

# Ideology and Insurrection: Bringing the Actor Back In

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**Abstract.** *This article is the product of a research on ideas, ideologies and political change, with a special focus on El Salvador.<sup>1</sup> It attempts to summarize some of my ideas on ideologies and political change in general—with a special attention to the so-called revolutionary ideologies—hoping that will have relevance to similar issues in other Latin American countries or to global trends.*

*Two broad propositions are presented here:*

*1) Ideology is a powerful “causer” of political change. It is neither the mirror of its immediate social and economic environment, nor a purely national product.*

*2) Revolutionary ideologies play a fundamental role at all stages of so-called “revolutions”, but even more so at the stage of emergence of insurrectionary forces, and especially in contemporary developing countries.*

## I. Politics and Economics

An important segment of political sociology is still the hostage of nineteenth century sociology, according to which politics is essentially a glass house mirroring the social and economic environment. In either Durkheim or Marx, nothing of real magnitude can possibly originate from the “superstructure” of politics. Real changes come from below and must have deep historical-structural roots.

Of course, there is a lot to be said about the linkages between socio-economic and political variables. Nevertheless, this shouldn't prevent students of political change (especially violent change) from looking at the crucial contribution of political will and ideology, if only because the grand socio-economic causes of revolution (social injustice and skewed distribution of income) have been a permanent fixture of most regions of the world—particularly Latin America—whereas full-fledged revolutions themselves have been quite rare.

What appears to be particularly noticeable in Latin American countries is not the distribution of income

per se, which is deplorable but not exceptional, but the overall poverty and more significantly, the actual poverty of the lower strata. One can find in this table more than enough reasons to revolt, but no clear variable which, by itself, could help in understanding why insurgency emerged virtually everywhere in Latin America during the 60's (South America) and the 70's (Central America), and not, or not as much, in other countries with similar characteristics.<sup>2</sup>

“Revolutions” are all unique, but they all involve revolutionaries, an old regime, violence, and the clash of ideologies. The idea that insurgents and their ideology, or the “agency”, matter as much as structural factors, is far from new. In fact, it is hard to find a genuinely new idea about revolution since Tocqueville. But it had better days. And in Latin American studies, ex-



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1. This research has yielded many publications; most recently, Grenier (1996).

2. The timing of the Chiapas and Guerrero's insurgencies is certainly unique: the post-Cold War 1990s. The ideological orientation is arguably different from the dominant Leninist discourse of the previous three decades—though the overall mind-set is probably not so different—. But the nature of the political mobilization is arguably similar: one more time, a mostly middle-to-upper class, urban-born, university-educated counter-elite improvises itself as the vanguard of the people. Needless to say, the grievances (exploitation, corruption, lack of democracy) are still legitimate and need urgent remedy.

TABLE 1. INCOME DISTRIBUTION IN VARIOUS COUNTRIES  
(% SHARE OF HOUSEHOLD INCOME BY PERCENTILE GROUPS OF HOUSEHOLDS)

	Lowest 20%	Second Quintile	Third Quintile	Fourth Quintile	Highest 20%	Highest 10%
Argentina (1970)	4.4	9.7	14.1	21.5	50.3	35.2
Brazil (1972)	2.2	5.0	9.4	17.0	66.6	50.6
Chile (1968)	4.4	9.0	13.8	21.4	51.4	34.8
Costa Rica (1971)	3.3	8.7	13.3	19.9	54.8	39.5
El Salvador (1976-77)	5.5	10.0	14.8	22.4	47.3	29.5
Mexico (1977)	2.9	7.0	12.0	20.4	57.7	40.6
Panama (1973)	2.0	5.2	11.0	20.0	61.8	44.2
Peru (1972)	1.9	5.1	11.0	21.0	61.0	42.9
Venezuela (1970)	3.0	7.3	12.9	22.8	54.0	35.7
United States (1980)	5.3	11.9	17.9	25.0	39.9	23.3
Canada (1978)	3.9	10.4	17.7	25.5	42.5	-

Source: Wilkie, J. (ed.); for Canada, Ross, D. (1980: 12).

planations of political change and violence have traditionally been deterministic, economicist, and rudimentary.

One way to reintroduce the idea of "agency" into the discussion is to break down the enchanted concept of revolution, in order to clearly distinguish different sequences of the revolutionary process.

The period of emergence of an insurgency is, in our view, specific. Far from being as directly connected as possible to those structural factors that supposedly "caused" the Revolution, the emergence of insurgency seems to respond to both smaller and bigger sets of incentives. *Smaller*: the immediate environment, or incentive structure, of insurgents. *Bigger*: the dominant and general passions of the time, in Latin America and beyond.

The peasants, the poor, the lower strata may have a key role to play for a truly "national revolt" to succeed, and for an agenda of radical change to be successfully implemented. (I have serious doubt about that, but this is not my concern here). Yet, they have very little to do with the political process by which dissident members of the "ruling class", defined broadly (in Latin America, mostly middle-class young people and university actors; during the European "Great Revolutions", defectors from the first, second or third estates), shift their atti-

3. In Latin America, these ingredients have mixed with others, inherited from two matrixes: the Iberian Peninsula of the Counter-Reformation and the pre-Colombian civilizations.

4. The Marquis de Condorcet, enthralled by the French Revolution, articulates this idea better when he envisions: "... l'espèce humaine, affranchie de toutes ses chaînes, soustraite à l'empire du hasard, comme à celui des ennemis de ses progrès, et marchant d'un pas ferme et sûr dans la route de la vérité, de la vertu et du bonheur". Quoted by Furet and Ozouf (1988: 243). Closer to our case study, Carlos Fuentes (1992: 106) once cited an indigenous poet who offered this intelligence: "Los que tienen el poder de contar los días, tienen el poder de hablarle a los dioses".

tudes vis-à-vis the government from one of demand for reform to one of confrontation and call for liberation (Wickham-Crowley, 1992; Grenier, 1994; Doyle, 1978).

In sum, insurgency, and political change in general, are a complex and always unique phenomenon—there is no historical law of revolt or political change—. Insurgency is made by insurgents, whose political motivations are shaped by such a wide array of factors that it is necessarily vain to reduce insurgency only, or even primarily, to redundant conditions of injustice. Injustice enters into the equation, but so does ideology, and of course the proper conditions favorable to ideology's mobilizational capacity. From the domestic structural conditions of revolt, the case is made here that our attention must be largely shifted to the conditions allowing for the emergence of both the insurgents and the ideas instrumental in organizing their political action. These conditions are to be found in the relatively autonomous and generational realm of ideologies and in the distinct social environment of ideologies.

## II. The Relative Autonomy of Ideologies

Appreciating the self-determination of political actors entails our paying attention to the role of ideologies in political action, because ideology is the organizing principle of modern political action. The famous slogan of the French Revolution—*liberté, égalité, fraternité (ou la mort!)*—highlights the essential ingredients that enter into all modern political recipes: liberalism, socialism, and nationalism (fascism being when nationalism turns into vinegar, ravaging all other ingredients beyond recognition).<sup>3</sup>

Very much like the worlds of mythology and religion, the world of ideology is an orderly world whose time-span transcends the short, haphazard and a priori absurd life of the individual. Powerful in a charismatic periods of history, such as self-proclaimed "Revolutions", ideology is nevertheless a poor substitute to religion and mythology in routinized liberal society, where immortality is confiscated by disenchanting institutions. Being born with the advent of reason as the new supreme being, ideology is also genuine parasite of science, usurping its procedure (explanation, involving cursory verification of some of its assumptions) without the rules of the procedure (comprehensive experimentation and falsification) (see Boudon, 1986: 45).

Revolutions are always conceived as the absolute triumph of an ideology over reality, a last redemptive *fiesta* where ideologues become One with the masses and their own heavenly creature. It supposes the illusion of a *temps zéro*, a utopia of new beginning, at once outside the realm of history and pregnant of a New One (during the French Revolution, Michelet offered, *le temps n'existait plus, le temps avait péri*).<sup>4</sup> In this line of thought, a totali-

tarian ideology is perhaps more straightforward and transparent than its diluted counterparts because it calls for a *tabula rasa*, followed by what Octavio Paz called a "mandatory communion", or a police-manufactured social fusion of the masses (Paz, 1993: 37). It is both reactionary and progressive, a path to both the lost village and the new Jerusalem. Not surprisingly, "revolutionary regimes" of the totalitarian variety always strive to preserve the original illusion by freezing time, through institutionalization of revolutionary myths, central planning, and expurgation of those "worms" who recoil from the vanguard-led social fusion.

The relative autonomy of ideologies in general means that no ideology is the mere translation of its material environment. For one, ideology is necessarily built, as Carl Schmitt explained, around the structuring pattern of "friends and foes". For the ideologue, it is therefore imperative to select and discard information according to political expediency. Ideology is a political strategy. The ideology's criterion of validity is not truthfulness; rather it is to be convincing enough to win political battles (Geertz, 1964: 47-76).

Even if ideologues were not interested in scoring political points, no discourse can be total, embracing the whole human experience. Pointing out this characteristic is fundamental since ideology tends to be presented as all-encompassing. The more an ideology is constructed for universal application and a wide array of human activity, ordering the world according to one transcendental principle, the more it has to be cut from the fundamental uncertainty and indetermination of the human experience. In Octavio Paz's terms: "*Todo lenguaje, sin excluir al de la libertad, termina por convertirse en una cárcel.*"<sup>5</sup> Stretched to its limits, which means in total awe before its own circular logic, ideology is impermeable to counter-argument ("you cannot reason a person out of something he has not been reasoned into" Swift).<sup>6</sup> Reassuring like a religion, empowering like a unique key to heaven, wrapped in the mantle of science, an ideology needs nothing but a suitable historical moment to intoxicate the many, from the hyperactive students and other dissident elements of the ruling class, to hard working men and women. The extent to which individuals can convince themselves of almost anything is seemingly unlimited (Cioran, *op cit.*: 179).

Intellectuals, who are the main producers and transmitters of ideologies, conjure up the image of Italo Calvino's *Il Barone Rampante*. Permanently perched at the peaks of the tallest trees and looking down unto the chaotic world, intellectuals entertain themselves in the illusion of their exclusive grasping of the whole picture of history. The ostentation of owning exclusive access to

the laws underpinning the human experience generates an aristocratic contempt for the daily ritual of conflict and accommodation of down-to-earth individuals (see Debray, 1996). One invariably finds, sifting through the initiation to ideology—in a political organization or in the classroom—the seeds of an intoxicating disdain for ordinary people, their choices and values. And this, even when the ideologue's aristocratic haughtiness is hidden behind populist slogans (the People, the Masses, the Proletariat, the Nation), for these slogans are nothing but abstract fig leaves cherished by the ideologue precisely because they are his own holy creation.

Intellectuals might master an extraordinary quantum of information while being powerfully wrong on the essentials, in contrast to "average" individuals who, on the whole, offset their general ignorance of details by a solid and prudent common sense on fundamental issues concerning their own lives. As the great moralist George Orwell remarked, ordinary citizens are both too ignorant and too healthy to imagine totalitarian ideologies.<sup>7</sup>

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5. "All language, even the language of liberty, ends up converting itself in a prison" (Paz, 1994: 138).
  6. Quoted in Revel, 1988: 347. In a remarkable essay on reactionary historian Joseph de Maistre, E. M. Cioran captures in an elegantly crafted paragraph (so much so that I dare not translate it) the extravagance not only of the ideological discourse, but of any discourse on the human experience: "Le tête-à-tête avec l'idée incite à déraisonner, oblitère le jugement, et produit l'illusion de la toute-puissance. En vérité, être aux prises avec une idée rend insensé, enlève à l'esprit son équilibre et à l'orgueil son calme. Nos dérèglements et nos aberrations émanent du combat que nous menons contre des irréalités, contre des abstractions, de notre volonté de l'emporter sur ce qui n'est pas; de là le côté impur, tyrannique, divagant, des ouvrages philosophiques, comme d'ailleurs de tout ouvrage. Le penseur en train de noircir une page sans destinataire se croit, se sent l'arbitre du monde... Chaque doctrine contient en germe des possibilités infinies de désastre: l'esprit n'étant constructif que par inadvertance, la rencontre de l'homme et de l'idée comporte presque toujours une suite funeste... Pour émettre la moindre opinion sur quoi que ce soit, un acte de bravoure et une certaine capacité d'irréflexion sont nécessaires, ainsi qu'une propension à se laisser emporter par des raisons extra-rationnelles." (Cioran, 1986: 15, 51, 65).
  7. Thomas Jefferson similarly concluded: "State a moral case to a ploughman and a professor. The former will decide it as well and often better than the latter because he has not been led astray by artificial rules." Quoted in Dahl, 1989: 59-60.





This phenomenon has been observed by many great sociologists, most of whom, at one point or another during their careers, pondered on the nature and role of the intellectual. For instance, Lewis Coser argues that...

In periods marked by relatively stable social structures and routinized politics, the affairs of state prove recalcitrant to intellectuals' attempts to gain political ascendance. But revolutionary periods may afford them the chance to gain state power. In ordinary periods, individual intellectuals may upon occasion be co-opted into seats of power, but only in revolutionary times will groups of intellectuals be in a position to conquer the state. It is then that revolutionary intellectuals wrest power and rule society, even if only for a short but pregnant moment in history. We can witness this process in many of the new nations of the contemporary world (Coser, 1965: 137).

In periods when neither traditions nor the ascendancy of institutions offer guidance to the people, manufacturers of ideas, especially political ideas, can have an inordinate influence upon the course of events. Mario Vargas Llosa once said that literature does not "reflect" nations; it invents them. The same could certainly be said about ideas—especially bad ones, as Revel would add.<sup>12</sup>

### III. Sequences, Internal War, and Ideologies

The enchanted concept of revolution routinely encompasses three different sequences of events: 1) the emergence of an insurgency; 2) the epicenter of the revolution, *i. e.* when the old regime is being overthrown and replaced by the new revolutionary regime; and finally 3) the ensuing period of implementation of radical changes by the new government.

The internal war covers the first, the second period, and part of the third period (until the new government reinstalls what Tilly called the "unique sovereignty" over the national territory).

Ideology arguably plays an important role at all stages of the process. The key impact of ideologies during the last stage is the least contentious (Goldstone, 1991). Even a structuralist like Theda Skocpol, who provocatively asserted in her famous *State and Social Revolutions* that "revolutions are not made; they come" (Skocpol, 1980: 17), subsequently admitted that ideologies "do independently affect the scope of transformations that revolutionary politicians attempt to institute when they rise to state power amidst ongoing social revolutions" (Skocpol, 1985: 95).<sup>13</sup> Some authors contemplate the possibility that ideology does affect the chances of building a strong opposition coalition, as well as the capacity of the regime to maintain itself in power.<sup>14</sup>



In recent years, Forrest D. Colburn (1994) is probably the author who has made the strongest case in favor of rehabilitating "revolutionary politics" and ideologies as independent variables in the studies of "revolution in the poor countries". He claims that "perhaps the two most remarkable characteristics of contemporary revolutions are, first, the extent to which they have shared a common intellectual culture, and, second, just how ambitious that intellectual culture has been, especially given the material poverty of the respective polities" (*ibid.*: 15). This ties in with previously adduced comments by François Furet, Martin Malia and Jean-François Revel, all hinting at the crucial role played by ideas, and by what Furet calls "political will", in shaping politics during periods of rapid political change.

This being said, this article wants to focus here on the first period: the emergence of insurgency. It explores the extent to which ideologies constitute an important variable for the understanding of the emergence of in-

12. For comparative perspective on the role of intellectuals in the emergence of ethnic tensions in Yugoslavia, see Slapsak, 1993.

13. Skocpol uttered those un-structuralist words in response to insightful criticisms formulated by William H. Sewell (1979), who reproached her some of her comments on ideology—for instance, when she contends that "It cannot be argued that the cognitive content of ideologies in any sense provides a predictive key to... the outcomes of the Revolution". (See Sewell, 1985: 57-85, and Skocpol, 1982: 265-303).

14. On El Salvador, see for instance Foran, "A Theory of Third World Social Revolutions: Iran, Nicaragua and El Salvador Compared". Paper presented at the meetings of the International Sociological Association, quoted in Foran, 1993: 14; Daudelin and Grenier, 1992: 713-34, and Daudelin and Grenier, 1994: 79-100.

ternal war. Ideologies carry more weight during this period than during the ensuing ones. Full-fledged national revolt and the implementation of radical changes constitutes complex, multifaceted, multi-dimensional societal phenomena, involving a variety of actors and constraints. The emergence of an insurgency, on the other hand, is a phenomenon whose social scope is relatively limited, where the main actors involved form a relatively homogeneous group of people. Social conditions of action (constraining and enabling) are likely to affect the probability of seeing an insurgency maturing into a full-fledged national revolt and, eventually, capturing state power. But these conditions play a relatively limited role during the phase of emergence of an insurgency per se. Conversely, ideologies are likely to be predominant in a relatively less constraining environment. And as we stated in the previous section, the more an ideology is constructed to embrace universal application and a wide array of human activity, ordering the world according to one transcendental principle, the more it allows itself to be cut from the fundamental uncertainty and indeterminacy of the human experience. This explains why in El Salvador, for instance, the insurgents' ideology was more radical during the period of emergence than at any time afterward, not less as the dominant paradigm (radicalism crops up as a last resort when patience wears out) suggests.

The all-encompassing and spellbinding notion of Revolution blurs the distinct configurations of each of the three periods, as though they were all "structurally" the same. An unsuccessful insurgency is not necessarily identical to a successful one in nature and origin (John Walton (1984) suggests the opposite). It is a common mistake to assume that all Latin American revolutions are structurally similar, with the proviso that some are (unfortunately) defective and do not develop to their fullest extent. The fact that one takes up arms in a country where indicators of relative deprivation abound is not tantamount to the emergence of a social revolution.<sup>15</sup>

For instance, Central American nations such as El Salvador, Nicaragua, Guatemala, or Honduras (democratic Costa Rica standing, again, as the exception) embody

characteristics that make them auspicious to political activism and destabilization by active minorities. They are city-states, where power is centralized and wealth extremely concentrated. The "civil society", outside the interlocked clans who monopolize power and wealth, is mostly invertebrate. In such countries, a relatively small but highly organized (namely, with the proper connections abroad) and motivated group of armed individuals (from coup plotters to guerrillas) can sustain an internal war for a long period of time, even without widespread popular support (see interesting comments by Ignacio Ellacuria, 1980: 807-24). Arguably, two or three thousand armed activists can survive for a very long period of time as a serious national counter-power in El Salvador, Guatemala, or Nicaragua; it is harder to imagine this scenario in Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Mexico, Venezuela, and so on. Ernesto "Che" Guevara was not all that wrong when he asserted that "a nucleus of 30 to 50 men" is "sufficient to initiate an armed fight in any country of the Americas", if the verb "to initiate" is understood properly and with some nuances from one region to another.<sup>16</sup>

## Conclusion

The purpose of this article is to bring the actor and its agenda "back in". Insurgents, like all political actors, are power-seekers, not solely social class spokespersons. Their political agenda is shaped by a variety of conditioning factors; not just those derived from some compelling socio-economic "reality". This "reality" itself, constantly invoked by politicians and scholars alike, is an intellectual construct, predicated on multiple beliefs and dispositions whose origins are both narrower (the immediate environment of ideologues) and wider (ideas shared by a generation of ideologues at one time) than suggested by exponents of the dominant paradigm. The historical, usually economic conditions of grievances identified by most "structuralist" theorists are supported by a significant, though not sufficient, body of evidence. An important source of dissatisfaction with the dominant paradigm, for instance, stems from the discovery that residual variables related to the "insurgents" themselves help to explain not only the short-term causes of the emergence of Latin American insurgency in the wake of the Cuban revolution (the so-called "guerrillas"), but also, conceivably, the immediate causes of their development and rapid decline in the 70's (South America) and 80's (Central America).

In closing, three general comments can be formulated based on this case study.

15. As Forrest D. Colburn (1994: 15) points out, "The many contemporary revolutions show... that there is little necessary linkage between structural origins and outcomes".

16. See Childs, 1995: 604. In his memoirs, Régis Debray (1996: 85) recalls a discussion with Fidel Castro when the *líder máximo* made the case that three men can start a war of liberation in Latin America.

First, bringing the actor “back in” to Latin American studies is warranted in order to come to terms with the political actors’ fundamental liberty and responsibility. For all the awesome constraints Latin American countries are facing—chiefly, those deriving from dependency, underdevelopment and a strong authoritarian legacy—no political outcome South of the Río Bravo could be regarded as “inevitable”. In fact, a wider variety of outcomes is imaginable in Latin America’s “fluid” political situations than in established and prosperous democracies, where institutional rigidity, diffusion of power, and “rent-seeking” activities breed incremental changes or even gridlock. The comparatively low level of political institutionalization in a “neo” or “post” patrimonial state brings politics closer to the relatively undifferentiated elite. But then comes what historian Simon Schama, pondering on the French revolution, called an “explosion of politics”, and the actual autonomy of politics (the uncertainty of political outcomes) is enhanced, stimulated by the ascendancy of passions over interests. Violence is arguably not the opposite of power, as Hannah Arendt suggested. It is rather the paroxysm of politics. For in the realm of violent politics, “means become ends” and politics becomes its own environment.<sup>17</sup>

Second, Latin American studies are just behind the pack with regards to reassessing the weight of political ideas in political change—see for instance the recent studies on “revolutions”, especially “great” ones such as the French and the Russian. More generally, our argument on the role of ideas in political change is likely to become much more “mainstream” in the years to come. For as Ferenc Feher suggests, Western societies are undergoing a transition toward a “post-machiavelian” society; that is, a society where issues related to problems of “identity”, “justice” and the “good life” are rapidly gaining ground at the expense of narrowly defined issues of interest representation and procedures. The early twenty-first century may well be like the late eighteenth: a period of intense production of ideas that will shape the world for decades and even centuries to come.

Third, this article has briefly analyzed ideas, but also ideologues. Indeed, if some general and dominant passions are shared by a whole generation of counter-

cultural actors, why would they trigger an internal war in virtually all Latin American countries, and significant instabilities in France, Italy and Germany, to name but a few developed nations, but nothing politically significant in, say, Canada, Costa Rica, or Great Britain? The reason is that interconnected factors related to the insurgents’ immediate environment do matter in explaining both the insurgents’ political mobilization and their impact on the polity. These factors are the ideological dispositions and distribution of resources (including political resources) in universities, the relation between university actors and the state, the size and political influence of the middle strata; plus, in our case study, the crisis in two key political forces: the Catholic Church and the communist party, both of which find most of their political networking opportunities through universities. The broader structural explanation may be useful to understand why an insurgency succeeds, and perhaps more importantly,

what kind of challenges victorious insurgents are likely to face once in command of the state apparatus. Nevertheless, it does not provide an obvious explanation about the why, how, and when specific insurgents decide to make good on their *patria o muerte* war cry.

This is not to say that ideas matter only during the period of emergence of insurgency. They also matter during the second sequence (the epicenter of the internal war, or what Tilly called “multiple sovereignty”) since no insurgency in

Latin America or the so-called Third World has ever conquered power without securing some support from the national bourgeoisie and the middle strata. And they do matter in the third and final phase of the internal war (when *comandantes ordene*—give orders—), for ideological dispositions shape political agendas as well as the perception of both opportunity and threat. The case made here is that ideas do matter more in a period of emergence of insurgency, because the social, economic and political constraints of the national environment weigh less in shaping the nature of an incipient insurgency (organizational structure and ideological dispositions) than in the following periods of the internal war. ■

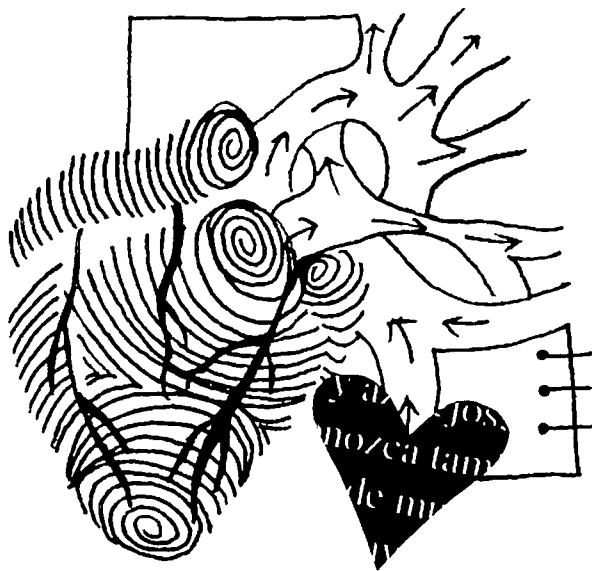


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17. The idea that politics can become its own environment was first formulated by professor Jacques Zylberberg in a conversation with the author.



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