

THIS IS NO TIME TO BE GIVEN TO DISTRACTION

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(Translated by Cristina Cielo.)

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With the Arab revolts, the global systemic crisis enters a new phase, more unpredictable and increasingly beyond control. Until now, the main actors have been the financial oligarchs, the powerful multinationals and the leading governments, particularly the United States and China, followed at some distance by institutions such as the G-20. Now, as popular sectors around the world – particularly the mobilized populace of the Middle East – enter the scene, a momentous shift has taken place. It implies a deepening and speeding up of the global transformations taking place.

The first peals heralding these changes resounded with the Greek youth revolts in December 2008. Financial capital’s attempted escape from inevitable depreciation through food commodities speculation has worsened the precarious situation of millions of people the world over. It is thus no surprise that the Arab world has erupted, but we know perfectly well that something similar can take place in any other part of the world, as testified by the occupation of the Wisconsin state capitol, in the United States. The question is not what will happen, but rather, where the “many-headed hydra” – title of one of the best analyses of history from below – will once more emerge.

The growing dismantling of the system will raze

many governments and even some states, whether they be conservative, progressive or of any hue they paint themselves. We are entering into a stage of generalized chaos, with a blurring of the old borders between left and right, between center and periphery and even of hegemonic ideologies.

The activation of popular sectors modifies our analytic axes, and above all, imposes ethical choices. The scenarios of inter-state relations will increasingly collide with the scenarios of emancipatory struggles. Concretely: popular struggles for freedom may bring down governments and regimes that seemed poised against imperialism and the unipolar world headed by the United States and Western multinationals. When popular revolts threaten governments that are friendly to the West, as in the case of Egypt, wide fronts against tyranny are formed by the most diverse lefts. But when those same revolts take aim at tyrannies that are more or less anti-US, that front is fractured and calculations of convenience emerge. Such is the case with Libya.

We Latin Americans can yet learn from the Arab revolts. The people’s struggles for their freedom are sacred for anyone of the left, if that still means anything. In this respect, there is no space for speculations or calculations. Leave that to Berlusconi, worried as he is about Italian investments in Libya and the assumed arrival of thousands of refugees to Mediterranean Europe. It is true that some have fallen as low as the Roman child abuser, but in fact we shouldn’t have expected much more from Daniel Ortega.

Precipitated by the Arab revolts, those of us who strive for fundamental changes in the world system and in our immediate realities must urgently debate three themes. The first is the most painful for those

Translator’s note: Roque Dalton (1935-1975) was a Salvadoran poet and revolutionary who was falsely accused of betrayal and executed by members of his own underground organization

of us shaped by the 1960s struggles. That is, we must look at ourselves in the mirror and refuse to be given to distraction. The heroic struggles of the last half century find their counterpart in the terrible events that we too often sweep under the rug. Roque Dalton is no exception. The murderer Muammar Gaddafi was once an ally of the anti-imperialist camp, and for some, he still is. No one is free from sins, but we must all look terror in the face. The author of these lines was once a fervent supporter of the Chinese cultural revolution, with little regard for the enormous damage it was causing ordinary people.

We should think about what it was at the time that led us to not care to see, to not want to hear or understand the pain of the people sacrificed on the altar of revolution. It is no use shielding ourselves behind “we didn’t know”; that is the same response that Germans gave when asked about their passivity under Nazism.

The second issue involves understanding that we are now faced with something different; this is not a simple repetition of the known. The rupture of the system is the beginning of a chaotic period in which our certainties and learnings will be put to test. The fall of the system will affect us all, and the rubble will also fall on our own heads. In “Marx and Underdevelopment,” Immanuel Wallerstein reminds us that “a controlled and organized transition tends to imply certain continuity of exploitation.” And he tells us that “we must lose our fear of a transition that looks like collapse, like disintegration,



Streets of Cairo (inverted flag).

Databent image of protests in Tahrir Square that came out, totally by chance, looking like an inverted Egyptian flag.

Flickr: Splicegraph 

which is indeed uncontrolled and in some ways even anarchic, but not necessarily disastrous.”

We are entering into a period of systemic chaos that at some moment will shed light on a new order, perhaps better, perhaps worse than the capitalist order. This system was born with the demographic catastrophe of the Black Plague, which killed a third of the European population over the span of a few years. It will not surrender on tiptoes and with fine manners, but rather in the midst of chaos and barbarity, as with Gaddafi’s regime.

The third point is that we are forced to make profound ethical choices that will shape our lives. There is no way other than to proceed unconditionally by the side of the oppressed, because they are the ones who most need a new world. Now that they are constituting themselves as actors in this systemic crisis, we must accompany them without directing them,

practicing – now more than ever – the exhortation to lead-by-following. The people in rebellion have shown more knowledge than the leaders and militants. They learned not to confront when it is not yet time, to surround and to sleep under tanks in order to immobilize them, to envelop soldiers to render their destructive capabilities useless. Feminine skills that transform war into the art of vanquishing without annihilating.