupts to destabilize the politics of consensus upending “the policed map of the possible” (Savater 2011).

Dissidence is seduction, resistance, but also, and fundamentally, imagination—an imagination that seeks to inaugurate an impossible time (Derrida 2003). It opens the gates to the possible and, in a Derridian fashion, to the insurrection of the possible. In this sense, dissidence is more than an economy of redemption; it is an economy of the imagination.

Zapatismo opened the doors to the imagination at a time when the map of potential horizons appeared collapsed due to three fundamental issues:

a) The decision of markets to enter international agreements in order to provide globalizing neoliberalism a legal framework for operation. Through the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), then-President Carlos Salinas de Gortari decreed, with an impeccable dive, Mexico’s entry into the sweet waters of free trade.

b) The defeat and repression against the social movements of the sixties and seventies, and the retreat of numerous social actors towards political work at a smaller scale.

c) And, the social and symbolic impacts of an overwhelming media and cultural industry that dedicated itself with great intensity to produce unequivocal versions of reality.

That is the scene. It is Mexico at the closing of the 20th Century, with its social and economic conditions in a marked decline. There are outbreaks of rebelliousness everywhere, but the television channels, radio stations, and the large national networks of print media pretend it is not happening. The ¡Ya Basta! — that call which explodes in the voices of men, women, Zapatista militias and bases of support—echos throughout the national territory, and beyond its borders. As if attracted by a magnet, social movements, civic organizations, indigenous groups, Marxists, anarchists, Catholics, atheists, youth, and some intellectuals, respond to a call that is not for war (as some political authorities, the owners of capital and media would have it), but precisely to the possibility of a new map to think life, reality, justice, love and also death.

They came from many places, from Spain, Italy, from the United States and other places, thousands of searchers, almost like in Juan Rulfo’s tale of Pedro Páramo:

I came to Comala because they told me that my father lived here, a man called Pedro Páramo. My mother told me. And I promised I would come to see him when she died [. . .] But I did not think I would keep my promise. Until now when I suddenly started to fill up with dreams, to make my illusions fly. And in this way a world started to form around the hope that that man called Pedro Páramo was. This is why I came to Comala.

One after the other, the travelers in this voyage to the South that some decided to call a utopia, seemed to be saying: I came to Mexico, Chiapas, because they told me that the future was opening up here. I suddenly became full of dreams and an entire world started to form itself around the hope of those called Zapatistas. That is why I came to Chiapas. Many came and stayed, while others came and left, and inside that space called Zapatismo dreams and projects began to blossom, hopes and cooperatives, desires and schools, first around an epicenter called ‘La Realidad’ and in those mojones that became the ‘caracoles’.

Derrida affirms that “the messianic without messianism would be the opening of the future or the coming of the other like the coming of justice, but without a horizon of waiting and with no
prophetic prefiguration” (2003, 61). Perhaps in this elaboration it is possible to find a insight that
goes to the heart of dissidence—one about the event as becoming of the other in a horizon
without prophetic expectation, that other that becomes a possible other, that space apart, that
impossible time, that configures itself as a “general structure of experience.”

Through these frameworks, it becomes possible to say that dissidence necessarily demands a
form of de-subjectification, a wrenching of the self, in order to construct a new
subjectivity—resistance, seduction, imagination, the becoming of the other to configure a
different/separated space in which another subjectivity is possible.

The risk, as we have seen in Zapatismo, is that in this liminal moment (Turner 1988)—this
time of openness and ambiguity in which the previous order is not what it was and the one
announced has not yet come into being—the prophetic prefiguration makes inroads and
works to turn dissidence into a telos, a fixed program. If the prophetic prefiguration triumphs
(this would be much more precise in plural, to situate the struggle for the definition of the future),
the horizon of what is possible is foreclosed by the past and the potency of indeterminacy is
defused.

It is Mexico, and the XXI century begins with the slight promise of a possible democracy. For the
first time in 70 years, the governing Party, the PRI (Revolutionary Institutional Party), looses the
elections against the party of the eternal opposition, the PAN (National Action Party), which from
its much-extended coexistence with its adversary, ends up being a faithful copy of its historical
nemesis. The ensuing years would show that everything changed without anything actually
changing—the deterioration of the living conditions of the majority of Mexicans continues; brutal
violence irrupts on the national scene, ingovernability increases; media monopolies assert their
power; and two Mexicans enter the exclusive list of Forbes millionaires: Carlos Slim, the Telmex
telephone company tycoon and, El Chapo Guzmán, the phantom leader of the Pacific Cartel.
That is Mexico. New elections are coming and after 12 years outside the Presidency, the PRI
aims to return to power. The PAN has been worn down by bad administration and internal
disputes, as Felipe Calderón has become the representation of failure and violence. The left is
atomized, divided, and bereft of visible new leaders. It is 2012.

Dissidence: We Are What We Will Be #YoSoy132

And what moved me most was that we spent more than four hours in the Assembly, trying to
understand who we are, what we were, what we wanted to be.—C.M. Member of #YoSoy132 Guadalajara

With Alejandro Grimson, I underscore the analytical and political importance of the notion of
cultural configuration, which he defines as “a space in which there are shared symbolic narratives, horizons of possibility, inequities of power, and historicity” (2011, 28). The question about the configuration of the dissidence (whether in singular or plural form) turns out to be fundamental if we assume, as Derrida would have it, that the messianic without prophetic prefiguration is not based on content that is historically revealed (Derrida 2013). Under this assumption, dissidence as an irruptive event that pierces the horizons of possibility cannot be defined from a map of previous meanings. Dissidence is not a revelation; it is event, potency, and rupture.

As an event, dissidence demands attention to what Rosenau (1990) calls “cascades,” which he understands as “sequences of actions in a multi-centric world that suddenly gain strength and impulse, lose velocity, stop, reverse their course or happen again while their multiple repercussions do not cease to expand and spread through whole systems and subsystems.” What I try to suggest is that dissidence is never a state, but an open process that involves adopting different configurations through sequences of actions.

On May 11th of 2012, the PRI’s candidate for the Presidency of Mexico, Enrique Peña Nieto, was visiting one of the auditoriums of the Ibero-American University in Mexico City, another act in the ritual chain of the elections. The students rebuked him directly and without a prepared script. Peña Nieto did not know how to respond; yet the arrogance of power was stronger. He was unable and had no desire to calibrate the sensible intelligence of his interlocutors, thus leading to the first sequence in the becoming of the event that turned into #YoSoy132. There was nothing written and it was an “incident” that could have passed by unnoticed. Yet a space already existed, an open-ended time for the becoming of the other, of another.

Soon thereafter, and amidst the virulent statements made by the national president of the PRI, Pedro Joaquín Coldwell, in which he accused the university students of being mindless followers, of being porros (the term used in Mexico to name the groups that infiltrate social movements to dismantle them from inside or justify repression), the students of the “Ibero” uploaded an 11-minute video on the web in which 131 students, with their ID in hand, self-represented themselves, and exercised their right to rebuke the statements and accusation being directed at them. The virality this video acquired has no precedent in the recent history of the country.

Each one of the participants used three elements to configure the video: their own name, their file number, and the identification card that accredits them as students of the university—a sign, an index and an icon. The name is the sign that operates as an emblem, as a condensation of a self, as a biographical ground from which one participates. The file number is an index that easily allows the location relevant and important aspects of the continuity of an element.
(symbolic or material) within reality—in this case their condition as students. Finally, the ID card operates as an icon, a representation or sign that keeps a relationship of sameness with the object represented. The power of this 11-minute video, in which the same elements are repeated with different tones and emphases, stems precisely from these characteristics. Individual responsibility (the full name) is not eluded; these speech acts emanate from a place of identity. Yet the event’s potency, beyond its formal elements, lies in that the students made evident, through the use of social networks, that the horizon of the possible could be transformed within a landscape of the impossible.

“This is not just the simple use of social networks, but collective and intelligent action to appropriate social networks and other digital tools for transformative political and collective action. It is not the Facebook or Twitter revolution, but rather a new techno-political capacity, practiced at a massive level by citizens on the web,” says Javier Toret, member of the group DatAnalysis15m.  

The video “131 students of the Ibero” was followed by an astounding sequence of new videos in which the protagonists (the majority of them young students of public and private universities), asserted they were “the 132th”, joining in this way, one by one, a wave that would find its best expression and symbolic condensation in the #YoSoy132 hashtag, that by then, the end of May 2012, was a trending topic on Twitter, a key theme on Facebook, with the movement now on the streets on repeated occasions.

If, as Toret points out, the point not merely about the use of social networks, the question that emerges suggests the articulation between an impossible time, the de-subjectification implied in the irruption of the event (as discussed above), and techno-political capacities.

#YoSoy132 was not a call to insurgency in a traditional political sense, it was a dissident invitation to think and feel in another way, an appeal to think and feel “as if one were already free”, as if everything had started to change simply because change was imagined.

Amidst their disdain for the Mexican political class, the corruption, the constant manipulation of information and with it, of reality, young people found in the #YoSoy132 configuration the possibility of “separating from” and disordering the police map of the possible through the rupture of the configuration of a pre-established order. Their battle against the manipulation of information focused on Televisa, but the power of the movement generated an important effect: along with a robustly established counter-discourse, they generated myriad options for information and analysis. They told another story—Internet radios, webpages, bulletins, magazines allowed them to break the monopoly of the legitimate word.

The month of June of 2012 was about the power of the impossible. The cascades of actions took place at an extraordinary speed—assemblies, sit-ins and encampments in public squares in different cities, an effervescent collective conversation in social media, brigades in public
transportation and neighborhoods, the creation of national working groups, collectives that joined #YoSoy132, marches, occupations, assuming different configurations but sheltered by “hope without waiting”, as Derrida would say.

Learning in the course of action itself, the members of the movement navigated, and not without problems, the tension between subversion and invention. This is not a play on words but a key tension of what I would like to refer to as an “intermediate space”, that sort of liminality, potency, that I understand as the open process for the irruption of an event that generates its own spatio-temporal coordinates; and that characterizes itself by the tension between a previous order and a new reality in gestation in which the political tension between the transformation or preservation of categories to think about the world expresses itself. To subvert is to disrupt, upset a system, invention is *inventio, invenire*, to find, discover, create.

#YoSoy132 did not exhaust itself in the sum of bodies in the street, nor in the accumulation of contestatory strength online. For many of its members it was clear that what was at stake was the liberation of time from the existing telos of the future, from a political program fitted to the ways of the political parties. It was not about recycling slogans, but arriving at this other space, at that other time. The goal was to invent its memory, and bring dissidence forth, in the archaeological manner suggested by Benjamin: “a good archaeological report not only informs us about the strata from which its findings originate, but also gives an account of the strata which first had to be broken through” (2012, 141). The layers that #YoSoy132 managed to pierce through are their main asset, but they undermined their capacity for invention, until further notice.

**Burn Together: Final Notes**

There are emotional images that can shake the most stable foundations of national states. There are political actions that have the chameleonic virtue of operating simultaneously as “photographable images”, which means “decipherable” to the media, and as powerful appeals for differentiated subjectivities, which means “appropriable” by a diverse and dispersed group of social actors which recognize themselves, suddenly in an image, in a ritual, in a spontaneous or intentional performance.

Both Zapatismo and #YoSoy132, in their becoming-event, managed to generate this other space of subjective interpelations and produce emotional images that, bursting the seams of traditional political discourse, shook the foundations of an order that assumes itself as the only one possible. In that intermediate space, in the messianic time without prophetic prefiguration, in that *as if we were* already free, the dissidences led by both social movements managed to catalyze emotions and desires—a fundamental condition, I maintain, to open the gates to dissident imagination.

Toret states, in the interview I have cited and in relation to the preliminary analysis of emotion
in a data base of millions of tweets related to the #15M hashtag, “we must emphasize that the
dominant emotions have been outrage and empowerment, and we have noticed the need for
the second to be present in order for action to take place. Indignation or rage is not enough.
Empowerment is necessary in order to overcome fear, the main factor of inhibition”.10

In my own qualitative research on #OccupyWallStreet and #YoSoy132, I arrive at the same
conclusion—empowerment is a key emotion for action. From hopelessness and sadness, it
shifts to rage and indignation11, but it is the vertigo of the collective emotion of empowerment
that detonates the possibility of breaking through the layers of fear and sadness. Outrage is not
enough!, as Stephane Hessel, the author of the “Indignaos” manifesto (2011) pointed out, in
his incitement to mobilization entitled Commit Yourselves! (2011b). But the engagement is born
of another emotion: solidarity, which in the socio-anthropology of emotions is equivalent to
feeling with others, to imagining a common good for and with others. That coming of solidarity,
that primary emotion of feeling another’s suffering or falling in love with the other and wishing
him or her good, is the seismic inauguration of dissidence, the announcement of its arrival and
the arrival of that possible other. One doesn’t expect the Messiah to arrive; one acts to make
something arrive, as Arditi would say (2012, 150). Emotions are essential for understanding not
why, but how people in the impossible time, being what they are, announce what we will be,
what we can be.

To stand aside, to rebel, let one self be seduced and seduce others, imagine, be moved, act in
consequence, but especially interrupt, perturb, upset, disorder the time of domination, are
constitutive elements and moments of dissidence. As Rancière points out: there are
interruptions: moments when one of the social machines which structure the time of domination
breaks down and stops. It may happen with trains and buses; it may happen with the school
apparatus, or with any other machine. There are also moments when crowds take to the streets
in order to oppose their own agenda to the agenda of the state and the temporality of
exploitation. “There are interruptions: Moments in which one of the machines that makes time
work is stopped — it can be the one at work, or the one in school. There are also moments in
which the masses in the street oppose their own order of the day against the agenda of the
government apparatuses. Those “moments” are not ephemeral outbursts, after which
everything returns to the normal order of things. They are also a transformation of the visible, of
the names that one can give to things, the landscape of the possible (2010, 9).”

Thinking dissidence with from through two emblematic movements of creative resistance in contemporary Mexican history is the exercise that, on one hand, attempts to problematize the enormous difficulty of stepping outside teleological thought and, at the same time, of
contending impossibility of the unquestionable contribution of these movements to the naming of the possible—the becoming event of other narratives, other visions that have been able to invite the imagination of another possible world, because “if we don’t burn together,
who will illuminate this darkness”.

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Estados Unidos; sus temas de investigación giran en torno a las culturas urbanas, vida
cotidiana y subjetividad, construcción social del miedo, jóvenes, violencia y
narcotráfico. Culturas Juveniles. Formas Políticas del Desencanto (Siglo XXI, 2012) es uno de
sus libros recientes.

Notes

1 This is not an essay of analysis of the Zapatismo or the #YoSoy132 movement, it is an unfinished piece that tries to reflect about dissidence, its facies, its drawalada, its ghosts.

2 Occupy the imagination. Tales of seduction and resistance. Trailer available at: http://vimeo.com/62362177

3 The interested reader can view the trailer of the documentary by producer Anfra Mejía “The questions of the snail”, because I consider that she places key questions to the becoming event of zapatismo and its relationship with the subjective processes of people that were or had been involved with the movement: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r9HSIkbEXtU

4 For a full description of the events I refer the interested reader to the chronicle that journalist Daniela and I wrote, #Yosoy132: the Mexican spring, available in http://www.revistaanfibia.com/cronica/yosoy132-la-primavera-mexicana-2

5 It is not the Facebook or Twitter revolution, it is a techno-political capacity”, interview available at http://madrilonia.org/2013/04/no-es-la-revolucion-facebook-o-twitter-es-una-nueva-capacidad-tecnopolitica-entrevistamos-a-toret/

6 See: http://datanalysis15m.wordpress.com/

7 The importance of “as if” of freedom, justice and equality is extraordinarily analyzed by Benjamin Artidi (2012), “The insurgences do not have a plan — they are the plan: Political performatives and evanescent mediators in 2011”.

8 I elaborated this notion in my research on the gas explosions in Guadalajara in 2991, to account precisely for the importance of analyzing a movement in its becoming event (Reguillo, 1996).

9 About this issue, see Victor Vich’s work (2004).
Here one can consult the interactive visualization of the main emotions surrounding 5M: [http://assets.outliers.es/15memociones/](http://assets.outliers.es/15memociones/)

11 Here I follow Spinoza’s line of analysis, who considers that emotions are not reduced to binary relationships or those of oppositions (hate-love) or dual (fear-hope), but that they always articulate themselves in complex systemic; for Spinoza there is a political economy of affects where the love or hate that a third party provokes on the “thing” of my affects, derives in a complex system of emotions that the author defined as tercerity. See Reguillo (2000) for an anthropological analysis a Kaminsky (1998), for a philosophical approach.

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