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# The Zapatista Social Movement: Innovation and Sustainability

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Richard Stahler-Sholk\*

The 1994 Zapatista rebellion in Chiapas, Mexico, illustrates “glocal” resistance to the neoliberal world order. While rooted in indigenous communities, the rebellion is best understood not in terms of essentialist identities but rather as an ongoing process of creating new social practices in resistance to domination. The sustainability of the movement depends not on the overthrow of the state, but on the effort to continually transform society. Four important contributions emerge from the experiences of the autonomous communities and municipalities in Zapatista-influenced territory: (1) The reframing of the concept of power. (2) The construction of new social subjectivities. (3) A redefinition of the concept of autonomy. (4) Radical democracy. **KEYWORDS:** Zapatista, indigenous, social movement, antisystemic, radical democracy, autonomy

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When the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) first launched an armed uprising on January 1, 1994—the date the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) went into effect—it first appeared to be yet another Latin American guerrilla group aimed at seizing state power. However, the armed phase lasted only twelve days, and the Zapatistas spent the next fifteen years as a social movement, creating autonomous structures of government and society in the indigenous regions of the state of Chiapas, Mexico, and organizing national and transnational networks of support. Differing significantly from vanguardist Latin American rebels of yesteryear, the movement generated widespread attention as it aimed for “glocal” transformation of society.

Scholarship on the 1994 Zapatista uprising has called attention to both the indigenous roots of the rebel support base (mainly in the

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Tzotzil, Tzeltal, Tojolab'al, and Ch'ol communities of Chiapas), and the specific shifts in political economy affecting Mexico since the late twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> While Mexico and the world were taken by surprise by the specter of ski-masked indigenous rebels taking over towns in Chiapas on January 1, 1994, the rebels had actually been organizing clandestinely for at least a decade before that. The antecedents built on previous organizing initiatives of independent peasant groups that had sought to distance themselves from the hegemonic Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) since the 1970s, as well as a sprinkling of Maoist organizers from northern Mexico, who arrived in the Lacandón Jungle in the same period, and Liberation Theology catechists working in the primarily indigenous communities of the central highlands, eastern jungle, and northern zone of the state of Chiapas. The onslaught of neoliberal policies after Mexico's 1982 debt crisis had a devastating impact on poor peasant and indigenous communities. The last straw was the agrarian counter-reform launched by the December 1991 "modification" of Article 27 of the 1917 revolutionary constitution, ending land redistribution and threatening privatization of the collectively held *ejido* lands. The Mexican government initially responded to the 1994 rebellion with military force, but massive protests by civil society forced a ceasefire after only twelve days, suggesting a resonance with a wider set of grievances in which the local rebellion was inscribed. At the same time, *zapatismo* was forged in the distinctive social spaces of indigenous communities, particularly in the newly evolving collective identities that emerged as indigenous people in Chiapas were squeezed out of land in "traditional" communities, migrating from the 1950s onward to the agricultural frontier, establishing settlements in the *cañadas* (canyons or ravines) that penetrated the Lacandón Jungle.<sup>2</sup>

The Zapatistas characterized their movement as a rebellion, not a revolution. They did not seek to seize state power nor to secede, but rather to build a more participatory and just order from the community level upward. Today's mode of globalization—neoliberalism, based on "free trade" and mobile capital—scatters geographically the focal points of contradiction, so that revolution in the old sense gives way to new forms of resistance such as transnational social movements. States police capital accumulation, but this is a contradictory process in the current era of globalization, with US hegemony in decline and tensions between what Hardt and Negri<sup>3</sup> refer to as empire versus imperialism. Increasingly states are facilitating a new phase of "accumulation by dispossession,"<sup>4</sup> but this privatization of public and collective spaces is also contradictory, since the neoliberal project of shrinking the state paradoxically requires a degree of state capacity to

administer the project. The Zapatistas, rooted in the collective spaces represented by indigenous communities, find themselves rebelling not just against the Mexican state but against the neoliberal framework that is already foundering across the Latin American region.<sup>5</sup>

The Zapatistas are part of an upsurge of social-movement organizing in Latin America since the 1980s. This phenomenon is explained in part by growing grassroots resistance to the social impact of neoliberal economic policies, as well as disappointment with a regional turn toward electoral democracy that failed to deliver on promises of substantive social justice or meaningful participation.<sup>6</sup> In rejecting both the neoliberal capitalist framework of market globalization and the “democracy lite” of parties and electoralism, these movements are attempting to construct new collective identities. These have notably included a reassertion of indigenous identities that are not exclusive of other simultaneously held identities and claims of rights.<sup>7</sup>

The Zapatistas are part of an antisystemic “movement of movements”<sup>8</sup> challenging neoliberal globalization, a phenomenon sometimes labeled *altermundista* and symbolized by the World Social Forums with their slogan “Another World Is Possible.” This network of movements is notable for the audacity of its actions in seizing and reconfiguring from below the new spaces of the globalized era. In this sense, we can locate the construction of what the Zapatistas call “very other” modes of governance from below (e.g., the autonomy project at the micro level of the indigenous communities in Chiapas)<sup>9</sup> within a broader constellation of counterhegemonic practices. The question posed in this article is, how can a movement seemingly rooted in such a local identity (indigenouness, or indigeneity, in the state of Chiapas) sustain itself in opposition to larger national and global forces?

In what follows, I highlight four important contributions that emerge from the experiences of the autonomous communities and municipalities in Zapatista-influenced territory:

1. The reframing of the concept of power
2. The construction of new social subjectivities
3. A redefinition of the concept of autonomy
4. Radical democracy

I argue that while indigenous identity is an important element of the Zapatista movement, it is not an essentialist or immutable identity but rather an evolving set of social and political practices in indigenous communities of Chiapas that involve an ongoing negotiation of demands around human rights, resource allocation, and autonomy.

### Reframing the Concept of Power

The current phase of globalization under the neoliberal paradigm has brought a readjustment in the role of the state as regulator of capitalist accumulation. In this process, power is no longer simply identified with state institutions, and the axes of conflict and contradiction in the post-Fordist system (of mobile and flexible transnational production) are not as fixed in time and space. In the corresponding “scale shift” in forms of political contention, contemporary times have seen new dynamics of volatile and mobile protest, such as the so-called Battle in Seattle on the occasion of the WTO ministerial meeting in 1999, and the construction of new organizational networks that transcend the territorial limits of the state.<sup>10</sup> As an example of these networks, the Zapatista “First Intercontinental Encounter for Humanity and Against Neoliberalism” (staged in the Lacandón Jungle of Chiapas in July 1996) preceded by three years and helped inspire the Seattle showdown.

It should come as no surprise that old paradigms of taking state power by armed assault should be waning in the face of new realities in which the state is not the sole locus of power, forcing a rethinking of what we even mean by the concept of “revolution.”<sup>11</sup> Antisystemic movements—the term *antisystemic movements* does not include all social and political movements, since some are limited to the electoral sphere—no longer focus on taking state power but rather seek to transform society from below, while challenging capitalism as a global paradigm. There is no consensus on the left about the new strategies of struggle, and indeed there is an important ongoing polemic on the question of whether it is possible to “change the world without taking power.”<sup>12</sup>

It is in this context that zapatismo joins the new wave of social movements, manifested in the Latin American region and beyond,<sup>13</sup> that occupy and attempt to transform spaces in civil society, thereby reframing the meaning of disputing and exercising power. While it is true that the EZLN in 1994 issued a declaration of war on the federal army and announced its intention to advance to Mexico City, armed combat lasted scarcely twelve days, and some commentators characterized the rebellion as more guerrilla theater than guerrilla warfare. Ironically, the Zapatistas after a change of strategy eventually did march into Mexico City in 2001 (without arms) through the so-called March of the Color of the Earth, culminating in the historic address by Comandanta Esther to the Mexican Congress. Notwithstanding the armed clandestine origins of the movement, the bulk of Zapatista activity and impact since 1994 has been in the realm of nonmilitary organizing. The Zapatista movement, in contrast to either the old guerrilla

model or the electoral politics model, has set about constructing autonomous spaces that are very local, yet linked to “translocal” identities<sup>14</sup> and transnational networks.<sup>15</sup> Zapatismo may be broadly conceived as the agglutination of these multiple dimensions, from the indigenous communities in Chiapas to the broad international “neo-Zapatista networks.”

The Zapatista movement recognizes the ideological and subjective dimension of power, incorporating the Gramscian sense of a “war of position” and the feminist theoretical construct of “empowerment” rather than “power over.” In practice, this effort to reframe power can be seen in the emphasis on “dignity” in the communities that have declared themselves in resistance, in the positive value ascribed to the quest for alternatives to government handouts, even when that implies sacrifice, and in the practice of exercising rights without asking or waiting for permission.<sup>16</sup> To be sure, the Zapatista policy after 1996 of rejecting all government aid and programs caused some dismay and desertion from within their ranks.<sup>17</sup> Being part of a Zapatista community “in resistance” requires a degree of self-sacrifice and self-restraint, not only in refusing the outpouring of aid that constituted part of the government’s counterinsurgency response to the rebellion, but also in not responding to violent provocations by the army and paramilitary groups. My interviews in the region corresponding to the Caracol of La Garrucha suggested that those who remained in the movement derived pride and self-esteem from their ability to analyze and reject the government’s carrot-and-stick approach. Their envy of the beneficiaries of government aid was mixed with pity for fellow indigenous peasants who were developing dependencies on a fickle patron and who in some cases had even stopped planting their own *milpa* (cornfield), a crucial marker of indigenous identity in this region. The government had the power (in the conventional sense) to deploy social programs and troops and to sponsor paramilitaries, but the impact was disempowering for the communities.

In demanding sacrifice of their members, the Zapatistas had to offer alternatives; after all, resistance is a means, not an attractive end in itself. One of the challenges for sustaining the movement is how to organize the provision of social programs and services (education, health, administration of justice) that would elsewhere be considered the responsibility of the state.<sup>18</sup> Displacing, or in a sense replacing, the state carries its own dilemmas, including how to obtain resources. One potential way to unlock resources has been the “recovery” of land from landowners in a kind of de facto reinitiation of Mexico’s halted agrarian reform. But that requires a sometimes problematical renegotiation of relations with other *campesino* (peasant) organizations that may see themselves as neither Zapatista nor part of the exploiting classes. Mean-

while, the state, while offering compensation to some landowners, continues to wield its claimed right to determine and enforce “legalization” of land tenancy as a way to fan division and undercut the Zapatista counterclaims to legitimacy. In a situation of dual power as in many parts of rural Chiapas, one of the challenges of establishing counter-hegemonic authority is the ready exit option for those who choose to abandon Zapatista affiliation. Interestingly, that exit option is less available in the settlements (*nuevos poblados*) on recovered land, where the Zapatista settlers grant themselves collective access to land contingent on their continued participation in the movement. Members of Zapatista support-base communities in the Garrucha region, when asked how their lives had been changed by the movement, invariably mentioned land at the top of their list of priorities, by which they meant not just territory but agrarian social relations more broadly.

Another potential resource for providing state-like services is the network of national and international civil-society supporters, NGOs, and collectives. That route to empowerment carries its own dilemmas, requiring a renegotiation of often complex power relationships with even the best-intentioned of NGOs.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, that struggle was one of the key factors motivating the 2003 reorganization of the Zapatista movement that led to the creation of the five regional caracoles, governed by rotating councils of community-based authorities (*juntas de buen gobierno*). The JBGs among other duties would negotiate the terms of NGO activities in each region, charging a 10 percent tax that allowed the Zapatistas to redistribute resources to less-favored communities.<sup>20</sup> In this era of increasing transnationalization of social movements, the Zapatistas are not unique in having to continually negotiate and redefine the North/South power dynamics and demand a shift from “altruistic” to “mutual” solidarity.<sup>21</sup> However, the influence does not all flow from Northern NGOs to Chiapas, and indeed the Zapatista movement is having an impact on the transformation of political practices in the so-called North as well, from Mexico City to Los Angeles and beyond.<sup>22</sup>

While the development of structures of self-governance—at the level of community, *municipio autónomo*, and caracol—is supposed to reflect a process of empowerment from below (reflected in the Zapatista notion of *mandar obedeciendo*, rule by obeying), this does not occur unproblematically or immediately. The Zapatistas’ own self-evaluation after the first year of functioning of the Juntas de Buen Gobierno noted that considerable work remained to be done to overcome entrenched gender hierarchies,<sup>23</sup> as well as to continue shifting power away from the insurgent command structure of the initial rebellion to the newer community-based structures of authority.<sup>24</sup>

In any process of radical social change, it is much easier to change the rules (e.g., the 1993 Zapatista Revolutionary Women's Law or the 1975 Cuban Family Law) than actually to bring about fundamental transformation in the prevailing ideology and patterns of social relations. Those changes become internalized only over time through practice. The Zapatista movement has opened some social spaces for modeling those alternative practices, a form of "prefigurative politics" that involves acting on the new patterns of relations that are the ultimate goal. It is through this practice, which includes challenging established patterns of gender and ethnic dynamics,<sup>25</sup> that the autonomous communities begin to accumulate experience, appropriating for themselves and giving their own meaning to concepts such as "democracy" and "development."<sup>26</sup>

One example of empowerment through this long-term process of transforming society can be seen in the Zapatista autonomous schools. The decentralized (and still somewhat uneven) development of autonomous schools has created opportunities for greater community involvement in shaping the curriculum. The unpaid "education promoters" (mostly youth) are more organically linked to the communities that have invested in their training and success, thus playing a different role from the "cultural *caciques*" that rural schoolteachers have historically exemplified in Mexico.<sup>27</sup> Particularly in the jungle region of the cañadas, where an older generation laboring on the fincas had limited access to formal education, the autonomous schools play an important role in empowerment by helping prepare a new generation for the tasks of governance. For that matter, the federal government's newfound concern for indigenous education in the wake of the Zapatista rebellion can also be seen as an indirect consequence of the movement.

One of the hallmarks of a structure of authority, such as a state, is the ability to make and enforce rules within a given space. The Zapatistas rejected the legitimacy claims of the state, basing their initial 1994 rebellion on Article 39 of the Mexican Constitution of 1917, which provided that "the national sovereignty resides essentially and originally in the people. All public power originates in the people and is instituted for their benefit. The people at all times have the inalienable right to alter or modify their form of government." The Zapatistas later reasserted their right to reconstitute public power based on the 1996 San Andrés Accords on Indigenous Rights and Culture (the one area in which the government signed agreements with the Zapatistas before negotiations broke down), even though the state effectively reneged on them. In practice, the ability to make and enforce laws depends less on coercive power than on the ability to win legitimacy,



which is conferred from within the society. In the view of Rosy, a Zapatista human-rights promoter from Motozintla in the *Tierra y Libertad* autonomous municipality,

I think an internal rule in the community is more fundamental than a law that the government makes from their chairs, just like that, without seeing the reality that the communities, the people are going through. So I think that autonomy is quite an important point and besides it's recognized in the Constitution. . . . Autonomy is functioning quite well because besides being able to resolve our own problems internally and without the need for some government commissioner or something to come in, it's the community itself, the people themselves then who solve their problems.<sup>28</sup>

This sense of empowerment among community-based human-rights promoters, drawing on an awareness of multiple levels of constitutional and universal rights, is part of the shift in power relationships promoted by the Zapatista movement that has spilled over beyond just the Zapatista support base.<sup>29</sup> In my interviews in the four autonomous municipalities making up the Garrucha region, I was regularly told that most of the disputes brought to the Zapatista authorities for resolution were actually brought by non-Zapatistas. Their preference for the Zapatista authorities over state institutions may stem from a variety of factors—the perception that the Zapatista authorities were more balanced, did not charge money for justice, offered the chance to conduct proceedings in indigenous languages, and generally remedied offenses with sentences of restitution rather than retribution—but whatever the reasons for the preference, it reflected the growing legitimacy and therefore empowerment of the Zapatista project.

The Zapatista daily practices in the spheres of education, dispute resolution, and provision of social services comprise an effort to harness community energy for local empowerment. Faced with the state's attempts to exercise conventional power by militarily occupying territory—later refined by “low-intensity warfare” techniques of extending state power by infiltrating the interstices of society (via army civic action programs, paramilitaries, and counterinsurgency-oriented social programs)—the Zapatista autonomy project represents an effort to reconceptualize power and redefine the terrain of contention. While the government tries to woo indigenous people away from the rebel cause and foment conflicts that they can depict as age-old intracommunal violence, the Zapatista resistance strategy revolves around reinforcing the bonds of indigenous community and inventing new collective practices such as community-based education and administration of justice.

### Construction of New Social Subjectivities

An old dilemma of the left is the concept of “false consciousness,” the divergence between the way social actors think and act versus what theory predicts would be their objective interests. This gap has given rise to the unfortunate vanguardist and verticalist practices of many historical models of organization. Zapatismo also has some historical roots in old hierarchical and clandestine structures, a defect of origin recognized by Subcomandante Marcos when he clarified that the members of the insurgent nucleus who originally led the armed uprising could not be leaders of the movement<sup>30</sup> and acknowledged that his own charismatic leadership role was less than ideal.<sup>31</sup> Any antisystemic movement must find ways to confront governmental systems that try to control them by imposing definitions of identities and leaderships. In the Mexican case, these hegemonic practices have been managed in a highly sophisticated fashion, during and after the reign of the “perfect dictatorship” of the PRI; for example, through *indigenismo* and later *neoindigenismo*, in which the state groups people, labels them, and chooses their interlocutors.<sup>32</sup> Identities, whether “traditional” or new, are always social constructions that are produced and reproduced in historical contexts of conflicting interests.

The Zapatista movement opted to dispute the state’s hegemonic definition of the Mexican nation, drawing on Article 39 of the 1917 constitution to claim the same historic rights set forth by the Mexican Revolution, while also claiming as their own touchstone the historic figure of Emiliano Zapata (symbolizing class-based peasant rights). At the same time, the movement insists on the right to difference; in this case, the historic rights that are specific to indigenous peoples, a demand eventually accepted in a formal sense with the 1996 signing of the San Andrés Accords on indigenous rights and culture,<sup>33</sup> but never implemented nor fulfilled by the state. This construction of multiple dimensions of identity and rights has been referred to as “ethnic citizenship.”<sup>34</sup> It combines the rights corresponding to the identity of Mexican citizenship with rights pertaining to indigenous identity (which implies autonomy to define structures of decisionmaking and to control the use of resources within a historical habitat). These rights, both as indigenous peoples and citizens, are also inscribed within the framework of international law, including Convention 169 of the International Labor Organization, which recognizes rights of indigenous peoples of the world, as well as other components of the framework of universal human rights.<sup>35</sup> In other words, the Zapatista movement claims rights based on the multiple and simultaneously held identities of social subjects defined as indigenous peoples, peasants, citizens, and human beings.<sup>36</sup>

In practice, once again, this process of defining and claiming new subjectivities is a complicated one. For example, in Chiapas and elsewhere in Mexico there are numerous other peasant organizations, many predating the Zapatistas,<sup>37</sup> and obviously the EZLN does not speak for all of them. Yet the Zapatista uprising broke a kind of logjam for peasant movements in Chiapas, the state with the largest share of unresolved land claims when Mexico's agrarian counterreform began with the "modification" of Article 27 at the end of 1991. Interestingly, in the rush of land invasions unleashed by the rebellion, the main beneficiaries were actually non-Zapatista peasant organizations.<sup>38</sup> Not surprisingly, in the subsequent tangle of titling disputes, the state took the opportunity to exacerbate divisions between Zapatista and non-Zapatista organizations as much as possible. The state compensated landowners who lost property, then offered legalization selectively to non-Zapatista organizations, in some cases giving them legal title to land already occupied by Zapatistas in order to set up conflict. Nevertheless, the Zapatista rebellion helped galvanize campesino activism and reopen land redistribution; so, ultimately, enhanced campesino agency was another indirect effect of *zapatismo*.

I had the opportunity to attend a forum of campesino organizations against PROCEDE in March 2006 in the ejido Petalcingo, municipio of Tila. The Zapatistas did not officially participate, but the discourse and framing of the rejection of the government's agrarian counterreform were clearly influenced by *zapatismo*. Similarly, several case studies of non-Zapatista peasant communities in Chiapas have documented the important ways in which the communities have leveraged the Zapatista movement for their own advantage in bargaining with the state.<sup>39</sup>

The Zapatista rebellion was also a point of reference for the convergence of Mexico's roughly sixty indigenous peoples in the Congreso Nacional Indígena (CNI), the National Indigenous Congress founded in 1996. Its constituent groups and interests are diverse, and the EZLN does not assume a leadership position, but the national reassertion of indigenous identity reflected by the foundation of the CNI was awakened in part by the Zapatista rebellion, and the CNI has embraced Zapatista initiatives such as the San Andrés Accords. Clearly the Zapatista movement is part of the broader regional phenomenon of resurgent indigenous identity within Latin American social movements,<sup>40</sup> and government policies have been forced to respond with new and sophisticated efforts to coopt these identities.<sup>41</sup> Yet the Zapatistas are constantly challenged to reflect the multiple identities (ethnicity, class, gender) of their core support base. This is particularly evident since the "Other Campaign" was launched with the Sixth Declaration of the Lacandón Jungle in June 2005, in an effort to link

the communities in Chiapas to an even more diverse national network.<sup>42</sup> To the extent that the Zapatista uprising awakened consciousness and empowerment among women and indigenous people in communities in Chiapas, those groups did not want their demands relegated to the background in the name of constructing a solely class-based alliance of progressive groups across Mexico. In an example of what Otero has called “political class formation,”<sup>43</sup> the Zapatista construction of indigenous identity is a specific expression of a set of subjective experiences that partly overlap with other groups in resistance to the neoliberal model and its exclusionary political complement.

### Reconceptualizing Autonomy

Elsewhere I have examined the variety of ways in which the concept of autonomy might be understood and the dilemmas and potential pitfalls in staking out a claim to autonomy.<sup>44</sup> The structures of self-governance in the Zapatista-influenced territories in Chiapas have evolved, from the assembly-based community-level practices (which drew on several pre-1994 influences) to the creation in December 1994 of thirty-eight Zapatista Autonomous Rebel Municipalities (MAREZ), and then the formation in 2003 of five regional structures called *caracoles*, governed by rotating “good governance councils” (the *juntas de buen gobierno*, or JBGs). The Zapatista autonomy project is highly decentralized in that its implementation varies from one *caracol* to another, from one MAREZ to another, and with even more variation among communities formed in different historical circumstances (historic *ejidos*, *nuevos poblados*, or settlements on lands “recovered” from landowners after 1994, isolated *rancherías* of a few families, etc.).

The Zapatistas proposed a flexible model of “autonomy of autonomies,” convoking civil society to define their own demands and modalities according to their local visions, rather than imposing a unified central model of self-governance. The idea of autonomy for the indigenous communities has roots that pre-date the Zapatista rebellion. In Chiapas there were proposals and models of autonomy advanced before 1994 in indigenous communities, notably including the Pluriethnic Autonomous Regions (RAPs) concentrated in some parts of the Lacandón Jungle region.<sup>45</sup> A distinguishing feature of the Zapatista vision is that it is not based in a territorial concept of autonomy, that is, it does not propose a simple decentralization of the current state administration to create another level within the same power structure. Rather, the MAREZ and *caracoles* are delinked from the state bureaucratic hierarchy to establish their own collective control

and community-based decisionmaking, including control over the use of natural resources.

The latter was a key point of rupture in the implementation of the San Andrés Accords, when the government ultimately backed away from the agreements by changing the legislative language to make the self-governance structures subordinate to the state structures and stripping away the substantive rights to control resources. The Zapatistas proceeded to implement what they saw as the original San Andrés Accords, despite periodic operations of the army, police, and paramilitaries to dismantle autonomous municipalities or evict Zapatistas from land and resources they sought to control.<sup>46</sup> Conflicts persist over whether it is the inhabitants of autonomous territories or the federal government that has the right to define and arbitrate such matters as environmental protection or development policies.

Beyond just the support-base communities of Chiapas, the Zapatista uprising inspired (and occasionally convened) other declarations of autonomous spaces from within civil society. These emerged among a multiplicity of groups, with varied proposals for applying the concept of autonomy to their own spheres of participation, including urban organizers.<sup>47</sup> Thus even during periods of apparent silence, when the EZLN was not engaged in public debate or confrontation with the government over recognition of lines of authority (and critics were quick to assume that the movement was dying out), the support-base communities continued to develop their capacity for self-governance and others continued to use their imagination in applying their own concept of autonomy.<sup>48</sup>

In June 2005, with the Sixth Declaration of the Lacandón Jungle, the Zapatistas launched the "Other Campaign," an initiative intended to link the very diverse groups that were "anti-capitalist and from below" at the national level and to some extent internationally as well.<sup>49</sup> The indirect effects of the Zapatista declaration of autonomy in their territories include reinforcing autonomous practices among non-Zapatista groups that share the critique of an exclusionary political and economic system. Within Chiapas, these include, for example, the pacifist group Las Abejas, organizations of political prisoners and their families, and indigenous peasant groups such as Xi'Nich. Together with the broader array of organizations and individuals that have defined themselves as adherents to the Other Campaign, the autonomous experiences loosely related to the Zapatista movement represent a departure from conventional ways of doing politics.

One of the remaining challenges for the Zapatistas in implementing autonomy lies in bolstering economic self-sufficiency. The communities that constitute the Zapatista support base are largely

subsistence cultivators, in an era when more than two decades of neoliberal economic policies have severely impacted peasant agriculture. These public policies have inserted Mexico into the global economy in a way that allowed US-subsidized agribusiness to dump corn on Mexican markets while removing domestic price supports. Meanwhile, the specific socially valuable contributions of peasant production, not least of which is the lower environmental impact, are overlooked because they are not assigned a dollar value in the market.<sup>50</sup> These neoliberal policies (especially the “reform” of Article 27 of the constitution, ending the promise of land distribution and removing protections from the ejido social-property sector) were a major trigger of the rebellion as well as a common cause with other marginalized groups. But of course the rebellion did not overthrow the state nor overturn the neoliberal public-policy framework, so the support-base communities continue to operate within this same structural context. The movement seeks broader structural change, but meanwhile the communities face the challenge of daily survival.

The concept of “sustainability” is inextricably linked to the political and policy choices that structure the incentives and disincentives for various development options. So, for example, the government can make a particular model of ecotourism look attractive and small-scale agriculture look risky by imposing certain policies of public infrastructure investment, credit, pricing policies, and so forth without grassroots participation in policy formulation; but then the claim that the communities that “choose” tourist development are exercising autonomy is open to question. The Zapatista communities have insisted on the right to define their own priorities, even if those are not the most profitable within the parameters of global-market criteria imposed by government policy.<sup>51</sup> To carve out the space to do so they have sought out fair-trade-coffee marketing networks, established artisan and production cooperatives, organized agroecology workshops, built regional warehouses to cut out the intermediaries for basic supplies, and developed new mechanisms for interacting with solidarity groups in an effort to tap resources without sacrificing local control. Among community members, there is consciousness of the political implications of economic development:

We are an independent organization and, well, our organization, our struggle is for the long term, so we have to organize collective work to maintain our struggle, because we know that every struggle also requires economic resources. . . . That's the principal objective: to resist above all and construct what we call autonomy, that is, to be independent of the government, of the bad government. . . . Only

in that way will we learn more along the way, because all of us here, *compañeros* or *compañeras*, when we want to do something we meet, we talk, we think about what it is we want to do, what are the tasks, if it's a good idea or not and everybody thinks, everybody contributes a little of their thinking, their idea, and then that makes us think that in this way we are going to get to the path, we're going to continue building what we call autonomy.<sup>52</sup>

In my conversations with members of communities in the four autonomous municipalities of La Garrucha, I found a relative sparsity of productive projects, even though there was consciousness of the importance of this aspect of autonomy. Perhaps autonomous education and health had to be prioritized more in a region where basic services had historically been neglected due to the patchy presence of the state and where much of the indigenous population had for decades been under the thumb of the large landowners. On the recovered lands, families gained access to individual parcels, which the settlers typically complemented by some collectively worked land, the proceeds of which constituted a kind of community investment fund that was allocated by decisions of the assembly. This generally allowed for at least some support for the volunteer education and health promoters (though not always enough to prevent attrition), travel assistance for "commissions" sent on community business, or occasional investment in collective projects such as livestock or a supply warehouse. Since the labor involved in this collective work might be thought of as a kind of tax, autonomy consisted in the communities setting their own level of collective labor and agreeing on use or distribution of the proceeds.

Some community members opted for the more individual response of labor migration, either for a few weeks in local agricultural labor, a few months in the construction or service industries around the beaches near Cancún, or longer, open-ended migration to the United States. The Zapatista elected authorities discouraged and regulated labor migration, generally requiring migrants or their families to make up their portion of community labor for the time spent away. However, the fact that some felt the need or desire to leave the communities for work pointed to a continued challenge to the Zapatista definitions of autonomy and community. In effect, indigenous identity as defined by actual lived experience in many parts of rural Mexico was being stretched to include transnational communities, and the more heavily indigenous southern states such as Chiapas and Oaxaca were, by the twenty-first century, becoming significant migrant-sending regions. The meaning of autonomy for indigenous communities, and indigenous identity itself, continued to evolve as the strategies of economic reproduction became more varied.

## Radical Democracy

The armed uprising of January 1994 and the military response of the government provoked a mass civic mobilization in Mexico, demanding a ceasefire and initiation of dialogue. Whether or not the EZLN anticipated this turn of events, it gave the wider civil society (beyond the indigenous communities that initially rose up in rebellion) a position of agency as partners in the movement. As the rebellion transformed itself from a guerrilla nucleus into a social movement, the Zapatista strategy focused on the mobilization of civil society, a task that is key to democratic development. In a national consultation organized by movement sympathizers on August 27, 1995, in which more than 1.3 million people participated, respondents expressed a preference for the Zapatistas to continue organizing as an independent force rather than creating or joining a political party. In that decisive period of 1994–1995, zapatismo in effect charted a course toward democratizing what had been “the perfect dictatorship,” based on direct action and participation of civil society, rather than the armed or electoral routes.

While the Zapatista declarations outlined a struggle for the ambitious macro goal of a democratic Mexico, the Zapatistas have in the meantime devoted considerable organizational efforts to transforming very local social and political structures within the indigenous communities of Chiapas. That attention to internal process is characteristic of various new social movements of recent decades, and it reflects a project that proposes to implement its ideals without waiting for all the “objective conditions” to fall into place. The kind of direct democracy practiced in village-level assemblies may not necessarily be a viable political model at the national level, but the Zapatistas envision that national model emerging out of the initiatives of the wider civil society, rather than being designed by a vanguard. Once again, the process is central to the outcome. This process is what Fraser,<sup>53</sup> modifying Habermas, referred to as “subaltern counterpublics,” not just spaces of public discourse but practices combining social equality, cultural diversity, solidarity, and participatory democracy.<sup>54</sup>

Meanwhile, within Chiapas, there has been a slow but steady process of creating new structures of self-governance building from the level of communities, up through the autonomous municipalities, and since 2003 the *juntas de buen gobierno*, with rotating leadership by community members, making up each of the five regional *caracoles*.<sup>55</sup> As those structures gradually generate alternative systems of education, health, justice, and alternative projects of agroecology, production, and commercialization, media, and so forth,<sup>56</sup> the movement is practicing new social relations and putting forth an alternative pole of political legitimacy. It should be noted that during some



periods of “silence” and apparent disappearance from view of the movement (meaning the absence of public declarations by Subcomandante Marcos), the reality inside the communities has been just the opposite; that is, characterized by intense organization and activity.

These everyday political and social practices in the autonomous spaces of course have their contradictory elements, but in principle they represent the potential for radical democracy. Through assemblies of the support-base communities and *encuentros* (encounters) that include the wider networks of supporters, the Zapatistas have put forward the goal of creating more horizontal and participatory spaces, based on the concept of *mandar obedeciendo* (leading by obeying), in which leadership is exercised by following the directions of the grass-roots.<sup>57</sup> One mechanism for attempting to put that ideal into practice is the rotation of members of the *juntas de buen gobierno*. In the region of La Garrucha, for example, a pool of leaders is elected by the communities making up each of the four autonomous municipalities, serving on standby for a period of three years. During that time they take turns serving a ten-day shift on the *junta*. The frequent rotation has the potential drawback of loss of continuity, but on the other hand it can prevent bureaucratic entrenchment or self-interested decisionmaking. A further accountability mechanism is the separate “vigilance commission,” which oversees the actions of the *juntas de buen gobierno* and publicizes their decisions and actions.

Among the continuing challenges for this model of grassroots participation is the disproportionately low representation of women in the rotating positions of authority.<sup>58</sup> This varies by region, with the Caracol of Morelia, for example, apparently achieving greater gender parity than what I observed in La Garrucha, where typically fewer than one-quarter of the members of autonomous municipal councils or *juntas de buen gobierno* were women. The roles of education and health promoters were also more often filled by men than women. The women in this region generally explained the disparity by referring to the legacy of past gender roles that undermined the formal equality of opportunity. For example, since they felt responsibilities to home and children, women were reluctant to volunteer for service that required periods of travel far from their communities. Men who took on full-time community responsibilities (such as education promoters) could count on community labor to help them in the cornfields, but women could not expect community labor in what was traditionally defined as the “private” space of their domestic tasks. Partly in an effort to address these underlying inequalities stemming from ideologies and social practices, the Zapatistas organized a women’s *encuentro* in La Garrucha, attended by some three thousand community members and supporters, on New Year’s Day 2008. Among

other things, the meeting allowed for some intergenerational sharing of experiences and models of alternative patterns of interaction. Men were allowed to attend and do support work in the kitchen or child-care, but not to participate in the discussions.

In general, the opportunities for broader participation through rotating leadership and through other service, plant the seeds for longer-term social transformation. As one junta member reflected on this process:

That's what's hardest: we don't have a lot of schooling. Because sometimes difficult problems present themselves and, well, we have always looked for the way to a solution and also, it's a little hard for us because there aren't more resources to give solutions to the problems of the people. . . . We don't have a lot of schooling to be able to improve the way things are working, those of us who are working here, we are learning among all of us, whoever knows something well they teach it to the next person and so on, little by little we change. That's the way it is.<sup>59</sup>

Participation in leadership and community service, then, are seen as part of the collective learning process that will develop skills and collective consciousness, which in the long term will reinforce the practice of participatory decisionmaking. Youth who are designated by their communities to serve as education and health promoters (as part of the resistance and rejection of government programs) acquire new experience, perhaps rotate into positions in the autonomous structures of governance, and in the process the construction of indigenous identity is evolving rather than static.

### **Wider Implications of an Innovative Movement**

Historical processes, like ripples from a pebble cast into a pond, have effects long after the key initiating events. The Zapatista movement has several layers that have had different degrees of salience at different points in time: the initial armed rebellion of January 1994, the new practices and institutions of autonomous governance in the indigenous communities of Chiapas, and the wider networks of national and international groups influenced by various aspects of Zapatista actions and organizing initiatives. The most interesting implications of the first sixteen years of zapatismo stem not so much from its guerrilla origins as from the longer-term social movement. The boundaries of social movements are fuzzier than specific organizations, so many of the impacts of zapatismo extend to people and groups who would not label themselves Zapatistas at all.

As a social movement, zapatismo is not unique nor isolated, but rather is part of a loosely networked set of antisystemic movements that have become noteworthy in Latin America and beyond since the 1980s. This overview has suggested some distinctive characteristics of zapatismo. One is that the movement departs from the conventional focus of seizing state power (via arms or elections), focusing instead on empowerment rooted in efforts to link up with a wider civil-society mobilization of marginalized groups. Another is that it departs from existing parties and organizations to build instead on new identities and subjectivities, recognizing the simultaneous existence of multiple relevant identities that make up social agency. A third is the effort to claim and practice autonomy, understood as neither secession nor subcontracted authority from the federal government for local territories, but rather as a social space in which actors make their own decisions about matters that affect them most. Finally, in searching for “new ways of doing politics,” the Zapatistas are engaged in processes and practices that hold potential for more participatory and less hierarchical decisionmaking. In all these ways, the impact of the Zapatista movement has reverberated far beyond the small corner of the southernmost Mexican state of Chiapas that first spawned the rebellion.

To a significant extent, the core of the movement is sustained by a sense of collective identity in the indigenous communities that gave rise to zapatismo. However, this is not a static indigeneity, but rather an ongoing process of reinventing the community in the context of the changing political economy in which they are inserted, and in resistance to the hegemonic discourses and practices of a state that seeks to control the communities for purposes of facilitating the neoliberal agenda. The sustainability of zapatismo also depends on solidarity, which is a function of its resonance with a network of other sectors (whose exclusion may or may not be based on ethnicity) struggling to define their own priorities rather than having them imposed from above by the forces of the state or the global market.

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