According to the two authors reviewed here, a new kind of social movement is arising in several Latin American countries. These new movements are nonhierarchical, territorially based, and autonomous—they tend to reject involvement with the state (though not absolutely); instead they propose to solve their problems of survival with their own resources.

These movements are different from traditional community or working-class movements, as well as the movements that opposed dictatorships and called for democratization in the 1980s. They have a territorial base and address the concrete problems of a particular locality in which people live and work. They reject the top-down model of organizing, which they argue has prevailed in past movements; they do not seek state power nor do they primarily seek benefits from the state. They emphasize affective bonds and personal interaction as the basis for solidarity. They reject the prevailing conception of power as domination, seeing it rather as the ability to carry out projects collectively and to develop activists’ capacities to cooperate.

Beginning in the 1990s, people in marginal communities as well as people who have suffered sudden losses due to economic crisis have formed most of these movements.

Raúl Zibechi, author of Territories in Resistance: A Cartography of Latin American Social Movements, is a journalist covering all of Latin America for the Uruguayan weekly Brecha. Marina Sitrin, author of Everyday Revolutions: Horizontalism and Autonomy in Argentina, is a sociologist at New York’s City University and a member of NACLA’s editorial committee. Zibechi characterizes the new movements as “movements of resistance,” Sitrin as “autonomous movements.” Zibechi highlights their opposition to the state, Sitrin their autonomy and creativity. They therefore differ in emphasis—and in the movements they examine—but there is a strong overlap.

Sitrin focuses on Argentina and presents the neighborhood assemblies, self-managed workplaces, and the piqueteros (movements of unemployed workers) that arose after the country’s economic collapse and popular uprising of December 2001. Zibechi seeks a broader compass, including all the Argentine movements of Sitrin’s account but also indigenous people in several countries, women’s social action collectives in Peru, the Brazilian Landless Workers Movement (MST), and the Zapatistas in Mexico (as well as some others that are mentioned more briefly). Sitrin emphasizes the horizontal and affective relations among activists, to which Zibechi pays relatively little attention. She is more interested in portraying the movements from the inside, while he looks at their relation—or deliberate avoidance of relation—to the outside world.

The three sets of movements on which Sitrin focuses all arose or grew during the Argentine financial collapse of 2001. The collapse was due largely to a previous government’s pegging the Argentine currency to the U.S. dollar, which led to a balance-of-payments crisis. In response, the government froze bank accounts. Massive protests shouting the slogan “Que se vayan todos” (“throw them all out”) toppled governments in rapid succession: Five presidents held office in less than a month.

Sitrin accompanied these movements intermittently for
a decade. She tells about marching with them and joining in their occupations. Middle-class people, those most directly affected by the bank closures—because they had bank accounts—formed neighborhood assemblies and flooded the streets in *cacerolazos*, demonstrations accompanied by the loud banging of pots and pans. Unemployed workers in more marginal areas formed the *piqueteros*—the name comes from their picket lines that closed roadways to demand unemployment subsidies that would be managed by the associations of the unemployed themselves. As capitalists dismissed workers or abandoned their firms because of the crisis, workers asserted authority over those workplaces and began to run them themselves.

In all of these sites, the new activists created horizontal forms of organization, rejecting the hierarchical leadership of earlier movements that had failed to respond to the crisis adequately. In horizontal organizations, people developed what Sitrin calls affective politics, a political practice of deepening human relationships and respect for individuals, rejecting strategic manipulation. She includes dynamic descriptions and extensive quotes from those who experienced the movements’ solidarity and problem solving through bonds of mutual respect and affection. Close personal relations, she argues, sustained people in the movements and motivated them to work on their collective projects.

But the three types of organization were different, depending largely on whether they had concrete tasks to perform. The workplaces had to organize to produce and sell their products or serve their customers, as well as to fight off the repression that the state brought down on them, complying with the demands of the ousted owners. The *piqueteros’* organizations in poor neighborhoods on the periphery of Buenos Aires and other cities, though they fought for unemployment subsidies, mainly organized mutual self-help to allow people to survive on their own resources. The neighborhood assemblies had less reason to exist once the immediate financial crisis was past and bank accounts were unfrozen; traditional political parties often intervened in the assemblies that survived, and partisan strife hampered their functioning.

Sitrin’s ethnographic account includes many testimonies of participants in the movements, describing not only how the organizations worked but also the transformation that participation has brought about in activists’ lives. As a woman in a local movement of unemployed work-
ers put it, “We . . . started to love each other as neighbors. We discovered that we were a lot happier when we were confronting the crisis together.”

Sitrin is attentive to the way language is transformed as well. Many words took on new meanings. Autonomy, for example: At first it had the mainly negative connotation of freedom from control by the external forces of government and parties, but it came to be something positive: an “active form of being”, a creation of something new rather than just a response to an external power.

Zibechi, in Essays That Were originally published separately, not only has a broader geographic reach, but offers a more structural account of what he refers to as movements of resistance, both of their origin and of their current relations to the larger society. He regards the new movements as a response to neoliberalism. Older movements that had represented the working class, most notably trade unions, were decimated by neoliberalism in the waning years of the last century. Most of the movements he discusses are based not in workplaces but in communities and are concerned with identity and everyday life.

He pays little attention to horizontality and affective relations in these movements. For him, their most distinctive feature is their territoriality. They exist on the margins of society, spatially as well as socially, where they are beyond the reach of the powerful. They can therefore resist subjection to the dominant institutions of society, including the state, and organize their own institutions. The workplaces he discusses have all come under worker control, usually after a struggle to oust owners or to pick up the pieces after owners had abandoned them.

Where Sitrin strongly emphasizes the language with which activists express their experiences, Zibechi emphasizes their epistemology. In their relative isolation, activists control knowledge-based activity and reject the beliefs imposed by colonizers. The knowledge they transmit in community-controlled schools (in the Bolivian Andes and in the Brazilian MST settlements) or in providing medical care (in Chiapas and the piñateros’ communities) is derived from their received traditions. In the schools they can teach their own culture, not the ruling ideology propagated in official schools, which belittle that culture. In health care they take advantage of modern medicine, but selectively. The movements that can do this most effectively are those that control territory. Overall, his argument fits movements that are more physically separate, hence more autonomous, than the other movements.

In his concluding section, Zibechi deals with these movements’ relation to the new progressive governments that have won elections in many Latin American countries in this century. The governments of Néstor and Cristina Kirchner in Argentina, Lula in Brazil, and the new governments in Bolivia and Ecuador, he says, have not really broken with neoliberalism; instead, despite programs to alleviate the worst of the poverty left by the preceding neoliberal decade, they have followed the same neoliberal prescription promoting the free market, resource extraction, and economic growth for its own sake. He draws on Foucault’s concept of biopolitical power: The state represses movements while incorporating the poor through social benefits (in the Southern Cone) or community action (in the Andean countries), and reinforces its position vis-à-vis the movements by seducing their leaders with government offices. He is hardly friendlier to the more radical governments of Bolivia and Ecuador than to the center-left Argentine, Brazilian, and Uruguayan governments. (His treatment of Venezuela is less harsh.)

These governments offer inducements to co-opt social movements, he says, and traditional movements have succumbed. The movements of resistance have maintained their autonomy more successfully. While their territorial base can protect them from repression, Zibechi argues, governments work hard to co-opt them. In general, however, the movements’ isolation protects them from co-optation.

These two books differ in their coverage, and partly for that reason they also differ in their emphases. Together, however, they give us a portrait of a new kind of movement of the last decade or more whose activism is a welcome antidote to the quiescence and incorporation of many of the more traditional urban and class-based movements. Neither book gives a full-scale analysis either of the neoliberalism or of the allegedly post-neoliberal governments. Though the
authors show that those governments have repressed social movements, they do not clearly explain why—except that Zibechi seems to assume that states are necessarily repressive.

Recognizing the danger of co-optation, both authors insist that the movements must guard their autonomy jealously. Some readers will be skeptical about both the movements’ staying power and about their ability to achieve the desired social transformations without using the tools of the state. Sitrin talks explicitly about staying power. As she acknowledges, many participants have dropped out and some movements have opted for accepting state benefits even at the cost of autonomy. She nevertheless declares the movements successful at fostering caring, cooperative relations and achieving their goals. She insists that their success must be measured by the testimony of the activists themselves—not by a numbers game counting those who have remained active and dedicated to horizontality and autonomy in comparison to the number who have dropped out or compromised with the state. If the experience of participants is the measure of success, however, then the experience of those who responded differently should also be accounted for.

Both authors count these movements’ autonomy from the state as their greatest strength. But their own evidence shows that the movements thoroughly imbricate themselves with the state even as they attempt to escape its strictures. And in the end, both authors qualify their claims and show that instead of complete separation, the movements are working out a more complex relation with the state that, they say, maintains a critical stance and avoids being taken over.

In Zibechi’s case the discrepancy arises in part because the essays in the book were written separately. He offers broad generalizations in early chapters claiming that the movements he has studied “not only [reject] the state form, but [they acquire] a non-state form”; later in the book, however, he presents details about particular movements that make them appear considerably less autonomous. The Brazilian MST, for example, while clearly a movement of opposition, relies heavily on the country’s agrarian reform bureaucracy for legitimization of its possession of occupied land and for support in the form of agricultural credit and technical assistance.

Sitrin, in her concluding chapters, argues that over time the movements developed a more sophisticated analysis of the state and learned to engage with it without making it the point of reference. Both authors’ claims of autonomy, however, are highly qualified by descriptions of the actual practice.

On the whole, these two books provide us with graphic pictures of a new kind of movement that maintains a critical stance toward the state while living within it. They show what resources make that stance possible. A similar movement has arisen in the United States since 2011: Occupy Wall Street and its extensions across the country have generally adopted the horizontal, leaderless style of organization. The occupation of territory, even if only for a short period, has given them an identity and a platform for asserting, at least rhetorically, their refusal to join in state-oriented politics. Sitrin herself has been an active participant and mentor to the movement in New York. The movements discussed in these books, despite the considerable differences between their social/political environments and our own, offer examples to inform us about the possibilities open to movements for social transformation in the United States as well.