

## Translator's Introduction

by Nate Freiburger

*Wild Politics* is the first book in our series *Cara a Cara*. In this series we imagine coming face to face with our comrades to the south in a kind of *encuentro* of ideas and militancy that challenges North to South knowledge flows. This translation is intended to participate—in however small a way—in the disruption of the current political economy of knowledge imprinted by colonial legacies and patterns. This is a political economy that Verónica Gago, a militant intellectual from Argentina outlines in an essay we at Changing Suns have published in translation as a zine.<sup>1</sup> In it, Gago describes the intense conceptual and organizing work coming out of Latin America in the last twenty years, work that has challenged a North-South political economy of knowledge that places Latin America as a passive recipient of conceptual categories. Yet, there is an intellectual imperialism within that North-South political economy of knowledge that has persisted. As Gago writes:

precisely when Latin America was becoming a sort of vanguard scene of insurgency, its conceptual production remained marginalized and was only ever seen as in need of tutelage. As if what happens here in Latin America could not be understood as anything more than the experiential dressing for a bibliographical adaptation that follows the rhythm of “fashions” or dominant

theories, this reveals the impossibility of detecting from another place those subjectivities that appear as “illegible” and, therefore, undervalued politically.<sup>2</sup>

The translations we look forward to publishing in our series *Cara a Cara* are our small contribution to disordering this political economy of knowledge. Certainly, there are resonances in the substantive content of *Wild Politics* with particular strains of western political theory and philosophy. But, we will leave those resonances to be drawn out by the reader of *Wild Politics*. Our point of departure is to think of the resonances of concepts developed in *Wild Politics* with other work from, and about, Latin America. Raúl Zibechi’s *Dispersing Power*, comes immediately to mind. In that book Zibechi draws upon a number concepts developed by Luis Tapia in his other works, particularly the idea of societies in movement.<sup>3</sup> Within societal movement there is a disordering of power, an anti-state power that Zibechi outlines, which is something like that which Tapia details in his description of the political subsoil and wild politics: “Wild politics is a form of disorganizing the cultural horizon and the institutions of domination.” There is a positivity to this disordering: disordering does not signify a lack. Rather, it points to an excess: an excess of vitality and modes of life that exceed the sensibility of liberal political institutionality. There are resonances in *Wild Politics* with Verónica Gago’s work on *destituent power*: the power that emerges in the wake of the 2001 economic crisis in Argentina that is destituent “...precisely for its capacity to overthrow and remove the hegemony of the political system based on parties and for opening up a temporality of radical indetermination based on the power of bodies in the street.”<sup>4</sup> And there are also resonances between the wild politics that Tapia describes and the societal movements outlined in Raquél Gutiérrez Aguilar’s book *¡A Desordenar!* (To Disorder!).

*Wild Politics*, as well as the works mentioned above, start from the accumulated experiences of collective actors in Latin America, whose organizing work itself can be seen as breaking with the dualism of thought/action. What these authors write of attempts to describe something more like a concept-practice. Tapia describes these concept-practices as belonging to the political subsoil, as being those which cannot be captured or represented by—and which also seek to escape—liberal political institutions. And, yet, there is always the attempt to capture. Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, another Bolivian sociologist and militant, has described the way that the fluidity of the political subsoil (which she calls “social magma”)—the destituent power of societies in movement—become classified using the zombie sociological category of “social movements” with the effect (intended or otherwise) of making them subjects to power: a move to contain the ungovernable, to represent the invisible, to make sensible that which cannot make sense to liberal political institutions.

In outlining the resonances in the conceptual-practical work of these authors, we don’t intend to make a performative statement about the commensurability of these concept-practices. We only intend to amplify resonances, without reducing one to the other. Our intent, here in this introduction, is to contribute to a “politics of reading,” as Verónica Gago puts it, that “weaves new relations...those that are practiced not to construct symbolic capital or personal prestige, but rather take a risk in naming and valorizing modes of existence that denounce and combat forms of exploitation and domination.”<sup>5</sup> We hope that with this translation, and the series *Cara a Cara*, we can help to foster a politics of reading that does not seek to reproduce the classificatory schemes that divide readers into ideological camps based on identifying which tradition such and such author or

book belongs. Rather, we would like to foster a politics of reading as *encuentro* (encounter).

And then, of course, there is the act of translation, an act that carries its own political—and sometimes tedious, technical—questions. Those questions can be very serious, particularly in the sense that translation can engage in a kind of violence to the lived experiences that the concepts originally sought to express—through an erasure of the experiences that particular concepts and ideas aimed to convey. This is particularly important when one is forced to use categories of description and expression that do not come from the conditions of one's experience. This is, indeed, one of key conditions of colonialism. We want to acknowledge this, while at the same time seeing the translations in this series as embodying the dynamics of *encuentro*: text/translator/reader/context are all transformed in the production/translation and the circulation of the text. And so, we would also like to dispatch with notions of purity: we are not “professional” translators, nor do we seek to be; we will also not be bound up in some bizarre hermeneutics of the text as if it were the divine word and we must find or be true to its original meaning. Nor would the authors, we think, in this series want such a thing. The text changes as it travels, but not only it changes: we, and we hope the readers of this book, change too.

In this exciting new translation of *Wild Politics* we present the work of Luis Tapia, a Bolivian philosopher and militant intellectual, who presents a systematic challenge to the modernist, Western anthropological assumptions used to justify the imposition of neoliberal political and economic models and policies in Bolivia. The book is a critique, rooted in the historical and current context of Bolivia, of neoliberal reason and liberal political models that masquerade as “democracy,” “modernization,” and “development.” Chapter One develops this critique

through a deconstruction of the subject of neoliberalism. It forcefully illustrates the anti-democratic and authoritarian character of neoliberal reason, as well as demonstrating the centrality of the state to both liberal politics and its current manifestation in neoliberal order.

Chapter Two provides a concise history of rebellion in Bolivia, but it is not orthodox historiography: there is no mention of a “great historical figure” in Bolivian history, as the history is told from the perspective of the collective subjects of rebellion. Tapia’s work picks up on, and critically recuperates, lines of conceptual development articulated by the late exiled Bolivian sociologist René Zavaleta. Through the work of the Grupo Comuna (that included Luis Tapia, Oscar Vega Camacho, Raúl Prada, Raquel Gutiérrez Aguilar, and, before he became Vice-President of Bolivia, Alvaro García Linera) Zavaleta’s work has acquired new significance. What most have valued in Zavaleta’s thought is his conceptualization of “lo nacional-popular” (the national-popular). Zavaleta takes up the concept from a discussion on Italian literary culture developed by Antonio Gramsci in order to analyze nation-state formation (or in his view, the lack thereof) in Bolivia. Looking at the history of rebellions in Bolivia, Tapia uses the concept of “national-popular” to discuss the historical formation of a particular collective subject in Bolivia, a collective subject which in turn forms part of a broader collective subject (along with indigenous communities, and/or workers’ committees). Analyzing rebellions this way is what allows Tapia to avoid the trappings of historiographic practice that narrates historical change through a series of “great figures” and their singular individual choices.

Tapia takes up this description of Bolivia, as a “motley society,” and develops it as one of the positive qualities of a “society in movement.” In this sense, Tapia recuperates the positive quality of Zavaleta’s

work from a history of political thought that attempts to explain the history of Bolivia in terms of the failures and obstacles of nation-state formation resulting from the composition and formation of a heterogeneity of political subjects within the state territory. Rather than finding in Zavaleta an explanation of the failures of nation-state formation in Bolivia in the incomplete formation of the national-popular, Tapia finds in Zavaleta the seeds of a positive political philosophy that illustrates the value of the “motley” as an anti-state or counter-state power. In many ways, *Wild Politics* is a work of political philosophy that grows out of another one of Zavaleta’s popularized concepts: *sociedad abigarrada*. The idea of *lo abigarrado* or *abigarramiento* is fundamentally a concept of complexity and of heterogeneity. Zavaleta develops the concept out of the difficulties associated with characterizing the “mode of production” of the country, seeing that—in Bolivia, at least—there is no one dominant mode of economic production. Instead, there are many partially connecting, overlapping, or interfering modes of economic production. Tapia concludes, in his other works, that this results in *abigarramiento* being a “coexistence of diverse temporalities and historic moments,” as well as a “diversity of political forms” (Tapia 2002: 308-309). To be sure, a “motley society” is not simply another descriptor of a multicultural society, what Ximena Soruco describes as many cultures under the umbrella of a monocultural liberal institutionalism.<sup>6</sup> Multicultural societies are ones that have been homogenized through a single political institution, and through the regulatory effect of a liberal discourse of equality. In a motley society, in a society in movement, politics are wild, they are characterized by an excess that cannot be captured by state political institutions.

*Wild Politics* lays out the impossibility of containing what is political in the representative system of politics.

Tapia critically analyzes the discourse of “equality” of modern, liberal, democratic political institutions. By founding liberal democracy on a transcendental category of equality rooted in human nature, a “necessary fiction” as Tapia puts it, liberal democracy paves the way for the state to become mediator between atomized individuals and general representative of society. Tapia’s systematic critique of liberal democratic discourse, and its hollow call for “equality,” runs parallel to a critique of liberal equality developed by the anarchist Voltairine de Cleyre in the late 19th century:

They speak of “inherent rights,” “inalienable rights,” “natural rights,” etc. They declare that men are equal because of a supposed metaphysical something-or-other, called equality, existing in some mysterious way apart from material conditions, just as the philosophers of the eighteenth century accounted for water being wet by alleging a metaphysical wetness, existing somehow apart from matter...But the experience of this age has proven that metaphysical quantities do not exist apart from materials, and hence humanity cannot be made equal by declarations on paper. Unless the material conditions for equality exist, it is worse than mockery to pronounce men equal.<sup>7</sup>

As Tapia illustrates in *Wild Politics*, equality becomes a regulatory discourse for establishing the partition of the political into what is sensible to representational institutional and “arithmetic” practices, and that which is not sensible. It is precisely those practices, actions, and modes of being, which are not sensible in the partitioning of the political that Tapia refers to as “political subsoil.” It is the constitutive excess of the sensible. It is this constitutive excess that Tapia deploys in his analysis of the modern category of citizenship as a composition of local political histories (typically understood as excess) and “a set of legal regulations and

political institutions through which there is a selective incorporation of some political practices—as standards, values, and general political regulation—developed in these histories” and made “sensible” to liberal politics. Liberal political discourse sutures together the sensible that appears as the surface of society, a surface of “spaces of visibility” that eclipses or covers over the subsoil of the political: “those who think and experience their life through beliefs, discourses and interactions that cannot be assimilated to the circuits of communication and expression that traverse the surface of dominant society.”<sup>8</sup>

And, while the subsoil contains that which escapes representation in dominant political discourses and institutions, Tapia reminds us that the subsoil also contains those elements and groups that have been pushed out of the sphere of visibility by the state. Fascists, racist ideologues, and hate groups of all kinds are also to be found there. That which we think winds up in the dustbin of history, like all trash, cannot be thought of through the metaphor of elimination. To eliminate is fantasy, and it is what allows the modernist dream and illusion of progress and progressivism. This is why the subsoil is not a romantic concept, it also involves the confrontation of different elements—ones that do not appear on the surface—with in it. It is, therefore, also an important site of struggle. We hope that the reader of *Wild Politics* will draw inspiration from the rich history of thought and social struggle from Latin America to think and act within their current political conjunctures.

## Notes

1. We would like to recognize the efforts of our compañera Liz Mason-Deese as the translator of the two essays that make up the Changing Suns zine *Intellectuals, Militancy, & Colonialism*. Those essays can also be found at <https://www.viewpoint-mag.com/>.



2. Gago, Verónica. 2017. "Intellectuals, Experiences, and Militant Investigation: Avatars of a Tense Relation" in *Intellectuals, Militancy and Colonialism*. Portland: Changing Suns Press.
3. See Tapia, L. 2002. *La Condición Multisocietal: Multiculturalidad, pluralismo y Modernidad*. La Paz: Muela del Diablo.
4. Gago, Verónica. 2017. "Intellectuals, Experiences, and Militant Investigation: Avatars of a Tense Relation" in *Intellectuals, Militancy and Colonialism*. Portland: Changing Suns Press.
5. *ibid.*
6. Soruco Sologuren, Ximena. 2011. *Apuntes para un Estado Plurinacional*. Vicepresidencia del Estado Plurinacional de Bolivia: La Paz.
7. de Cleyre, Voltairine. 2016. *The Selected Works of Voltairine de Cleyre: Poems, Essays, Sketches and Stories, 1885-1911*. Oakland: AK Press.
8. See chapter three of this translation page 52