

The Power and Promise of Continuous Political Assembly: the case of the ayllu

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In what follows, I am going to talk about a book project that I am working on tentatively entitled *Continuous Assembly: the Power and Promise of Non Archism*, a set of ideas that I will explain further. It's still in draft form so I welcome any and all comments and thoughts. The theme of the book and hence my talk today involves the idea of continuous political assembly as a form of resistance that works to thwart and even more critically at times serves to defeat what I call archism. Archism is the form of hierarchical modes of political, economic and social equality that have ruled the planet for the last 500 years and which is so ubiquitous that it does not even seem to need (and definitely does not want) a name. In a nutshell, continuous political assembly (or just continuous assembly for short) is a set of institutions wherein a community has a way to engage with one another on a near daily basis in order to form a self-organized and self-empowered community. These institutions, as I will show further, are still to be found in many contemporary indigenous communities but are far less in evidence in the West. I will argue that continuous political assembly is the key to resisting archism which otherwise continues to evolve into an ever more fearsome mode.

Let me start by describing the idea that motivated me to write this book in the first place. I've long been highly dissatisfied (a huge understatement!) about what Walter Benjamin calls "left-wing melancholia," namely the idea that the left is doomed to repeat a series of very brief and ultimately failed but otherwise glorious and beautiful uprisings. Either these uprisings are crushed from forces of capitalism and fascism like the Paris Commune, the Spartacist uprising, and the Spanish anarchists, or they are doomed by forces within the left itself, including

examples like the Bolshevik takeover and destruction of the soviets, China's effectively becoming a capitalist state led by a communist party, or many other such instances.

So many of leftists ask themselves what we can and should be doing when we live in times (such as now) when conditions do not seem ripe for revolution, when in fact the forces of fascism seem to be ascendent in the world. And behind that thought, is a deeper one: even if we did live in revolutionary times, what is the point of engaging in such movements if we are only going to be defeated and murdered? Was it worth the sacrifice of Rosa Luxemburg and so many other Spartacists for the sake of a few days of uprising? The murder of Buenaventura Durutti and Federico Garcia Lorca and countless others for the sake of a glorious summer of anarchism in 1936? The brave partisans of the Paris Commune who were lined up and shot against a wall?

These kinds of thoughts are, if you are a committed leftist, very depressing indeed, and it might seem easy to feel a kind of existential dread or despair as you look toward a future of just more of the same. My thought though, something that gives me in fact a lot of hope, is that the answer to the problems of the left do not need to be invented from scratch to allow for some future finally successful revolution. My idea—and this is what this whole book and my whole talk today will be about—is that the formula for success already exists and actually has existed for thousands of years, long predating the era of what I like to call archism. Briefly, once again, archism is a term I like to use (I got it from reading Ursula K. LeGuin's "The Dispossessed") that refers to the forms of dominance and hierarchy that have ruled this planet for the past 500 years. It's main components are capitalism, white supremacy, heteropatriarchy and related forms of elitism.

Reading David Graeber and David Wengrow's wonderful book *The Dawn of Everything* helped cement what I had always thought, that archism is not the inevitable end of human

development but rather a horrible accident, one that many earlier societies organized themselves against to try to make such an outcome impossible. Over time, archism has managed to worm its way into our lives but in many contemporary indigenous communities around the world—in the Andean Highlands, with the Zapatistas, as well as in countless historical examples--we see something that has so far evaded the Western left. These communities have survived unimaginable levels of violence, genocide, disease, colonization and liberalization of their societies. While the West tends to produce quick and evanescent outbursts against archism, these societies sometimes endure and sometimes actually *win*.

In my book—and I'll talk about the first example at greater length--I have a chapter each about the *ayllu* system in the Andean highlands and the role of the Haitian *cultivateurs*. The latter were farmers who, upon freeing themselves from slavery after the Haitian Revolution, refused demands by their own political leaders like Toussaint Louverture and Dessalines to go back to working on plantations, even if for a wage. Instead, they set up a form of small farms that were organized into collective forms of self-organization called the *tè minè* (or minor lands) movement.

Both of these histories involve the use of what I am calling continual political assembly, that is to say, their daily and ordinary life doubles as a forum in which they can meet and come together to make collective decisions. The benefits of such a system are incalculable. They produce a community that is deeply and entirely self organized. The people in these communities know and trust each other implicitly. They know how to cooperate politically, economically and, just as critically, militarily. The *ayllu* system in the Andean highlands has lasted for over one thousand years. It survived a genocide which reduced the indigenous population by 90%. It survived colonization and the advent of the liberalizing states of Peru and

Bolivia. But more than survive, it has at times either come close to defeating or actually defeating archist power. In the late 18th century, the uprising of Tupac Amaru II in Peru and Tupac Katari in Bolivia came close to chasing the Spanish out of the Andes entirely. In the early 2000s, in the so called Gas and Water wars in urban Bolivia, the *ayllu* form was key to defeating the government, forcing in the end the collapse of the government and leading to the election of Evo Morales.

In Haiti, the *tè minè* system was a form of continuous assembly as well. This system was ostensibly a system of individual small plot farms across the hills and mountains of Haiti. Yet in fact it was far more than that. It was a system of collective self-organization and power, a veritable revolution within the revolution, that lasted almost 120 years until it was finally destroyed by the US invasion and occupation of the island of Hispaniola in 1915. The disaster you see in Haiti today is not due to the Haitians themselves but rather due to the fact that over the next 19 years, the US ruthlessly uprooted the *tè miné* system, replacing it with a more typical form of corporate predation, dependency and environmental degradation.

The point of all of this is that the form of continuous political assembly can actually defeat archism. Not every time, not in a way that destroyed archism once and for all, but in a way that tangibly and often permanently sets back archist predations against that particular community. It's true that the *tè minè* system, what I think of as Haiti's revolution within a revolution, was destroyed but that was after well over 100 years! Think of this in contrast to the three months of the Paris commune, the glorious summer of anarchist power in Spain, the few days of the Spartacist uprising and you get the point.

In my studies of the *ayllu* and the *tè minè* systems, I have found that these systems are continually changing over time. In this sense there is nothing romantic or timeless about these

communities. They are as contemporary as communities in the West. They are also both marked by enormous internal diversity. This makes perfect sense to me. Each community makes its own decisions and so of course they will be different than other communities nearby and more different still than communities that are farther away. Similarly, each new generation will make its own decisions so that this diversity occurs not only across space but also over time even as it is held within a cultural and linguistic envelope that ties it to earlier practices.

There is no inherent content for continuous assembly, therefore. It is akin to Walter Benjamin's notion of "pure means," that is, means which are also their own end. Indigenous people do not have a monopoly on this practice. As I will show further, non indigenous communities can both participate in the indigenous form but also come up with forms of their own.

The name that I give for the practice of continuous assembly as a whole is the admittedly imperfect term non archism. I was tempted to call it anarchism but I feel that it is wrong to use a term that is itself derived from a European and North American tradition in particular (although of course there are anarchists all over the world) to apply to such a huge phenomenon. Instead, I think of anarchism and left communism as variants of non archism, just two forms (themselves with huge internal variation) of a vast set of practices that comprise what could be considered to be the birthright of all human beings, namely the ability to access the rest of their community, to take part in the economic, social and political life of their community in meaningful and powerful ways.

Critically, I do not think of archism and non archism as a binary. Archism is one, particularly horrible form of human organization. As I will explain further, a lot of the worst features of archism have historical antecedents. Slavery, monarchy, aristocracy and other such

forms of hierarchy have all existed for a long time, and their practices could be quite terrible. Yet they never come close, not just in terms of degree but also in kind, with the sorts of absolute degradations, mass murder, exploitation and horror of archism.

The term non archism, by contrast to archism, refers to every single other form of human self organization. As already noted, it includes all of the anarchist experiments and uprisings of the last few hundred years as well as other leftist uprisings. In my book project I have a chapter each on the Spanish revolution in the 1930s, the Chilean Revolution that occurred while Salvador Allende was president from 1970-1973 as well as the Italian autonomist uprising that took place over the course of the 1970s and culminating in a huge uprising in 1977.

Ok, so all that I have just said is a preamble to make my point. My central argument is the following: without the benefit of continuous assembly (because in the West, these forums have been savagely and long repressed as we have become transformed into subjects of liberalism and capitalism) western revolutions have had to rely on archist institutions such as unions, parties and the state to advance their cause. In the case of the Spanish revolution, the union was the vehicle that they chose. In the case of Chile, it was the state itself. In the case of the Italian autonomists, they were suspicious of all three of those forms so they used instead what were called “extraparliamentary groups” which nonetheless kept many aspects of the party. In all three cases these archist supplements ended up betraying and undermining the revolutions which they helped to make possible.

My conclusions are threefold. First, that insofar as an archist supplement is probably required to jump start a revolutionary movement that has no institutions of continuous assembly to work from, the archist supplement must be engaged with as briefly as possible. All focus must be, not only on creating forms of continuous assemblies--all western revolutions do this

immediately whether via soviets, worker's councils or what have you—but on making sure that this regime of dual power is oriented towards a transfer from the archist to the non archist institution as soon as possible. This is because the archist supplement will inevitably betray the revolution, as my case studies amply indicate.

Secondly, I will be arguing that the recourse for those of us who live in non revolutionary times in the West is to build up institutions of continuous assembly now, so that when the moment of revolution comes, we will have some networks and forms that already can serve to bolster that revolution.

Third, and this is maybe the biggest point of all, that indigenous and non indigenous communities need one another to defeat archism. Indigenous communities have the political form—i.e. continuous assembly—to defeat archism but they have neither the numbers nor the resources by which to do so. Non indigenous communities have the resources and numbers but not the institutions to do so. By learning from each other, by sharing resources, knowledge and forms of revolution, they can, I think, finally really beat archism and return it to the nothingness from which it came.

To make the rest of my argument, I will try to do a few things. First, I'll talk a bit more about non archism and archism and the critical role of continuous assembly. Then I'll talk about the case of the Ayllu as key example of continuous assembly. I will also (very) briefly summarize the contrasting story in Spain, Chile and Italy where institutions of continuous assembly had to be made from scratch during their respective revolutions. And finally I will reiterate my conclusions about how indigenous and non indigenous communities can work together in several key ways. All of this will of necessity be quite brief but I can elaborate on anything if people want to hear more about one issue or another in the time for questions.

Ok so, first let me say some more about non archism, by looking at the *Dawn of Everything* in a bit more detail. In that book, the authors challenge a core premise upon which a lot of archist history is based, namely that the emergence of states becomes inevitable as societies grow more complex. Normally, we think that human beings have moved over time from hunting and gathering to agriculture and then onto cities, in the process developing complex bureaucracies to manage society and having aristocratic elites (what the authors call “heroic societies”) at the top. These transitions, it is thought, ultimately lead to the formation of the modern state and what I have been calling archism. Yet, in fact, the authors show that not only does history not always move in one direction (they show that sometimes agriculturalists turn to hunting and gathering, sometimes communities abandon cities and return to rural life) but furthermore that none of these developments necessitate a state no matter what order they appear in. They write:

One might then argue that ‘states’ first emerged when the two forms of governance (bureaucratic and heroic) merged together. A case could be made. But equally we might ask if this is really such a significant issue in the first place? If it is possible to have monarchs, aristocracies, slavery and extreme forms of patriarchal domination, even without a state (as it evidently was) ; and if it’s equally possible to maintain complex irrigation systems, or develop science and abstract philosophy without a state (as it also appears to be), then what do we actually learn about human history by establishing that one political entity is what we would like to describe as a ‘state’ and another isn’t?¹

A similar argument can be made with the concept of sovereignty. For the Western left this term is almost always read as very bad thing but in fact indigenous scholars such as Audra Simpson argue that there are an enormous variety of forms of sovereignty among indigenous communities both historically and today and they do not include the same levels of hierarchy and violence that Western forms have.

Let me give two brief examples from the *Dawn of Everything* to make this point (the book is huge and one way that it is non archist is that, rather than make an argument and use the

cases to show that they are right they let the case studies, in their infinite variety, make the argument for them). The authors show that sovereignty, for example, can be contained both within space and time. In terms of space, they offer the example of the Natchez community in what is now the state of Louisiana. When French explorers arrived in this territory they encountered a king called the “Natchez Great Sun” (reminiscent of their own “Sun King” Louis XIV).² They saw that this king had seemingly absolute power, even to the point where some of his followers offered to be strangled to accompany the Great Sun at the moment of his death.³ Yet, for all of this, the authors note something peculiar about this king, arguing that:

This power was strictly limited by his own physical presence, which in turn was largely confined to the royal village itself. Most Natchez did not live in the royal village (indeed, most tended to avoid the place for obvious reasons); outside it... If subjects weren't inclined to obey [royal] representatives' orders, they simply laughed at them.⁴

In practice, the authors tell us that the vast majority of the Natchez people lived in “blissful disregard for the wishes of their ostensible rulers.”⁵ They also say that “Natchez sovereignty was, effectively, bottled up.”⁶ Here, Sovereignty is spatially contained in a way that allows the Natchez to live with its effects in ways that are minimally invasive to their way of life. As opposed to Carl Schmitt's famous adage that “sovereign is he who decides upon the exception,” in the case of the Natchez, the Great Sun doesn't so much decide on the exception as he constitutes it.

In terms of containing sovereignty within time, the authors offer another example from indigenous north America, namely the Cheyenne and Lakota people. These communities abandoned agriculture after re-domesticating escaped Spanish horses and reverted to a hunting gathering economy, something that theoretically should not be possible in the teleological way that archist scholarship considers the development of stages in human history

Citing Robert Lowie, an ethnologist who studied these communities, the authors write:

As Lowie observed, this “unequivocal authoritarianism” operated on a strictly season and temporary basis. Once the hunting season [was] complete, such authoritarianism gave way to what he called “anarchic” forms of organization, society splitting once again into small, mobile bands.⁷

The authors further write that “the Plains Indians did in fact know something of state power, even though they never actually developed a state.”⁸ In this way, the relatively top down model of “state-like” sovereignty does not lead to absolute authority but rather is episodic, coming in and out of existence depending on the economic and political life of the community .

Here, we can see that one reason that archism took tens of thousands of years to develop was not that it was impossible before the advent of capitalism and the modern nation state but rather that earlier communities took steps to assure that it didn’t arise. In fact sometimes archist like societies did arise in the past but the authors show that in such cases there were eventual revolutions or mass abandonment of these power structures that led to their undoing. They cite the example of Cahokia a once powerful city state in indigenous North America as one such example. They also speculate that the Mayans may have abandoned their own city states for the same reason.

The authors of *The Dawn of Everything* also show that bureaucracy, including amidst the *ayllu*, was used to make sure that there was no concentration of wealth in any one family so as to prevent the rise of an elite within the community. In this way, I think that it could be said that non archism and archism exist in a kind of dialectical structure where for most of human history the former prevented the rise of the latter. Archism takes all of the worst features from non archism, the hierarchy, the bureaucracy, the concentration of power and combines them into one horrible form and then, to make matters worse, views itself as the inevitable and desirable “end of history,” offering that it should remain the effective and only form of political, social and economic organization for the rest of time.

Let me talk now a bit about archism itself, where it comes from and how it operates. In my understanding of it, archism tracks very closely with what Walter Benjamin calls “mythic violence.”⁹ Mythic violence too is a form of projection, a false evocation of some exteriority that justifies almost anything that is done in its name. It is “mythic” because it is based on false gods or premises and it is “violent” because it forcibly imposes an order onto the actual world based on the imagined superiority of its (entirely false) source of authority.

Because of its mythic status, this form of violence is eternally anxious about its own right to exist. Accordingly, those institutions that are produced via acts of mythic violence—the specific instance in Benjamin’s essay “Toward the Critique of Violence” is law— must resort to actual physical violence in order to demonstrate both to itself and to those who are subject to its power, that its existence and right are not to be questioned. Thus, Benjamin writes:

If violence, violence crowned by fate, is the origin of law, then one may readily suppose that in the highest violence, in the power over life and death, where violence appears on the stage of the legal order, its origins are represented as they burst into the status quo, manifesting themselves in a fierce manner... Its meaning is thus not to punish the infringement of law but to establish new law itself.¹⁰

Here we can see how the law is never executed for the sake of something like justice but rather only for the sake of the law itself. It requires spectacular acts of violence to “burst into the status quo,” to show how “its origins are represented.” Yet this violence can never be extreme enough to make the origins of law truly ontological. That is to say, the false transcendence of the origins of law cannot use violence to make itself wholly and fully (and only) immanent. Here, mythic violence condemns the law to a kind of permanent half-life.

In fact, Benjamin suggests that what mythic violence produces is not life at all but rather an amorphous and parasitical existence that draws entirely upon the body of its subject population. Very famously, in this same essay, Benjamin compares the effects of mythic

violence with that of divine violence which, stemming from an actual deity, is secure about its own sources of authority and therefore not compelled to compete with human beings for its own source of authority.

Benjamin famously tells us that “mythic violence is blood-violence over mere life for the sake of violence itself; divine violence is pure violence over all life for the sake of the living.”¹¹ Mythic violence reduces its subjects to mere life, but at the same time, those same people are also “the living;” mythic violence’s power over the living can never be utter because if it were, there would be nothing left to parasitize. The creativity and vitality of the living is what permits mythic violence to perpetuate itself. In the case of the law, it can point to ways that it is non-violent and just by stealing credit from those human acts that are committed by its subjects (and usually in its name). Mythic violence itself is nothing but death and destruction; unless it literally kills everyone under its power it will always be, in some critical sense, dependent upon the living, even as it busily reduces them to mere life. Accordingly (and this will be very important for what follows), systems based on mythic violence always risk being returned to the nothingness that they have always been. They do not have the substance, the ontological basis that the living enjoy. This is a vulnerability that non archism can always take advantage of.

If I was going to offer a distinction between mythic violence and archism, I would say that whereas mythic violence explains the how and the why, archism speaks to the what. Archism is the product of acts of mythic violence; it is a parasitical system based on false hierarchies. Furthermore, where Benjamin sees mythic violence as dating from the Fall of Adam and Eve, I date archism as dating from the dawn of European colonization and capitalism. Furthermore, in my own work, I look to many traditions for whom Adam and Eve mean nothing and are not therefore foundational ways to understand the phenomena that I am looking at.

One of the reasons that continuous assembly is so critical as a way to thwart archism is that it offers a platform by which the living can come together to contest and propose alternative forms of reality, always based in their own material collective processes. I wouldn't quite say that in their material practices these communities encounter a pure or true form of reality to counter the lies of archism. Rather I'd say that they develop a collective sense on their own terms, according to their own cultural history, myths and collective experiences. Continual assembly is not an abstraction but something that is based in actual practice. That practice itself generates forms of thinking and judgment that is entirely independent of the web of lies that constitutes archism, reversing and undermining the parasitical relationship between the archons and their subjects. This amounts to what Frantz Fanon calls "a ravenous taste for the tangible."¹²

Let me now turn my attention away from the theoretical models that I am working with to discuss the cases. I want to focus on the case of the *ayllu*, to help show how continuous assembly operates in an indigenous context. The *ayllu* is a good case to highlight because it is one of the most successful examples of long held forms of continuous assembly, a form that predates the Incas and has persisted into the present moment in time. In his essay, "On the Problem of Land" the Peruvian Marxist thinker José Carlos Mariátegui describes the *ayllu* as a system of collective self-organization. He writes that the *ayllu* is a "group of related families" who collectively farm "although the property [is] divided into individual and non-transferable lots."¹³ Traditionally, members of an *ayllu* were usually descended from a common lineage and practiced endogamy, that is, marriage within the same community.¹⁴

For Mariátegui, the *ayllu* is of critical historical importance. In describing its system, Mariátegui tells us that during the time of the Incas, these communities practiced what he calls

“Inca communism.”¹⁵ By labeling the *ayllu* as communist and by locating this communism in Peru’s ancient past, Mariátegui is, I believe, implicitly connecting communism as a Western practice to what I have been calling non archism. This connection works, not as an exact copy—indeed, he goes on to say that they are radically different modes, one indigenous and agricultural in the past and the other non indigenous, industrial and in the future--but rather as an infinitely varied form of self-organization that nonetheless holds in common an emphasis on horizontal modes of organizing and the participation of all members of a community in their own self formation (i.e. continuous assembly).

In thinking of the *ayllu* form as a kind of communism, we can see that Marx himself appreciated the way that common purpose could transform people. He says for example.

When communist workmen associate with one another, theory, propaganda, etc., is their first end. But at the same time, as a result of this association, they acquire a new need—the need for society —and what appears as a means becomes an end. You can observe this practical process in its most splendid results whenever you see French socialist workers together. Such things as smoking, drinking, eating, etc., are no longer means of contact or means that bring together. Company, association, and conversation, which again has society as its end, are enough for them; the brotherhood of man is no mere phrase with them, but a fact of life, and the nobility of man shines upon us from their work-hardened bodies.¹⁶

This tracks very closely with what Mariátegui says about the nature of co-sociality and production in the *ayllu*. In “The Problem of Land,” citing Hildebrando Castro Pozo’s description of how the *ayllu* has adapted to modern circumstances, he writes:

As Castro Pozo writes “Customs have been reduced to *mingas* or gatherings of all the *ayllu* to help some member of the community with his walls, irrigation ditches, or house. Work proceeds to the music of harps or violins and the consumption of several quarts of sugar-cane *aguadiente*, packages of cigarettes and wads of coca.” These customs have led the Indians to the practice—incipient and rudimentary, to be sure—of the collective contract. Instead of individuals separately offering their services to landowners or contractors, all the able-bodied men of the cooperative jointly contract to do the work.¹⁷

Here we see that, as opposed to the social contract of liberal theory, Mariátegui describes a “collective contract” instead. The liberal social contract isolates each person from the other by having them mutually give up their power to some common sovereign. The communist collective contract, on the other hand, is a source of power for the community as such, a power that is bolstered both by common labor and even, as we see above, by social gathering, shared meals and the like.

Here, a way of life is entangled with collective power, even as it serves to produce that power. Whether we call that power communism or non archism (or both), we can see that in some sense, through its longevity and endurance, the *ayllu* achieved something that has long eluded Western attempts to reprise that same value. For the *ayllu* their workaday life, their kinship structure, even their socializing was also a form of continuous political assembly. In folding in the political into ordinary life in this way, the members of the *ayllu* have access to a forum, an institution, that allows all members of the community to participate in collective forms of judgment and decision.

It should also be emphasized that the *ayllu* is not a static form. It has changed over time, in part due to external pressures such as the dictates of the Incan Empire, the coming of the Spanish and genocide and the later liberalizing and then neoliberalizing forces of the modern day states of Peru and Bolivia.

Such changes can be seen in terms of the internal structure of the *ayllu*. I don’t want to make it seem like the *ayllu* were perfectly egalitarian. It has separate roles for men and women and unmarried men are subordinate to married ones. It also had a leadership structure but this changed quite a bit over time. its earlier incarnations, *ayllu* were often run by what were called *curacas*, people who claimed some kind of descent from the Incan nobility. One such *curaca*

was Tupac Amaru II, born José Gabriel Condorcanqui Noguera, who, along with his wife Micaela Bastidas, led a rebellion that nearly drove the Spanish out of Peru entirely in the 1780s.

Tupac Amaru II took the name of the last Incan leader and surrounded himself with the iconography of the empire; he had long hair and often wore symbols of Incan culture such as a gold chain with the Incan sun (at the same time, he was a devout Catholic). He and his followers swept the Spanish out of a large swath of Peru.

There are two things worth noting about his rebellion for my purposes. The first was that Amaru II was a bit of an anachronism in that his claims to have ties to the Incas was becoming an anomaly even in his own time. The *ayllu* had begun to move away from a system based on Incan authority to establish the system of *vayaroq*, or local mayors. This move came in part because there were many who falsely claimed descent from the Incan lords (often chosen by mestizo overlords who promoted someone they favored with that title). There was also a lot of resistance to the rigidity of aristocratic power.

The *vayaroq* system was, by contrast, much looser in nature, allowing for yet more variation between and within the *ayllu* communities. The *vayaroq* served as a way to express and funnel collective decision making. As Miguel La Serna tells us, “the chief function of...varayoqs was to preserve the community’s core social, economic, and political structures and uphold public order. The prestige hierarchy was inclusive and participatory only to the extent that (1) village heads of household collectively determined who would serve each year, and (2) it was a rotational post, meaning that all qualified villagers could, and indeed were expected to, participate.” This position was only open to married men so it was not wholly egalitarian. Yet this position was far more embedded in the collective and its own agency than its western equivalent.

The other thing to note about Amaru II's rebellion was that it had widely different outcomes across the Andean highlands. In Peru proper, the uprising was largely oriented against the Spanish rather than against mestizo populations (Amaru II himself had mestizo blood) yet, as you moved towards "upper Peru" (i.e. modern day Bolivia), the uprising took on a broader form, targeting mestizo overlords as well as being more widespread and violent. In that other region, indigenous people were far more numerous and so had a better opportunity to clear away all vestiges of colonialism. They also had a leader of their own, Tupac Katari although his influence was less controlling than in the north precisely because the *ayllu* there were far more self determining and less integrated into the Spanish world. There was even a second Katari, Tomás Katari, also in "upper Peru," who eschewed the title of Tupac (which means Royal in both Quechua and Aymara, the two main indigenous languages of this region) and led a local rebellion of his own. Ultimately this rebellion did not succeed in getting rid of the Spanish but it did force them to make many important concessions to the indigenous population and showed them that they couldn't presume a permanent stranglehold on power in the Andes.

The complexity of this uprising is typical of the *ayllu*. The same phenomenon could be seen, for example, one hundred years later when the Shining Path began its insurgency. In that case, some communities welcomed the Shining Path (which had an explicitly pro indigenous ideology) and others rejected them. La Serna tells us that the difference had to do with the degree to which the *ayllu* were relatively intact or not. Those communities where the *ayllu* was strong tended to reject the Shining Path outright, whereas those that had been weakened and were thus not able to mete out their own forms of justice looked to the Shining Path to avenge their grievances for them. Yet, after this was done (i.e. after local mestizo overlords, called gamonales

were killed or driven off), these communities too often turned against the Shining Path, the coincidence of their interests having now concluded.

The last thing I want to say about the *ayllu* is to give a quick overview of the wild success of two uprisings in modern day Bolivia in the 2000s, the so called Gas and Water wars. In both cases, the government wanted to neoliberalize first gas and then water in two major cities, Cochabamba in the first case and El Alto in the other. Both of these cities had huge indigenous populations. In both cases, the *ayllu* form was preserved even in the urban settings. In El Alto in particular, that form was the key to victory because even non indigenous people adapted to this political forms and were able collectively to defeat a series of assaults on them by the Bolivian state.

In his book *Dispersing Power*, Raul Zibechi describes how that these communities were *organized* militarily in a way that defied the Bolivian army.¹⁸ He writes that these military forms were based on *ayllu* cosmology and, in particular martial arts based on a kinship with animals.

Pulga [flea] is a tactic utilized to block roads and streets at night, quickly, and to withdraw instantly—similar to a flea bite—and occurs simultaneously at thousands of different locations. The *wayronko* [ground beetle] tactic consists of “lightning marches and blockades to distract the forces of repression,” without a route or prior plan, like the flight of the beetle, which seems to lack any predictable direction. In the *sikititi* [red ant] tactic, the communities march “in line.” Finally the *taraxchi* [plumed bird] tactic is a massive mobilization intended to shut down the cities.¹⁹

These military tactics show how the *ayllu* model is not merely a way to organize politically and economically per se but also in virtually all modes of life, including fighting. The result, as previously mentioned was the eventual fall of the Bolivian government and the election of Evo Morales, who is himself indigenous. This example is very important because one thing that people frequently say about leftist uprisings in general is that they always get mowed down

by right wing militaries but this example shows that this is not the case (and the Spanish anarchists too fought Franco to a draw with their guerilla armies).

To end my examination of the *ayllu*, I want to focus on how well this model works. Members of the *ayllu* know one another; they trust each other (not in an emotional sense only but also in an objective way, having built up years of interaction). Their form of continuous assembly lies at the basis of their survival and power. And, it's important to note that non indigenous people, landless mestizos who had migrated to the cities of Bolivia along with indigenous people, were readily integrated into the *ayllu* as a way to join forces to defeat the state. This is not a formula for perfect success—the *ayllu* remain subject in many ways to vestiges of colonialism and the effects of genocide but it presents a lasting and resilient response to forces that could easily have wiped the people of the Andean highlands out of existence.

Let me just very briefly touch on some of the Western and non indigenous cases that I look at for a contrast. There, as previously noted, without the benefits of continuous assembly, revolutions in these places required the use of archist institutions like unions and parties and even states to make up for the lack of self trust, knowledge and organization that continuous political assembly otherwise supplies.

In the case of Spanish anarchism, that vehicle was the CNT, the National Confederation of Workers. This was an anarchist union, the epitome of anarcho-syndicalism. There was also a second organization, the FAI, Federation of Iberian Anarchists, who served to try to keep the CNT dominated by anarchist ideology and practice. The Spanish anarchists were worried about what they called “leaderism,” the tendency of leaders to sell out their own communities and make common cause with enemies. The CNT was organized in many ways to avoid this outcome. There was no bargaining team, no paid staff, no permanent positions and there was the

FAI which sometimes ran interference with the CNT when moderates or others threatened to change the direction of the union. Yet, for all of this, the leadership did in fact sell out the revolution, joining in the popular front government (four of the anarchist leaders joined the government) and worse still, integrating the anarchist irregulars, who had beaten Franco to a standstill, into the national army at which point the forces of fascism began to turn the tide, eventually winning and destroying the revolution.

In my chapter on Chile, I find the same thing to be the case with the revolution there in the early 1970s. The Chilean state, like the anarchist union was an example of an anarchist institution being used against itself. In Chile, Allende declared that the state would no longer bring violence to people's self-organizing and an explosion of local organizing ensued with the *cordones* system of takeovers of various factories and other workplaces and indigenous recapturing of their own territory. All of this constituted a kind of revolution from below that was loosely coordinated with Allende and his Unidad Popular coalition. Yet in fact Allende was not comfortable with the fast rate of change and often tried (unsuccessfully) to slow things down as he was trying to court the moderate vote for the next round of elections (he barely won in 1970 and had to make all kinds of agreements with centrist parties that tied his hands in many instances). Yet, the protection that his control of the state offered the revolution from below was key to how it was able to flourish. Accordingly, when the fascist coup happened with Pinochet, the reliance on the state for protection meant that the Chileans were not able to mount a real counterattack and the entire revolution was destroyed, as in Spain, leading to mass murder and arrests.

And finally, with the autonomists in the 1970s in Italy, there was a much more conscious effort to avoid turning either to the parties or unions, using new political forms like the extra

parliamentary groups and even more diffuse political formations. In their case, the autonomists came much closer to the ideal of merging with the people that they sought to represent and fight for but even there a kind of incipient Leninism meant that there was always a distinction between the groups and the larger movement and this in the end spelled the end of the autonomist uprising.

By way of a conclusion of this talk, I once again don't want to leave the impression that only indigenous people have a chance to thwart archism or engage in non archism. In each of the last three cases I mentioned, I see a road that could have worked, namely a way to more quickly build up the non archist organs of power and switch over from the archist supplements such as unions, parties and states. Here again, I think a dialogue between indigenous and non indigenous groups would greatly benefit future revolutionaries, to compare and to align their movements.

Relatedly, I also want to stress that there one other way in which indigenous communities such as the *ayllu* have something to show Western and non indigenous left movements, namely how to deal with the core of militants that are so often at the center of radical organizing. On the one hand these people are indispensable since they do the bulk of organizing and fomenting revolution. But at the same time, they represent a great danger to the movement insofar as they can become the pathway to archist retrenchments. This is an example of what I earlier referred to as the dialectical relationship between archism and non archism, wherein the practices of non archism will always run the risk of leading to archism unless steps are taken to prevent it. I think the indigenous communities that I have been studying have a good answer to the problem of leadership. Here, I am struck once again by the fact that the answer to all of our political problems does not need to be invented anew but has already existed, in many cases for thousands of years. In terms of dealing with questions of leadership, non archist communities throughout

human histories have been coming up with creative ways to engage with various forms of leadership without incurring the dangers of archism. Think of the Great Sun in the Natchez community or the way the Cheyenne and Lakota communities have dealt with incipient archism in the buffalo hunting season. Or think of the *vayaroq* system, where leadership is routinized in such a way that it does not interfere overmuch with the self organization of the community as a whole but rather focuses and extends it.

In reiterating the value of cooperation between indigenous and non indigenous leftists, I think that Western leftists can—and often have-- come up with their own creative models of how to deal with questions of power (the extraparliamentary groups is a good example). My main takeaway here is that when communities are self organized, they can come up with the best mechanisms to avoid falling into archism. And furthermore, as Rosa Luxemburg tells us with her concept of class struggle as a form of a “living political school,” communities can learn from their mistakes and over time, perfect and develop their collective institutions and power.

There is an infinite number of ways that people can organize themselves. Archism, which always insists on uniformity and harmony, seeks to impose an order over the complexity and diversity of human life whereas non archism accepts human life on its own terms and is inherently based on human diversity and the multitude of human life. I think that alone is reason for optimism. Archism is, as it were, always swimming against the tide, seeking to impose itself where it is not wanted. Non archism allows for the plethora of human political, economic and social forms to be expressed. And that is all to the good.

¹David Graber and David Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021), pp. 361-362.

²Ibid., p. 392.

³ Ibid.

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- ⁴ Ibid., p. 156.
- ⁵ Ibid., p. 393.
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ Ibid., p. 177.
- ⁸ Ibid., p. 178.
- ⁹ Walter Benjamin, "Toward the Critique of Violence," in *Towards the Critique of Violence: A Critical Edition*, Peter Fenves and Julia Ng, eds., (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2021): 30-61, p. 57.
- ¹⁰ Ibid., p. 47
- ¹¹ Ibid., pp. 57-58.
- ¹² Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, (New York: Grove Press, 1963), p. 52.
- ¹³ José Carlos Mariátegui, "The Problem of Land" in *Seven Interpretive Essays on Peruvian Reality* (Austin, Tx: University of Texas Press, 1988) p. 35
- ¹⁴ Hildebrando Castro Pozo, "Social and Economic-Political Evolution of the Communities of Central Peru" in *Handbook of South American Indians: Volume 2 The Andean Civilizations*, Julian H. Steward, ed., (Bureau of American Ethnology, 1944) p. 484.
- ¹⁵ "The Problem of Land," p. 74.
- ¹⁶ Karl Marx, "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844," in the *Marx Engels Reader*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1978), pp. 99-100.
- ¹⁷ "The Problem of Land," p. 58.
- ¹⁸ Oscar Olivera, *Cochabamba!: Water War in Bolivia*, (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2004), p. 170.
- ¹⁹ Raúl Zibechi, *Dispersing Power: Social Movements as Anti-State Forces*, (Oakland, CA.: AK Press, 2010), p. 51.