



## Introduction to Colectivo Situaciones

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The following translation of the article on ‘research militancy’, a fundamental piece insofar as it lays bare the values and principles Colectivo Situaciones invoke in their definition of themselves as militants, calls for a reflection on our role as translators. It is our hope that this English version of the article will find resonances among those who practice a politics that is inseparable from thinking in their own situation. But we feel that it is important to share with the reader our urge to dispel any mythical (mis)understanding of the transparency of language. We share with Colectivo Situaciones the conviction that the abstraction involved in the attempt to communicate inevitably impoverishes experience. Translation adds one more layer of abstraction. In this sense, we assume the full significance of the Italian adage *traduttore, traditore*. Not because we intend to betray anybody, but because the acknowledgment that every translation is a betrayal is our attempt to keep faith with the concrete situation in which the experience being communicated unfolds.

In this introduction, we would like to go through some of the difficulties we had in doing the translation. We hope that explaining the decisions we made will provide some steps toward bringing the reader closer to the work of Colectivo Situaciones.

We faced our first difficulty when trying to translate the title. We were unsure how to translate the term *militancia de investigación*. This phrase can be rendered into English as either ‘research militancy’ or ‘militant research’. At the risk of taking words too seriously (always a risk in translation), it may be useful to spend some time on these two possible translations. ‘Militant research’ implies a continuity with other examples of militant research, those presented in other parts of this volume and elsewhere. ‘Research militancy’ may sound strange to the English speaker’s ear and it is less immediately clear what the term means.

The grammatical difference between these two phrases is a matter of which word defines the activity and which word qualifies it, which word will be the predicate of the other. The difference seems to be one of emphasis. Does the Spanish phrase refer to knowledge production which happens to be radical in some way (militant research)? Or does it refer to radical activism which happens to take the form of knowledge production (research militancy)?

Our indecision brought us to ask Colectivo Situaciones which one of the two expressions they felt more comfortable with. To our surprise – or perhaps not – the response was “with both.” “We think of our practice as a double movement: to create ways of being militants that escape the political certainties established a priori and embrace politics as research (in this case, it would be ‘research militancy’), and, at the same time, to invent forms of thinking and producing concepts that reject academic procedures, breaking away from the image of an object to be known and putting at the centre subjective experience (in this case, it would be ‘militant research’).”

Situaciones came together as a collective in the late 1990s. Previously they had been involved in El Mate, a student group notable for creating the Che Guevara Free Lecturership, an experiment oriented to recuperating the memory of the generation of Argentinean and Latin American revolutionaries of the 1960s and 1970s that began at the faculty of social sciences of the University of Buenos Aires and quickly spread throughout several universities in Argentina and abroad. The Argentinean social landscape in which the men and women of Situaciones forged their ideas was a desert swept by neoliberal winds, in which only a few movements of resistance could stand up by themselves. Those were times in which dilettante postmodern thinkers had come to the conclusion that social change was a relic from the past and in which people involved in politics could only see their activity through rarely questioned models.

Research militancy was the response to the need to rebuild the links between thought and the new forms of political involvement that were rapidly becoming part of the Argentinean reality. In the prologue ‘On Method’ of the book Colectivo Situaciones wrote together with the unemployed workers’ movement of Solano, the authors distinguish research militancy from three other relations to knowledge.<sup>1</sup> On the one hand, academic research inevitably reifies those it constructs as objects. Academics cannot help leaving outside the scope of their investigation the function of attributing meaning, values, interests, and rationalities of the subject who does the research. On the other hand, traditional political activists – those involved in parties or party-like organizations – usually hold that their commitment and involvement makes their relation to knowledge more advanced than the work done by academics. But their activity is not less objectifying, in the sense that it always approaches the struggles from a previously constituted knowledge framework. Struggles are thus regarded not for their value in themselves, but rather in terms of their contribution to something other than themselves – the socialist or communist society waiting at the end of the road. A third figure, the humanitarian activist, also relates to others in an instrumental fashion – in the justification and funding of NGOs (non-governmental organizations) – and takes the world as static, not subject to being changed radically (thus, the best one can hope for is the alleviation of the worst abuses).

Research militancy does not distinguish between thinking and doing politics. For, insofar as we reserve the notion of thought for the thinking/doing activity that deposes

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1 MTD of Solano and Colectivo Situaciones (2002) *Hipótesis 891: Más Allá de los Piquetes*. Buenos Aires: De Mano en Mano [Hypothesis 891: Beyond the Roadblocks]. An updated version of this passage will appear as an article in the book, Day, R., C. Mark & G. de Peuter (eds.) (forthcoming) *Utopian Pedagogy*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

the logic by which existing models acquire meaning, thinking is immediately political. On the other hand, if we reserve the concept of politics for the struggle for freedom and justice, all politics involves thinking, because there are forms of thinking against established models implicit in every radical practice – a thought people carry out with their bodies.

This brings us to a second translation difficulty. Two Spanish words translate as the English word ‘power’: *poder* and *potencia*. Generally speaking, we could say that *poder* defines power as ‘power over’ (the sense it has, for instance, when it refers to state or sovereign power) and *potencia* defines ‘power to,’ the type of capacity expressed in the statement ‘I can.’<sup>2</sup> To continue with the generalization, it is possible to say that *poder* refers to static forms of power, while *potencia* refers to its dynamic forms. *Potencia* always exists in the ‘here and now’ of its exercise; it coincides with the act in which it is effected. This is because *potencia* is inseparable from our capacity – indeed, our bodies’ capacity – to be affected. This capacity cannot be detached from the moment, place, and concrete social relations in which *potencia* manifests itself. This is the reason for arguing, in the article we are introducing, that anything said about *potencia* is an abstraction of the results. Whatever is said or communicated about it can never be the *potencia* itself. Research militancy is concerned with the expansion of *potencia*. For that reason, a descriptive presentation of its techniques would necessarily lead to an abstraction. Such a description might produce a ‘method’ in which all the richness of the *potencia* of research militancy in the situation is trimmed off to leave only that part whose utilitarian value make it transferable to other situations.

The thought of practices is thought with the body, because bodies encounter each other in acts that immediately define their mutual capacities to be affected. History can only be the history of contingency, a sequence of moments with their own non-detachable intensities. Miguel Benasayag argues that act and state – to which correspond *potencia* and *poder* – are two levels of thought and life.<sup>3</sup> None of them can be subsumed under the other. Either one takes the side of *potencia* or the side of the *poder* (or of the desire for *poder*, as expressed in militants who want to ‘take power,’ build The Party, construct hegemonies, etc.).

*Potencias* found in different forms of resistance are the foundation of counterpower, but both terms are not the same. Counterpower indicates a point of irreversibility in the development of resistance, a moment when the principal task becomes to develop and secure what has been achieved by the struggle (Benasayag & Sztulwark: 213). Counterpower is diffuse and multiple. It displaces the question of power from the centrality it has historically enjoyed, because its struggle is “against the powers such as they act in our situations” (MTD of Solano and Colectivo Situaciones, *Hipótesis 891*

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2 For further discussion of this distinction see Holloway, J. (2002) *Change the World Without Taking Power*. London: Pluto Press. Translators of works by French and Italian philosophers inspired by Spinoza usually run into similar difficulties. See the translator’s introduction written by Michael Hardt in Negri, A. (1991) *The Savage Anomaly: The Power of Spinoza’s Metaphysics and Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

3 Miguel Benasayag, a former member of the Argentinean Guevarist guerrilla army PRT-ERP, is now philosopher and activist residing in Paris. He participates in the collective Malgré Tout and played an important role in the early life of Colectivo Situaciones.

104). To be on the side of *potencia* is to recognize that the state and the market originate at the level of the values we embrace and the bonds that connect us to others.

*Potencia* defines the material dimension of the encounter of bodies, while *poder* is a level characterized by idealization, representation, and normalization. Colectivo Situaciones avoid a name to define their political identity, which would freeze the fluid material multiplicity of militant research by subordinating it to the one-dimensional nature of idealizations. “We are not ‘autonomists’, ‘situationists’, or anything ending with ‘-ist’” they once told us. Identities have normalizing effects: they establish models, they place multiplicity under control, they reduce the multiple dimensions of life to the one dimension of an idealization. They make an exception with *Guevarism*, because Che Guevara clearly preferred to stay on the side of *potencia* and opposed those who calmed down concrete struggles in the name of ideal recipes on how to achieve a communist society.<sup>4</sup>

An investigation into the forms of *potencia* and the social relations that produce it can only be done from a standpoint that systematically embraces doubt and ignorance. If we recognize that the practical thought of struggles is an activity of bodies, we have to recognize as well – with Spinoza – that nobody knows what a body can do. To do research in the realm of *potencia* – to investigate that which is alive and multiple – militant researchers have to abandon their previous certainties, their desire to encounter pure subjects, and the drive to recuperate their practice as an ideal of coherence and consistency. In this regard, one might say that Colectivo Situaciones seek to concretely embody two Zapatista slogans: ‘asking we walk,’ and ‘we make the road by walking,’ such that, the act of questioning and collective reflection is part of the process of constructing power.

Research militancy is a form of intervention, a practice that accompanies other practices, or *experiencias*. This is our third translation difficulty. Colectivo Situaciones, like many other activists belonging to the wave of new protagonism in Argentina, uses the word *experiencia* to refer to singular, more or less organized groups, with flexible boundaries, involved in an ongoing emancipatory practice. Examples of *experiencias* with whom Colectivo Situaciones have practiced research militancy include H.I.J.O.S. (the human rights group formed by children of the disappeared), MoCaSE (a campesino group), and MTD of Solano (a movement within the larger *piquetero* movement, formed mainly by unemployed workers), Grupo de Arte Callejero (a street art group that works very close to H.I.J.O.S), the educational community Creciendo Juntos (a free school run by militant teachers), the political prisoners of Néstor Kirchner’s government, and a number of other *experiencias* in Argentina, Bolivia, Uruguay, and Mexico. The word *experiencia* connotes both *experience*, in the sense of accumulation of knowledges of resistance, and *experiment*, understood as a practice. In the article, when the word *experiencia* has this double connotation we have translated it as *experience/experiment*.

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4 Cf. Benasayag, M. and D. Sztulwark. (2000) *Política y Situación: De la potencia al contrapoder*. Buenos Aires: Ediciones de Mano en Mano, 217-21. Diego Sztulwark is one of the members of Colectivo Situaciones.

We keep these words together because we find it important to keep present the experiential dimension to which the word *experiencia* makes reference. An *experiencia* can have territorial characteristics, such as MTD of Solano, whose roots are in a shanty town located in the south of greater Buenos Aires, or can be more deterritorialized, like Colectivo Situaciones itself. But in all cases, *experiencias* are defined by a certain form of organization of the life-world, a particular quest to redefine the bonds that define that group of people as a collective in such way that they produce, in the situation, social relations that are superior to those of capitalism. The construction of a non-capitalist sociability is a key activity for the *experiencias* Colectivo Situaciones works with. For MTD of Solano, for instance, the production of subjective bonds that are alternative to those of the state and the market is a defining moment of their concept of autonomy. For the material basis of support of both the market and the state are the bonds produced at the local level. Thus, one of their most important activities of self-reflection involves the critique of individualist values, contractual relations, and the instrumentalization of life such as they appear at the most basic and concrete level, that is, the same level, the same temporal and spatial dimension, at which *potencia* exists. There are certain types of social bonds that make *potencia* stronger. Others make it weaker. The research militancy theorized and practiced by Colectivo Situaciones is a committed effort to both producing bonds at that concrete level and weaving them in such way that they allow for a maximum of *potencia*.

Militant researchers work toward making more potent the elements of a non-capitalist sociability. This requires from them the development of a particular type of relation with the groups and movements with which they work. Following Spinoza, Colectivo Situaciones calls this relation *composition*. Composition defines relations between bodies. It does not refer to agreements established at a discursive level but to the multi-dimensional flows of affect and desire the relationship puts in motion. Thus, research militancy becomes immanent to the *experiencias* it works with. This concrete relation is not achieved through conscious understanding, but by letting oneself open to the dynamics of affect that define the possibility of *potencia* in the situation.

Here Colectivo Situaciones take distance from a certain truism pervasive in much of contemporary activist culture, both in Argentina and in North America: the idea that certain type of communication (be it the use of the internet, grassroots film making, or any other type) has an inherent emancipatory effect on people. Communication produces abstractions of experience. The experience itself can only be lived. Even though there is *potencia*, for instance, in the activism that carries out grassroots communication experiments, that which in the situation exists as a *potencia* cannot be communicated. In this sense, perhaps Colectivo Situaciones would agree with the thesis put forward by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri according to which there is no circulation of struggles.<sup>5</sup> Except that, for Colectivo Situaciones, this is not just the case of this point in history. Struggles do not communicate their *potencia*, they never did and they never will. There is, however, the possibility of resonances between struggles and points of resistance, but that is something entirely different. There are resonances between struggles when there are ‘shared epochal problems’ and they face similar obstacles, making possible the transference of ‘certain knowledges, feelings, and

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5 Hardt, M. and A. Negri (2000) *Empire*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 52-9.

declarations” (2002: 199). Thus, there could be resonances between, for instance, Argentinean *piqueteros* and migrant workers in Western Europe, even if there is no actual exchange of words between them.<sup>6</sup>

Colectivo Situaciones makes a crucial distinction between the standpoint that looks at the social whole from the abstract bird’s eye perspective of ‘global thinking’ and the thought of the situation, for which the experiential dimension is the concrete form of existence of the world. Here, as the Malgré Tout collective puts it, the choice is clear: either world or situation.<sup>7</sup> The global standpoint is one in which we look at the world as spectators, the mass-mediated outlook that turns us into concerned individuals, concerned about issues that come to us only as representations. The restricted sphere of the situation, however, is one whose configuration we are responsible for. We produce and are produced by the situations we inhabit. Either our practices are those of the individual-spectator, and thus keep in place certain values, bonds, and affects that reproduce the centrality of state power and the pervasiveness of market relations, or we are persons in situation, open to produce and maintain the bonds that assemble a different, non-capitalist sociability.

Research militancy takes an immanent commitment to the situation. The situation, as Colectivo Situaciones understands it, is a sovereign space and time that defines its own senses and subtracts itself from the senses produced by the state and the market. The working hypotheses of research militants are direct elaborations on the exigencies of the situation. By contrast with the academic researcher, the traditional militant, and the humanitarian activist, who are ‘extrasituational,’ the militant researcher thinks and acts in situation.

How to write about the *potencia* of an experience/experiment knowing that its *potencia* will not be transferred in the writing? What kind of writing can at least look for resonances? Certainly, not a writing that presents itself as a blueprint, as an outline, as a forecast. A writing like this has to be antipedagogical. Militant research does not teach, at least not in the sense of an explication which assumes the stupidity and powerlessness of those to whom it explains.<sup>8</sup> Research militancy is a composition of wills, an attempt to create what Spinoza called joyful passions, which starts from and increases the power (*potencia*) of everyone involved. Such a perspective is only possible by admitting from the beginning that one does not have answers, and, by doing so, abandoning the desire to lead others or be seen as an expert.

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6 For a discussion of the notion of resonance see Holloway, J. (1998) ‘Dignity’s Revolt,’ in J. Holloway and E. Peláez (eds.) *Zapatista! Reinventing Revolution in Mexico*. London: Pluto Press.

7 Collectif Malgré Tout (2005) ‘Manifeste’ [<http://1libertaire.free.fr/malgretout02.html>], accessed 28 August 2005, English translation forthcoming. In 1999, El Mate (Colectivo Situaciones had not appeared yet), Malgré Tout, Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, along with other collectives from Latin America and Europe, gathered in Buenos Aires to form the Network of Alternative Resistance. Their joint declaration outlines several of the principles of Colectivo Situaciones’ philosophy. An English translation can be found here [[http://www.voiceoftheturtle.org/library/nar\\_manifesto.php](http://www.voiceoftheturtle.org/library/nar_manifesto.php)].

8 See Ranciere, J. (1991) *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons In Intellectual Emancipation*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Of course, it should be clear that we as translators believe there is much to be learned from Colectivo Situaciones. But it is not a matter of receiving correct ideas that they transmit, as if copying recipes from a cookbook. Rather, we believe it is a matter of learning to recognize and amplify the *potencia* in our own situations, and so to act in a way that resonates with the practice of Colectivo Situaciones. We hope that our introduction and translation helps people make use of the text for their own purposes and in their own situations.

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