

Dmitry Vilensky / Chto Delat

Interview by Alejandra Ballón, Aurélien Gamboni and Laura von Niederhäusern (1)  
CCC Newsletter # 9

**AB / AG / LvN** In the text *Practicing Dialectic* (2) you mention that “we don’t need an absence of leaders, but a surplus”, many leaders, so that if everyone had a leader we could reject the notion itself. We thought this was an interesting way of introducing our question about how you work in your collective. How do you organize yourselves?

**Dmitry Vilensky** That’s a problematic question. The particular text you refer to is very provocative. I was trying to speak about dialectics and at the same time write dialectically. We all strive for horizontality and equality, but currently most of the people practicing and engaging in some form of collective, they all know that it’s somehow a problem.

Why is it a problem? For example I know this very well from our collective work of editing. There is one moment in time, you are sitting in front of your screen, online, and there is something going on – something didn’t arrive, something is not translated... – and then you write a message: “please help” and you realize, “oh my god, they are all sleeping!” It’s five o’clock in the morning and you feel fucking alone. You need to make a decision because tomorrow it must be published; there is a deadline.

So what? I think we somehow have an ideal vision of collectives. That’s why in the article I used the term *leadership*, or *leader*, but for me the word *initiative* would be a more appropriate word. We need a lot of people who initiate different things. Those that can be correlated, overlapped, what we call working groups, councils, soviets, whatever. Organs that really work on concrete things: making a film, producing a newspaper, organizing an action. But right now that’s the other problem: a lack of initiatives.

There is a misunderstanding. You remember all the exultation about the Zapatista, Subcomandante Marcos. He made this very romantic speech, where he says that all elderly people, kids and everyone should come and stay until they agree on a decision. “It can be one month, it can be five months – we have time.” Maybe in Chiapas that is possible, because it’s another dimension of time, but when you operate in the highly efficient capitalist world you do not have this time. That’s why this sort of imagination of peaceful micro-community where everyone is mobilised and comes up with initiatives is not working.

So now there is really a need, an urgency, to find a balance between what I call *delegation* and *participation*. For example in the case of the orchestra conductor or the filmmaker, we delegate certain rights to decide, or to command. I think that it’s very important. In this way I would really like to move away from the current paranoia of power. I think that paranoia is very much weakening the left. Capital has no such paranoia, it is concentrating on power and visions.

**AB / AG / LvN** Our second question concerns the name of your collective – Chto Delat (“What has to be done?”). The name was taken from a *Bildungsroman*, a genre of literature that tried to tell a story about the education/development of a subject. At the same time the purpose was to educate the reader. Why did you choose this name? And in what way did you take up this ideal, this project of education?

**DM** I would like to emphasise that the name was chosen within the context of a certain historical movement. Chernyshevsky wrote that novel<sup>3</sup> in a period of primary accumulation of capital, during the introduction of the capitalist mode of production. And somehow, paradoxically, in the period between 1990 to 2000 we found ourselves in a similar position: also a total failure of all left visionary imagination, in a very conservative situation of Putin’s Russia, which also reminds me very much of the period when Chernyshevsky lived, of course not directly.

“What has to be done?” is a name chosen due to the need of not being associated with failure.

Chernyshevsky’s novel was incredibly successful, very popular. Nevertheless it can be problematic in a literary sense. (There were many jokes made about it by Nabokov, for example.) It was at the same time a bestseller. I mean literacy was very low, but everyone has read that book. It really formed a whole generation of revolutionary Russian intelligentsia.

In the political pamphlet of the same title by Lenin, there is an article where he talks about the notion of the newspaper as a collective organizer. In some measure this is still the case. The newspaper is a medium with a simple format but heavy in content. It is really demanding.

I also think we share a frustration about the marginalisation of most leftist groups, which makes it difficult for us to appeal to a wider public or to form this public ourselves.

This is exactly what Chernyshevsky was about.

**AB / AG / LvN** So it's also a question of how you address the public through art. In your case, do you think that art should play a teaching role?

**DM** In our newspaper issue *What is the Use of Art?* (4) we completely agree with the general consensus (I don't like this word) that art is about *Bildung*, the formation of subjectivity. This is the main role. It's not about sale, luxury, fetishism in the galleries, not at all. It's about the use. The use, of course, is education; it is how you educate yourself.

It is again a very tricky question, because the issue of education raised a lot of suspicion during the 20th century. Particularly within the activities of anarchistic groups, many people rejected any form of structured education, instead calling for spontaneity, vitality... In my opinion the whole discussion of self-education runs nowhere, although that discussion was quite important at a certain moment.

**AB / AG / LvN** Yesterday you mentioned, for example, that most of the members of Chto Delat grew up during the Soviet period and that it was a necessity, an urgency to be self-educated at some point.

**DM** I would like to try to sort out that misunderstanding. Of course when I spoke about some projects we did about self-education, for us it was more about self-organisation, self-government. For example, I mentioned that people never really finished any university studies. But they did read books. It is not that knowledge just falls from heaven. There are generations, peoples and institutions that built this knowledge. You need to develop your own method to pick up certain knowledge that is really important for you, that is urgent in a certain time.

**AB / AG / LvN** That connects to your quote from André Gorz, who says that today's decisive battle is shaping up around the production of subjectivity.(5)

**DM** Again, for this reason we need to engage somehow with the issues of hegemony. Of course it's a very fragile balance, particularly if we try to have a historical vision. For example, if you follow the history of art in relation to minority groups such as suprematism, constructivism, it was always a tiny minority of the artists who participated in these movements. You can count them: 10 people in New York, 10 people in Paris, 10 people in Moscow, that is all. For me it is really a miracle how this knowledge – these ideas that we need – spread. And right now this is the major history.

Our main argument was that we should stop to consider capitalism as a totality, its dialectical totality of contradiction. There is nothing like "pure capitalism." Even in the most disgusting neoliberal movements of privatizing whatever, from water to air, there was some kind of a stupid obsession to make it function better. Sometimes these "assholes" are really amazingly visionary people.

I think a lot of subjectivity is formed through that relation to the commons. There is a clear line of separation between a liberal conservative wing and the socialist, which is whether "things should belong to the people" or "to the public". It's also about functionality, which is the big problem. Because if you say you give it to common hands, to function better for the common good, sometimes it's also a mistake. It's a really complex process of restructuring.

The base is the economy. We have to recognise that. As Marx once mentioned regarding the production of revolutionary subjectivity, a steam machine produced much more transformation than some political movements during the French revolution. That was real change!

Right now we are living again within one of the most challenging technological revolutions, and it's hard to comprehend the speed of change... But at the same time interesting things are developing. I think compared to the subjectivity of '68, the subjectivity of nowadays is quite different, and I am not sure if it is such a bad thing. Sometimes I try to be optimistic. [laugh]

#### Notes

1. This interview has been recorded on January 13, 2010, by Alejandra Ballón, Aurélien Gamboni and Laura von Niederhäusern, and transcribed by Laura von Niederhäusern.
2. Dmitry Vilensky, "Practicing Dialectic, Chto Delat and Method", in *Great Method*, Newspaper Chto Delat, issue 03-27, September 2009.
3. Nikolay Chernyshevsky, *What Is To Be Done?*, 1863.  
Nikolaï Tchernychevsky, *Que faire?*, traduit du russe par Dimitri Sesemann, Éditions des Syrtes, Paris 2000.
4. *What is the Use of Art?*, Newspaper Chto Delat, issue 01-25, March 2009.
5. Alexey Penzin & Dmitry Vilensky, "What's the Use? Art, Philosophy, and Subject Formation. A Chto Delat dialogue," in *What is the Use of Art?*, Newspaper Chto Delat, issue 01-25, March 2009.