

Regional Citizens' Assembly. Building citizenships in the South

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"Nation is humanity, it's that part of humanity that we have closer at hand and in which we happen to have been born...So, in a very special way, man is forced to fulfill his duty to humanity there."

José Martí

José Martí, the Cuban poet, thinker, exiled and diplomat, wrote these words not long before dying fighting for Cuba's late independence. According to them, nation is, explicitly, a responsibility towards humanity; it is there, where it is most likely, where it is closest to us, where we were lucky enough to be born. The validity of this belief, which is part of the Latin American cultural and ethical heritage, had a fortunate meeting with a world movement, and gave birth to a way of walking, of thinking and of building that has already travelled for a rich year. This is the birth of the REGIONAL CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY OF THE SOUTHERN CONE.

The quest

The processes of deep crisis and cultural alteration characteristic of a complete change of time, undergone by the world during the 20th century, and the irrefutable historical experiences of perversity, crimes and all kinds of threats which sprung up from what was conventionally known until then as development, be this by the hand of liberal capitalism, fascism or real socialism, have discredited to a greater or lesser degree the faith in great discourses and political, social and cultural meanings. Moreover, the old, structural, social injustices, citizens' inequality and the exclusion of differences have continued and, many times, increased, worsening the relationship crisis between society and the environment.

The discouraging mixture of social insecurity, philosophical uncertainties and the break in trust in modernity paved the way for two great opposing attitude tendencies which combine and overlap. On the one hand, the lack of hope in the human race – pessimism - or in the belief that there is any sense in reality – nihilism -, and the sole focus on the search for private pleasure – selfish hedonism. On the other hand, the idea that all those crises, all those phenomena, combined with the threats of future dictatorships and catastrophic environmental deterioration, have made individuals' concerns about a new kind of regulation, a new social contract, locally, regionally and globally, even more necessary. Thus, active citizenship is not only desirable but also indispensable in order to extend, provide for and deepen authentic democratic orders, since

pure judicial and institutional mechanisms, though essential, turn out to be insufficient without a degree of that virtue, concern and dedication to public issues on the part of the citizens.

The need for new ethical, plural and supportive frameworks

From the early 1990s these preoccupations were catalyzed through a network of debates and actions pushed by various people and groups. The straightening axis in this process, which involved the widest group of people and organizations, was a coincidence on the need for New Ethical Frameworks, both plural and supportive. This is the foundation of a new social pact, an original way to build and rule human relations, mostly concerning the rights of others, of future generations, of the environment and even of the universe to explore. In a nutshell, this entails building the foundations of a new way of regulating social relations, based on citizens' responsibility and prominence

This belief did not deny the accumulated body of thoughts about Human Rights and social practices, but rather updated and completed it in order to overcome the crucial and critical times reached. Neither did it deny the multiplicity of such other, similar search initiatives as alternative summits, civilian conferences and world social forums. On the contrary, we knew and felt part of this great movement, this necessary human response to the global crisis of civilization.

The global process of five Assemblies of citizen diversity held in June 2001, which ended with the Intercontinental Assembly in Lille, France, in December, was the starting point of a long path of reflections and collective, plural practices worldwide which gathered, through conferences, meetings and alliances, almost all continents.

The meeting

The special cultural configuration of South America has happily met this global process which is developing around the world. There, where crises and time change have specific and urgent ways, where memory and feelings are profound and rich as well as problematic and tragic, this movement of citizen reflection and action has come to the end of the world to melt in the web of fights, ideas and voices for a new regional horizon as part of humanity's new sunrise, both plural and supportive.

In the rich resistance and search for alternatives to the neoliberal capitalist globalization, the South American peoples also need and seek to re-do geography, to re-shape territories. The colonial geographic and cultural barriers are crackling, hence the immense challenge to necessarily alter the political geometry and the culture, the very way of thinking.

We have not invented anything. These processes are already taking place. The Regional Citizens' Assembly comes from the many pre-existing regional experiences and ties, through agreement and empowering, through key dialogs between the most diverse people and social organizations from Argentina, Peru, Bolivia, Uruguay, Chile and - in the making - Paraguay. These countries form a region with a dynamic and flexible inter-relation with the rest of the countries in South America.

Objectives

The Assembly intertwines and establishes a dialog with other similar initiatives in the region (forums, meetings and networks), and it emphasizes reflection and

proposals consciously and explicitly. It aims being a process of conversation, thought and rehearsal of new possible forms of regulations of the social order - the systematic group of new alternative values - in order to build a new, responsible, plural and supportive citizenship while exercising it. It aims at being a social reorganization process, from the foundations of society, sustainable in each regional territory, with a view to build a society, a social and political system capable of peacefully living in a diverse society.

The assembly moves within the logic of the processes of Councils or Constitutional Assemblies, but it is not contemplated in any legal or institutional frame.

Predictably enough, the Assembly has reflected plurality, diversity, contradictions, complexities and regional dynamics. It is especially rich in its geographical and generational diversity, as well as in its socio – professional practices: it includes a vast, heterogeneous group of knowledge and views. This has necessarily set an uneven development, not without obstacles; but it also contributes to one of its explicit and fundamental aims: complementing and articulation difference, the development of a new articulation ethic, thought and knowledge.

In short, the systematic process of conversation, reflection and proposal for a new governance, centered around justice and inclusion; a renewal of the tools of democracy and new forms of interaction between the local and the global so that citizens, neither individual nor collectively, feel impotent when faced with new problems whose complexities and scales surpass them.

Assemblies are instruments for including, complementing and articulating differences, so that common priorities and strategies may emerge. They are our own, useful, collective thinking construction about the future of our region, but engraved within a global vision.

Regional integration

Current realities such as migrations, the growing omnipresent flows of communication and ideas, the trans-nationalization of consumption, of the productive processes and of employment; war, environmental and pandemic threats, among others, all transcend the capacity of the States as internal, external or regional political agents.

The new stage and its challenges necessarily turn us all into agents of a new social order, and this includes international relations. They impose a new kind of citizens' integration: daily, alive, deep, inclusive, peaceful and in need of New Ethical, plural and supportive frameworks.

The Assembly is also an instrument for dialogs towards peace and supportive regional integration.

The horizon. Towards a Regional Citizens' Assembly in 2010

The creation of a network of young people and alternative media during the Valparaíso meeting in January 2007; the preliminary meeting in Antofagasta, Chile, in April

2007, which tried to find a maritime solution for Bolivia; and the education meeting in the Southern Cone in Córdoba in January 2008; are the milestones in the Assembly's process. They have enabled the formation of teams in each country and the definition of a long term agenda. In it, the next two years are "preparatory" for a first Regional Citizens' Assembly of the Southern Cone, set

for the year 2010. During these next two years, the aim is to draft “Letters of Principles” and “Plans for Collective Actions”.

The Agenda points at and works for the creation, in this preliminary period, of a female citizens’ alliance for the Assembly during the next meeting in Lima, Peru, in April 2008, as well as an academic and education Alliance, an environmental alliance, an alliance of the military for peace, a religious alliance, an Indigenous Peoples’ alliance, a Human Rights’ alliance, a social movement alliance, an Alliance of cultural players, One of municipalities and local power, and a migration alliance. These are strategic sectors. They are not excluding or defined ones.

The qualitative and systematic development of new group methodologies (the “how-to”) has been defined as the central axis in order to achieve the goals. The creation of Chairs of Indigenous people and regional Integration systematic reflection is also proposed, as well as the construction of virtual communication and propagation support both of the permanent dialogs and the accumulated reflections and proposals. In order for this to happen, there is a need for an increasing addition of people and organizations, as well as the construction of alliances with various sectors and other initiatives. As a result, we extend a constant invitation to all those people, activists, professionals, organizations, social movements, NGOs, etc., that would like to work towards those aims, by becoming part of this vital enriching process, an invitation to communicate, articulate and get inside the Regional Citizens’ Assembly for the Southern Cone process.

The world movement for a new citizenship for a regional governance is thus formed in the south. Our north is the south. Our end is the beginning.

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