

Note: In this excellent essay, well-known Latin American writer Raúl Zibechi explores the everyday practice of autonomy in Zapatista territories, focusing on education, health and self-governance. He then explains the political developments around the Zapatista's Sixth Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle which led to the La Otra (The Other) political campaign during the 2006 elections.

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The Other Campaign, or Politics from Below

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A revolutionary sets out to change things primarily from above, not from below, unlike the social rebel. The revolutionary asserts: we will make a movement, take power and change things from above. The social rebel organizes the masses and fights for change from below without having to address the question of seizing power.

Subcomandante Marcos (2001)

The long journey of the Zapatista movement reveals a dual dynamic: the daily, continuous construction of local autonomy and the national and international struggle to change the balance of power. The link between the two processes, which are interrelated and interdependent, seems to be one of the most salient and compelling aspects of Zapatismo. I will trace this relationship from the early days of the uprising in order to show that material autonomy and political autonomy cannot be separated, and that one encourages the other. Indeed, the Other Campaign that the EZLN launched on January 1, 2006 demonstrates that there can be no political autonomy without material autonomy. Furthermore, material autonomy will discover its limits if the autonomous territories are unable to change the state of affairs prevailing in each region, in each country, and, ultimately, on the entire planet.

Thanks to the militant journalism of Gloria Muñoz Ramírez (2004; 2005), we have insight into the most important aspects of the new world being built by the Zapatistas in the municipalities and autonomous regions of Chiapas. The first anniversary of the Caracoles and the Good Government councils in August 2004 was an opportunity for the movement to give an account of how they have constructed their autonomy.

Autonomy has a long tradition among the popular sectors and indigenous peoples across the continent, and it has

been a hallmark of the Zapatistas from the first day of the uprising. However, the current movement taking shape in the Good Government councils has an exact date of birth: December 8, 1994. On that day, the Zapatistas announced the end of the truce and that their troops would advance, and launched the Peace with Justice and Dignity for Indigenous Peoples' campaign—through which they created thirty autonomous municipalities in areas of EZLN influence (EZLN

1995, 170–182). Thus, a reality took shape that was already evident in incipient form some time before: The EZLN is the armed wing of the Indigenous peoples of Chiapas, at their disposal to fight when necessary. Furthermore, the guerrilla army is subordinate to the civilian communities, implementing the decisions made by them.

From that moment, the construction of autonomous spaces took a leap forward and followed a stealthy path beyond the Zapatista world, a process that Gloria Muñoz reveals in her writings and texts. Since the creation of those thirty autonomous municipalities in December 1994, the construction of material autonomy has been central to the Zapatista struggle and represents what Marcos calls “the material conditions for resistance” (Marcos 2003b).

From Autonomous Municipalities to the Good Government Councils

From the very beginning, the Zapatista autonomous municipalities had a different function from the Mexican State municipalities. The communiqué announcing their creation determined that “the civilian populations of these municipalities have appointed new authorities,” while “the laws to which the new rebel municipalities must and do comply with, in their practice of leading by obeying, are: the United Mexican States Constitution of 1917; the Zapatista revolutionary laws of 1993, the local laws of the municipal committee that will be determined by the civilian population” (EZLN 1994, 181–182).

Autonomy rests upon the control of territory, though it is more than just a declaration or an ideological objective. Autonomy is linked to difference. Indigenous peoples need autonomy to protect their culture and cosmovision—their world—as something distinct from the hegemonic world. In the territories controlled by the Zapatistas, an autonomous process began to spread. And it is necessary to emphasize the “process” aspect of it, in the sense that autonomy cannot be the result of “a single act” but requires “a relatively long pe-

riod, whose duration is not possible to determine beforehand” (Díaz Polanco 1997, 156–57). This is because autonomy is not a concession from the state, but rather a victory of the social sector that needs to protect and strengthen its difference in order to continue to exist as a people.

We thus arrive at a sort of triad: territory, self-government, and autonomy (or self-determination), in which each dimension is inseparable. In these self-governed areas in the Lacandon Jungle and Los Altos, the Indigenous peoples under the auspices of “leading by obeying” took a gigantic leap forward between 1994 and the birth of the Caracoles in 2003. Looking back, we can say that from the 1974 Indigenous Congress (and probably even before) the communities underwent a process of strengthening, an “internal growth,” that enabled them to free themselves from their traditional ties (Zibeche 1999, 87–122). However, another stage began with the declaration of the autonomous municipalities in 1994 that represented the creation of a new world in the Zapatista territories.

This revolution in the Zapatista zone has many dimensions. First of all, there are changes in the production and reproduction of everyday life: The communities and municipal councils have taken education, health, and agricultural production into their own hands. This has led to a significant improvement in the quality of life in Zapatista communities and has been one of the crucial material foundations upon which self-government rests.

The second dimension pertains to the construction of political autonomy. While the basic nuclei of autonomy is the community with its assembly, a higher body has been created—the Municipal Council—that brings together representatives of each community making up the autonomous rebel municipality. Although the EZLN kept the organizational structure under wraps for a long time for reasons of security and self-defense (on February 9, 1995, the Mexican state launched a military offensive designed to take out the leadership of the EZLN), various studies indicate that each council consisted of a president, vice president, secretary, and treasurer, as well as commissions or committees responsible for justice, land issues, health, education, culture, and production, among others (Ornelas 2004).

In the eight and a half years between December 1994 and August 2003 (i.e., between the proclamation of the autonomous municipalities and the creation of the Caracoles in the space previously occupied by the Aguascalientes), a dense network of initiatives connected to these communities, mu-

nicipalities, and autonomous regions was created.¹ During those years, the Zapatistas did more than create a new and different world, they also maintained a strong national and international presence: In 1994, they convened the National Democratic Convention, launching the first Aguascalientes center in Guadalupe Tepeyac; they participated in the San Andrés Talks in 1996, networking extensively with other indigenous peoples throughout Mexico, which gave birth to the National Indigenous Convention; they convened the Gatherings for Humanity and Against Neoliberalism (the first one was held in Chiapas in 1996); they held widespread consultations with civil society; and they organized large mobilizations, the most important of which was the March of the Color of the Earth in 2001.²

But we should focus less on the Zapatistas' familiar public activity and more on the movement's internal structure, specifically its two dimensions: the construction of power and the moral and material basis of this new world. We should remember that since the beginning of the uprising, the Zapatistas applied a set of "revolutionary laws" in the rebel-controlled area. Although the most well known is the women's revolutionary law (which includes the rights to decide how many children to have, to be elected to military or civilian posts, and the abolition of obligatory marriage), there are a set of "laws" that in some ways provided a political framework for the world being born in the autonomous areas.

When the Zapatistas unveiled the Caracoles and the Councils of Good Government in August 2003, and decided to tell the world their own story, we learned in detail what had occurred during the previous years. La Jornada journalist Luis Hernández Navarro describes the enormous changes that took place in Oventic, the most well-known Zapatista town in Los Altos:

In 1994, Oventic was only a sparsely populated rural community situated near important municipal headquarters like San Andrés. Ten years later, this place has become an urban center equipped with a high school and a hospital full of murals and cooperatives, where the Good Government Council (the Central Heart of

1 The Zapatistas set up meeting spaces called Aguascalientes in five key rebel communities in late 1994. They were intended as centers of interchange with national and international civil society.

2 About the National Democratic Convention, see EZLN 1994; about the San Andrés Accords, see Hernández Navarro and Vera Herrera 1998; and about the march, see EZLN 2004.

the Zapatistas in Front of the World) sits. (Hernández Navarro 2004a)

According to this analyst, the explosive growth of Oventic is due to the political role played by the locality, to which seven autonomous municipalities belong. He defines self-governed spaces like Oventic as “a laboratory for the transformation of social relations” and “a school of alternative governance and politics.” He concludes that the people “have retaken control of their society and are reinventing it” in Zapatista areas. We see now—through Gloria Muñoz’s book *EZLN: The Fire and the Word*, and the series of EZLN communiqués *The Thirteenth Stele*—the profile of more than a thousand Zapatista communities in Chiapas, grouped in twenty-nine autonomous municipalities and five large regions covered by five Good Government Councils and home to some 200,000 people.

From a quantitative point of view, the communities have constructed two hospitals, eighteen clinics, and about 800 community health houses in the five regions, with no less than 500 health promoters trained under the criteria adopted by the Zapatistas.³ In the area of education, there are about 300 schools and 1,000 educational “promoters” that make up the Zapatista Rebel Autonomous Education System, as well as a center for secondary education at the municipal headquarters in Oventic. The communities achieved and manage all this without any state aid.

Let’s take a closer look. In the Caracol based in the community of La Realidad (named Mother of the Caracols of the Sea in Our Dreams), the hospital has surgical facilities for small and medium-sized operations. “Thousands of indigenous support bases” participated in the construction of the hospital over three years, working in shifts and overcoming enormous obstacles in the process, including the lack of doctors (Muñoz 2004, 317). The treatment patients receive is very different to what they receive in the state hospitals, where the staff humiliate the indigenous, so much so that even many indigenous supporters of the PRI prefer to go to the Zapatista health clinic. The hospital has a dental consultant and an herbalist clinic, underscoring the fact that the Zapatistas are not limited to reproducing capitalist health practices. Part of the hospital complex is also a school for female and male health promoters, where some 118 promoters were trained in 2003. The zone has three municipal clinics and more than a hundred community clinics “where free consultations are

³ The figures are cited by Gloria Muñoz, but they are based on approximations with no statistical value.

available to Zapatista support bases, and when available, free medicine” (Muñoz 2004, 318).

The Caracol also grows herbs, has a kitchen, and has proudly trained more than 300 female bone-setters, herbalists, and midwives. An account contained in Gloria Muñoz’s work

shows that the process of redeeming the tradition of healing bones and bone-setting meant overcoming many obstacles:

This dream started when we realized that the knowledge of our elders was being lost. They know how to cure bones and sprains, they know how to use herbs, they know how to oversee the delivery of babies, but their knowledge was being lost with the use of medicines purchased in the pharmacy. So we came to an agreement and brought together all the men and women that know about traditional healing. It was not easy to bring everyone together. Many compañeros did not want to share their knowledge, saying that it was a gift that cannot be transferred because it is something carried within them. But a sense of awareness and understanding grew among the people, the health authorities held discussions, and they convinced people to change their way of thinking and to participate in the courses. They were some twenty men and women, older people from the communities, who acted as teachers of traditional health. About 350 students signed up, most of them Zapatista compañeros. Now the amount of midwives, bone-setters, and herbalists in our communities has increased. (2004, 319)

I think this example shows how the Zapatistas are building a new world. They are not directly linked to national or international forces, not even their own Caracoles and Good Government Councils. This reveals something much deeper: the capacity to change the world or, as pointed out by Marcos on one occasion, to build or re-invent it.

First of all, it shows that the resources needed to solve the health-related problems lay within the people and their communities. This is a very different concept from that of the state system, which treats human beings and especially the indigenous like children. Following the example of international agencies like the World Bank, state institutions refer to the indigenous not as poor but as “disadvantaged,” and thus objects of charity. It follows, then, that the disadvantaged must be considered incomplete and need to come under the state’s care, which really knows what they need. In contrast, the Za-

patistas emphasize the value of dignity and rebellion and, above all, consider human beings as subjects of their own lives and their own health. The opposite of this is state health care, which profits from health. Capital must turn human beings into passive patients, objects to be taken under the wing of the medical and state establishment.

Second, recovering traditional knowledge is a long process of inner discovery that creates its own problems. For instance, some in the communities have the knowledge but do not want to share because they believe this knowledge gives them special power. Or sometimes the knowledge, which is really the heritage of the whole community, is not yet afforded collective value. Overcoming such problems takes time and a lot of internal work that a power external to the community cannot carry out or impose by decree. It is a matter of conscience and, therefore, of social ties. In recuperating bone healing, as well as herbal and child-birthing practices, other kinds of connections are being made, knowledge is being democratized and socialized, powers are dispersed, and the community as a whole acquires new knowledge and powers.

Third, the Zapatistas combine traditional and allopathic medicine. In the community health centers two medical kits are used: one with herbs and the other with pharmaceuticals. This practice of combining “the two medicines” is a result of experience within the communities and is tied to the indigenous cosmology and culture that promotes the use of traditional medicines.⁴

Fourth, the health network begins in the community health clinic, the ubiquitous dispensary found in every community no matter how small and isolated it may be. This network emerged in the community, from the bottom up. Visitors to the communities in the mid-nineties would witness a small and modest house where a health activist (usually a woman) attended to the people’s basic health needs. She would also lead courses and workshops on topics ranging from reproductive health to basic sanitary practices, like teaching the importance of boiling drinking water and personal and domestic hygiene. The state system does the opposite: It constructs a large hospital in a major town and the community members must travel long distances to get there, where they inevitably receive inhumane treatment. The construction of the municipal hospitals in the Caracoles of La Realidad and Oventic took two decades; hundreds of small community health centres, microclinics, and dispensaries were built from the bottom up.

4 On this theme, see: Acero and Dalle Rive 1989.

A health network created from the bottom up that integrates different kinds of medicine and recuperates and socializes medical knowledge is part of an emancipatory process that no state can take over. New social ties are created in this process, underscoring the idea that healing is a collective and community-based process (Maldonado Alvarado 2003). Furthermore, by being an autonomous communal construction, it is part of an emancipatory process in which there is no separation between medicine and health care and the community.

That separation is one of the key elements of capitalism. All aspects of capitalist society are mediated by a bureaucratic layer that manages the interests of society (health, education, state). No such bureaucracy exists in the Zapatista autonomous regions and, instead, there is a process that goes against the grain of the last five centuries of capitalist history. Capitalism appropriates traditional healing knowledge and concentrates it in the state-led medical body, whereas Zapatista communities re-appropriate their knowledge and the people are collectively recovering control over their own bodies. This is emancipation in action.

The lack of separation between health and community ultimately reflects the form in which a person engages in health. The communities choose health promoters and—provided that they agree—they are trained to attend to the people's health concerns. Control remains within the community from the beginning and this prevents the formation of a separate body to oversee medical care. Ultimately, the Good Government councils are responsible for the maintenance of health activists (Colectivo Situaciones 2005, 67–71).

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The same set of principles guided education. Before the Zapatista uprising, there were few schools in the communities and where there was one, it often lacked teachers. Beginning in 1997, the Zapatistas developed their own curricula, and there are now three generations of education promoters teaching in more than 300 schools built in communities and villages by the locals themselves.

Like the health system, the education system grows from the bottom up. Not content with simply establishing a school and installing teachers, the Zapatista system of education attempts to integrate the schools into the community and the struggle. Based on the pedagogical notion that education “springs from the peoples’ own knowledge,” education activ-

ists describe a process in which “the children consult the elders and, together, they go about constructing their own educational program.” They do not use grades: “Those that don’t know do not get a zero; instead, the whole group does not proceed until everyone is on the same level, so no one is failed. Similarly, at the end of the course the indigenous promoters

organize a series of activities attended by families and parents, who are invited to note the progress of their children without assigning any grades” (Muñoz 2004, 351).

Communities elect the female and male activists, schools are built by the same communities, and the children bring a chicken to feed the teachers/promoters as a kind of “tuition.” The Good Government councils are in charge of providing teaching materials. The schools do not receive or accept any government subsidy and teachers are not paid a salary, but are fed and clothed by the communities. The entire educational process is guided by the principles: “Nobody educates anybody else, nobody is educated alone”; “educate while producing”; and “educate while learning” (Nachman 2004). Thus, the

Zapatistas have eradicated the state from their schools. This is the concept of self-education, as expressed explicitly by Zapatista education activists: “Education occurs among all of us. No one can say ‘I will liberate you’; liberation comes from the will of all of us. Nobody raises the awareness of another, nobody raises their awareness alone” (Muñoz 2004, 351).

We see that Zapatista education is community self-education; the communities are taking education into their own hands and, as in health care and all aspects of their lives, they have not created a separate “specialized” or “professionalized” body of educators. The pedagogical content and educational standards emerge from communities and indigenous people; those who provide education are chosen by the communities and their work is supervised by them.

In the Ricardo Flores Magón municipality, a training center for activists has been set up, with the support of Greek sympathizers. After three years of community work involving almost all the men of the one hundred communities that make up the municipality, the center opened in August 2004.

A member of the Autonomous Council, Julio, spoke of the type of education they wish to provide:

We have to completely change education. We want an education with a different politics and that is taught

differently in the classrooms. We do not want students seated in rows, looking at each other's back. We want them to be seated in circles, so that they may face each other. This is why we like the project that the Greeks presented to us, which is a school with six-sided rooms so that the benches can form a circle. The school-rooms

are hexagonal, not square.... So education is different, from the shape of the classrooms on. Sitting in circles will create unity among students, increased solidarity, and greater intimacy. (Muñoz 2004, 4)

During the first anniversary of the Good Government councils, Subcomandante Marcos summarized the "radical change" in health and educational practices in the Zapatista like this: "Where once there was death, now life is beginning" (Subcomandante Marcos 2004). In only one year, fifty schools were built and the three hundred that already existed were equipped without receiving a single peso from the state.

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There have also been significant changes in production and distribution in the Zapatista zone. The indigenous people have always produced a substantial portion of their own food. The Zapatistas seek to combat the power and influence of intermediaries (the so-called "coyotes") who pay the producers miserable prices for their products. In La Realidad, the Zapatistas bought a truck to carry their products directly to the market town of Las Margaritas, where a Zapatista-run market operates. In some communities, such as Veracruz, the rebels have set up supply warehouses to supply hundreds of Zapatista and non-Zapatista community stores (Muñoz 2005, 323). In the Los Altos region, the Zapatista communities sell organic coffee through two of their own cooperatives and women embroiderers formed cooperatives to market their handicrafts and eliminate the greedy and racist intermediaries in the nearby commercial center of San Cristóbal de Las Casas.

There are cooperatives and libraries in all the Caracoles, and in some there are cobblers, bicycle workshops, cafes, and other services. Women collectively plant vegetable gardens, sew, embroider, make candles, and bake. "The autonomy of the people begins with caring for the land," they say, using bio-insecticides to control pests instead of agrochemicals. "We don't seek to eliminate pests but to drive them away." Projects are underway, such as concrete-block production, cooperative pig, hen, sheep, chicken, and cattle farms, and fruit tree plantations (Muñoz 2005, 323).

Social change correlates closely with autonomy, both individually and collectively. This is very visible in areas such as education and health. Learning involves self-learning—that is, “the people must control their own learning process.” The same is true in health: “We talk of curing ourselves, of allowing our bodies to recover and to learn to heal ourselves. Given that nobody can learn to heal my own body except myself, I

have to learn to heal myself; I’m in control, I am the agent.

If I speak of their education and health, I am depending on the system” (Esteva 2005, 193). In short, this integrated vision of autonomy carries the principle of self-government to all aspects of life because it is a way to overcome dependencies. Autonomy is a whole; it touches all aspects of life or it is not autonomy.

Nevertheless, progress is always partial. The issue of women’s emancipation is one issue where progress has been slow, according to documents released by the Zapatistas.

What is certain, notes Hernández Navarro, is that “against the current, they are producing and reproducing a different society”; they are “reinventing tradition.” According to this analyst, the Zapatistas are growing from the bottom up and, as we have seen, “they have been intergrating the most advanced experiences in each of the different fields of action in which they are engaging. In many ways, they are a synthesis of them” (Hernández Navarro 2004b).

The Zapatista movement is also carrying out agrarian reform from below. Having displaced large landowners, as well as their intermediaries and local chieftains from their territories, they are introducing new forms of popular organization, unleashing the creativity and transformative energies of the people, communities, and villages. Likewise, they have displaced state authorities and professional politicians. The balance of forces has changed within the Zapatista territories.

The decisive actor in this process was the Zapatista army—understood as the armed wing of the communities—which was able to “clear the ground” for many of the projects we have seen. In other words, the expulsion of state power and the creation of a space controlled by the communities allowed this huge number of initiatives to appear.

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Let us now look at distribution of power in Zapatista terri-

tories. The implementation of the rotation of administrative duties was one of the most important achievements of the Good Government councils during their first year, and it is something that allows us to truly speak of “good governance.” “We were all government, we had no leader, it was a collective government, and between us all we taught ourselves what each one knew” (Subcomandante Marcos 2004).

Moreover, three of the Caracoles issued a report at the beginning of 2005, as the Good Government councils entered into their second year of operation, expressing surprise at the number of youth involved in the tasks of government. But more surprising still is the strength of the system of rotation.

The members of each council are elected by the assemblies of the communities and remain in office for three years, but,

its members rotate every eight days, so in this way, they return to oversee the task several times. Each member travels from their municipality to the Caracol, where they remain day and night for a week and then return home to continue working the land and attending to their domestic labors and family. They receive no salary. It is a responsibility, not a privilege.... The practice of rotation, reversibility, and accountability in the good government councils and the fact that gradually everyone will go through the experience of governing and being governed will result in nothing less than the elimination of the governing class. (Navarro 2005)

Achieving this was a learning experience for the people and the Zapatistas, especially for the EZLN. Much of that process is summarized in The Thirteenth Stele series of communiqués in which the Zapatistas announce the creation of the Caracoles and the Good Government councils and the end of the five Aguascalientes that had, in turn, been born as a response to the destruction of the Aguascalientes of Guadalupe Tepeyac after the state army’s military offensive on February 9, 1995. From the point of view of constructing autonomy, it was a decisive and fundamental step. The Thirteenth Stele contains a summary of actions and a public self-criticism of the EZLN and, on the basis of the critique, the Zapatistas put forward alternatives and responses.

It outlines the two main problems needing resolution: the relations between autonomous authorities and national and international civil society and those between Zapatista and non-Zapatista communities. The fifth part of The Thir-

teenth Stele, entitled, "A History," details them. It argues that there has been uneven development in the various autonomous municipalities, in the communities and even within Zapatista families. The most well known or most accessible municipalities receive more projects; families that housed or had close contact with visitors receive more attention or

gifts. Such things are considered natural in human relations, but, also, "this can introduce imbalances in community life if there are no counterweights" (Subcomandante Marcos 2003b).

The second issue is more complex and affects the relationship between civilians and military personnel. Tradition deems that when a person is not fulfilling their responsibilities (and these traditions operated before the existence of the EZLN) that they would be replaced by another in a "natural" manner. But the presence of the Zapatista Army created some problems:

As a political-military organization, the leadership makes the final decision here. What I mean is that the EZLN's military structure has in some way "contaminated" a tradition of democracy and self-governance. In a manner of speaking, the EZLN was one of the "undemocratic" elements in a relationship of direct community democracy (another anti-democratic element is the Church, but that's a matter for another paper). (Subcomandante Marcos 2003b)

He argues that when autonomous municipalities began operating and self-government grew from local to regional levels, the "shadow" of the military structure was alleviated from the autonomy process because the EZLN does not intervene in the affairs of the local municipalities and regions. Furthermore, "since the EZLN, due to its principles, does not fight for the seizure of power, none of the military commanders or members of the Clandestine Indigenous Revolutionary Committee may hold positions in the community or in the autonomous municipalities" (Subcomandante Marcos 2003b). Whoever wishes to do so must leave their position in the Zapatista army.

The Zapatista self-critique is strongest when it addresses one of most sensitive issues: how the autonomous councils administer justice and how results have been occasionally "irregular" and sometimes problematic. On this point Marcos and the EZLN are very transparent and it is useful to reprint in detail the nature of their comments:

If the relationship between the Autonomous Councils and the communities is full of contradictions, the relationship with non-Zapatista communities has been

one of constant friction and confrontation.

In the offices of non-governmental human rights defenders (and in the General Command of the EZLN), there are more than a few complaints against Zapatistas for alleged human rights violations, injustices, and

arbitrary acts. When the General Command receives complaints, it turns them over to the committees in the region in order to investigate their veracity and, when they are confirmed, sets out to resolve the problem, bringing the parties together in order to come to agreement.

But organizations that defend human rights are confused, because they don't know whom to address. The EZLN or to the Autonomous Councils? And they have a good point. (Subcomandante Marcos, 2003b)

The text attributes these problems to the confusion between civilian and military roles. But, as Marcos points out, it also reflects the fact that it is not only Zapatistas who have constructed indigenous autonomy but also “hundreds of thousands of persons of different colors, different nationalities, different cultures, different languages, in short, of different worlds” (Subcomandante Marcos, 2003b).

Autonomy and difference go hand in hand, because autonomy implies that people have the right to govern themselves completely, “to determine their own form of government, their own sociocultural practices, and their own economic organization” (Díaz Polanco and Sánchez 2002, 45).

This point is extremely important because autonomy is often reduced to the function of government—this is how the powerful often receive the peoples' demands for autonomy. In contrast, the Zapatista experience teaches us that autonomy is comprehensive and strategic—ranging from the smallest cooperative, to a school or a health center in the jungle—reflecting the form and manner in which each project is carried out, in whom sovereignty resides, how they make decisions, and how they organize themselves.

Autonomy and heterogeneity are also related. If we are truly autonomous, each collective will do things as they decide. This enormous diversity is what the Zapatistas call “another world in which many worlds fit” and it shows us that “it is possible to act uniformly without suppressing diversity.” In that sense, the Good Government councils “are an instance

of unified action rather than a mechanism of uniformity, to the extent that they do not centralize powers or dictate the terms of the base” (Ornelas 2004, 10). In this way, the Zapatistas cannot help but to undermine the homogenizing and excluding practices of capital. The political left replicates these modes of capitalism by seeking the cohesion and uniformity

of anti-systemic forces, while, for the Zapatistas, “the multiplication of the subject of social transformation is the alternative to the mechanisms of power that characterize the capitalist system” (Ornelas 2004, 11).

The five Good Government councils, operating in as many caracoles, attempted to carry out the following tasks:

- to offset inequities among the autonomous municipalities and communities.
- to mediate disputes between autonomous municipalities and between them and state municipalities.
- to address complaints against autonomous councils in matters of human rights violations and complaints; to oversee correction of errors and monitor compliance.
- to monitor the implementation of projects and community work in the autonomous municipalities, ensuring compliance with the schedules and standards agreed upon with communities.
- to monitor compliance with laws in the municipalities.
- to help national and international civil society visit communities, carrying out productive projects and installing peace camps in rebel communities.
- to help people from autonomous rebel Zapatista municipalities participate in activities or events outside the communities.
- to ensure in Zapatista territory that leadership leads by obeying.

The Good Government council consists of one or two delegates from the Autonomous Councils in each zone. Presently

there is a clear civil-military division. The municipalities carry out tasks related to dispensing justice, education, housing,

land, labor, food, information, culture, and local transport. The military side, the EZLN, “monitors the operations of the Good Government councils in order to prevent acts of corruption, intolerance, injustice, and deviation from the Zapatista principle of leading by obeying” (Subcomandante Marcos 2003b).

Thus the Zapatistas hope to resolve the problems generated by the civil-military overlap. They do this through principles that they have embraced since the January 1, 1994 uprising: without creating a body that is separate from the communities and without creating state institutions or a bureaucracy, without, as Ornelas points out, “reproducing the separation between politics, society, and economy; between public and private; between ‘important’ and the banal; while seeking to create relationships that tend toward the (re)unification of social life” (Ornelas 2004, 11). Ultimately, the “civil” as much as the “military” depend upon the real power in the Zapatista movement—the community assembly, the community body that commands, by leading.

The Zapatistas’ ability to create a new world in their territories, and to enable people to take control of their own lives, has strengthened the movement’s capacity to resist the military-state encirclement. Their capacity to resist—the strengthening of difference—is what allowed them to launch the Other Campaign. An early announcement of this initiative can be found in the 2003 text about the creation of the Caracoles; it calls for the “La Realidad-Tijuana plan” that would “link all the resistance in our country and, with it, rebuild the Mexican nation from below” (Subcomandante Marcos 2003b). The plan went into motion two years later, with the announcement of the “red alert” and the Sixth Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle.

The Other, or Plebeian Politics

The Zapatista concept of autonomy is remarkable and guides all of the movement’s actions. Autonomy is not only or primarily an issue of how the rebel movement relates to the Mexican state or to other movements. It is present in every aspect of Zapatista life, from the most remote community to the region as a whole, inspiring the smallest local undertaking to major campaigns like the Other Campaign. Autonomy is a way of viewing life and, among other things, politics, but it also imposes limits on autonomous spaces that fail to expand and tend to remain isolated.

The second part of the Sixth Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle (“Where We Are Now”) addresses the problem of limits: “By our way of thinking, and what we see in our hearts,

we have reached a point where we cannot go any further, and we could possibly lose everything we have if we do nothing more to move forward” (EZLN 2005). A few lines below it adds that perhaps unity of action with other sectors that have the same shortcomings as the Zapatistas will allow them to get what they need and deserve. Hence, a new step in the struggle

“is only possible if the indigenous join together with workers, peasants, students, teachers, employees...” or, in other words, if all struggles are linked.

Years ago, the Zapatistas voiced a desire to establish links with those who resisted elsewhere in the world so as to avoid remaining confined in their Chiapas “island.” In his letter “The World: Seven Thoughts in May of 2003,” Subcomandante Marcos emphasized once again that they had no interest in conventional statist politics, given the weakness of nation states and their subordination to global powers, and that popular movements must unite their efforts:

Turning to the traditional political class as an ally in the struggle is an exercise in nostalgia. Turning to neopoliticians is a symptom of schizophrenia. There is nothing to do up there, other than betting that maybe something can be done.

There are those who are devoted to imagining that that the rudder exists and to fighting for its possession. There are those who are seeking the rudder, certain that it has been left somewhere. And there are those who make of an island, not a refuge for self-satisfaction, but a ship for finding another island and another and another. (Subcomandante Marcos 2003a, 10)

According to the EZLN’s analysis, the political, which is based upon class relations but maintains some autonomy from them, drove national states. With globalization, the “society of power” now occupies a higher place, a “collective leadership body that has displaced the political class and now makes the fundamental decisions” that no longer go through national institutions (Subcomandante Marcos 2003a, 6). Therefore, it does not make sense to engage in a struggle to take control of a “rudder” that either does not exist or is pure decoration.

The only way of doing politics is to change the world from below, not in order to reach the heights of power, but to create relations with others from below. This is what La Sexta (The Sixth Declaration) is all about. “In Mexico, what we want to do is come to an agreement with persons and organizations of the left, and not that we will tell them what to do or give them orders” (EZLN 2005). Giving orders would be to reproduce the

habits of the political class. Indeed since the very beginning, the Zapatistas have advanced a new way of doing politics. It is not yet defined but is “already operational in small and large fragments of societies worldwide” (Marcos 2003a, 13). This point is important because it involves two key issues: The Zapatista movement is not “the” new way of doing politics but simply another formulation (the most coherent, in my opinion); and, on the other hand, if there are different new ways of doing politics from below, in multiple movements and spaces of resistance, it is necessary to create bridges to bring them into contact with one another. That is the Other Campaign. Nor are we going to tell them to be like us or to rise up in arms.

What we are going to do is ask them what their lives are like, their struggle, their thoughts about our country and what we should do so they do not defeat us. What we are going to do is to heed of the thoughts of the simple and humble people, and perhaps we will find there the same love that we feel for our fatherland. And perhaps we will find agreement between those of us who are simple and humble and, together, we will organize all over the country and link our struggles, which are alone right now, separated from each other, and we will find something like a program that has what we all want, and a plan for how we are going to achieve the realization of that program, which is called the “national program of struggle.” (EZLN 2005)

Following meetings with partisans and groups that endorsed La Sexta, Marcos began a tour of the country on January 1, 2006, with the objective of listening and “building from below and for below an alternative to neoliberal destruction, an alternative left for Mexico.” This is the real novelty of the Other Campaign, which does not call for a political apparatus and communicates directly with people like them, like the indigenous people of Chiapas. In the first three months, Marcos met with other indigenous from other states, workers, women, students, sex workers, housewives, youth, and the elderly in public events involving several thousand people and in small meetings with a half dozen Sexta. “They know where they want to go, but they will make the roadmap with others while on the road,” wrote Adolfo Gilly (2005b).

According to participants in the Other Campaign, Zapatismo is playing an important role in creating a space for the communication of rebellion, much like ten years ago, when the EZLN uprising strengthened and expanded other movements. A good expression of this can be found in the

message that representatives of the Mixe, Zapotec, and Chinantec people of the Sierra de Oaxaca read when Marcos or “Delegate Zero” visited. It recalls that politicians of the right and the left never took them into account, never heard or saw them, but “you men and women of the EZLN taught us to revalue our roots and strengthen our sense of the future.” They believe that the Other Campaign is an opportunity “to refresh our collective memory and history and renew our hopes and dreams.” It is an opportunity to “build a new social pact that will radically transform the current legal, political, economic, social, and cultural structures of this country” (Bellinghousen 2006c). Joel Aquino, from the Assembly of Chontales and Zapotec Authorities of the Sierra Norte, asserted that the Zapatista uprising “was like a torch illuminating our path,” and Ruperto Ko Wo, an elderly Maya from Campeche, said, “We are ready for a policy of alliances to alleviate poverty in our region” and support participation in “national dialogue” (Bellinghousen 2006b; 2006a).

But why are Marcos and the Zapatistas traveling the length and breadth of Mexico instead of inviting the collectives and people to visit Chiapas like they did on previous occasions? Are the risks not too high? Does it make sense to travel thousands of miles to visit a town or neighborhood and meet with five or ten people? This must occur because politics from below develops in different spaces than politics from above.

These are spaces far from major centers of decision-making, in which those from below feel safe because they control these spaces.⁵ The Zapatistas know this and decided to do politics in those spaces, which can only be known directly, without intermediaries. These are spaces that do not shine, that are beyond the glare of the media spotlight, and are, as Marcos says, “the place where they live and struggle: their home, their factory, their barrio, their town...their neighborhood, what one would call the reality of where they live and work, which is to say, where they construct their own history” (Subcomandante Marcos 2005a).

We see that for those from below there are no special stages—well lit and with microphones and cameras for TV—waiting for them to do politics, but only the same stages upon which they live their daily lives. The problem is that this is not visible for those who do politics by looking upward. This is a central aspect of plebeian politics or the way of doing politics from below.

5 On this topic, see Scott 2000.

As we see it, and we could be wrong, this is where those from below make their big decisions: the birthplace of each person's *Ya Basta!*, where anger and rebellion grows, although it is not visible until the large demonstrations, where it becomes a collective, transformative force. *La Sexta* and the *Other Campaign* are not seeking a place for the word, but a place for listening, where you and others have done your political work and organizing. They do not call for big meetings, conventions, fronts, associations, coalitions, and so on. We will go, yes, to the gatherings and large meetings if they invite us and we can make it. We'll go with you because we trust those like you. This is why none of the meetings, representatives, fronts, dialogues, programs, etc., have reason to fear that we would dispute spaces, names, calls, signatures at the bottom, number of invited or power of persuasion. But if we have to choose, we will choose to go to a neighborhood or a factory, a market, or a classroom instead of going to a big gathering. It will be said then that the EZLN is missing out on the chance that its word could be heard by thousands, millions. And therein lies the problem, because the EZLN is not looking to get the many to listen to its word but, on the contrary, seeks to listen to many—not all, but those from below who resist and struggle. Whoever does not understand that this is what the EZLN is looking for, has understood nothing and they will be the ones demanding statements, interviews, and communiqués in search of yet more explanations. (Subcomandante Marcos 2005a)

We see how the Zapatistas approach politics: by building within spaces that are invisible to the powerful, political parties, academics, and intellectuals linked to power. Starting out from the creation of spaces for listening, they hope to create new spaces for a new vocabulary for those from below who are in struggle. And here another one of the Zapatistas' great creations or discoveries is born: that not just a single word will exist, but a multiplicity of words. The idea of a rainbow of colors within the single color of a traditional flag (be it red, or red and black, or whatever) expresses this idea best.

Spaces created for exchange between the different people cannot be "synthesized" into a single, homogeneous space—it is necessary to open spaces in which differences can be expressed. This is a way of doing anti-capitalism, because the logic of capital is a logic of standardization. Producing merchandise in the current globalized world implies the produc-

tion of millions of identical products for consumption by people who thus lose their specific traits and become identical before the market. In politics, what unifies them is the electoral market that synthesizes for different policies:

Before leaving, Ramona gave me this embroidery which she made while she was recovering in Mexico City. She gave it to someone from civil society, who returned it to us in one of these preparatory meetings. She told me: “This is what we want from the Other Campaign.” These colors, no more, but no less. Perhaps what we need to do is understand unity like Ramona’s embroidery, where each color and form has its place; there’s no uniformity, nor hegemony. Finally, to understand unity as the agreement along the path. (Subcomandante Marcos 2005b)

This type of unity from below unlike that offered by the trade union or traditional political parties, is not based on the power of a leader or prominent personality but, as Marcos said in the same piece, on loyalty among comrades. It is on that basis that we can walk together, each one in step with a “multiplicity of feet and ways of walking in the Other Campaign.”

This walk is gathering momentum throughout Mexico. The Other Campaign had little impact on those who supported Andres Manuel López Obrador (of the Democratic Revolutionary Party, PRD), but it exercised great influence among those who resist and mobilize. Its meetings “are not rallies to pressure government authorities” or “electoral campaign events” in which the candidates make the same promises that they make in all electoral campaigns; “they are a public space for the memory of wrongs suffered, the ground for dialogue about shared misfortunes and aspirations” (Hernández Navarro 2006a).

But what can come of this space of exchange? People often lament the dispersion of the organizations, the fragmentation of struggles, the inability to find common ground between activists of different generations, from different sectors of labor, with different demands and problems. However, in these spaces controlled by those from below, due to the work done by the Other Campaign, “a common language is being created among those who until recently could not engage with one another” (ibid.). This may seem small or insufficient but we can be sure that once those from below find a common language and recover the ability to speak their truths out loud that their acts will one day, any day, bring on a rebellion. The Zapatistas know that “it is only when hidden

speech is declared openly, the subordinates can recognize to what extent their demands, their dreams, their anger is shared by other subordinates with whom they have not been in direct contact” (Scott 2000, 262).

New Challenges for Autonomy

The Zapatistas did not invent autonomy nor grassroots ways of doing politics from below; both have a long tradition in Latin America. The Zapatistas have endeavored to develop and improve them, creating the conditions for the expansion, growth, and diffusion of autonomist politics within the spaces of the oppressed.

However, the Sixth and the Other Campaign appear on the scene at a special moment in Mexican and Latin American political life: when the social struggle has worn out the most savage forms and radical implementation of the neoliberal model, and when the tired and old parties of the right have begun to crack apart and give way to progressive and leftist forces. This is not a new problem for the movements, but it is worse in recent decades because in a few countries the popular resistance has helped the left occupy places within the state apparatus.

According to Marcos, one should situate the beginning of the Other Campaign in the year 2001, when the political parties—the PRI, the PAN, and the PRD—rejected the law of indigenous rights and culture. Parliament considered the law following the mass mobilization around the March of the Color of the Earth, during which millions came out around the country to greet the Zapatista caravan as it passed through on its way to Mexico City, where it would support the indigenous autonomy law. The march lasted thirty-seven days, from February 24 to April 2, 2001, traveled four thousand miles, crossed thirteen states, and held seventy-seven public events, culminating in a major rally in Mexico City’s Zocalo, after which the EZLN addressed Congress. But both the right and the left in parliament united to reject the law.

“At this point we concluded that the path of dialogue with the Mexican political class was exhausted and that we had to find another path,” Marcos pointed out (Bogado 2006). Nevertheless this other path represented a risk that needed to be carefully weighed by the Zapatistas, namely the possibility of a surgical strike against the leadership of the EZLN due to their isolation from the political class. The Zapatistas anticipated that a good part of the people who hitherto supported their struggle would withdraw their support “at the moment when we distance ourselves from the politicians, especially those

from the so-called institutional left, the PRD” (Bogado 2006).

That was exactly what happened. They chose the election period to start the Other Campaign, adds Marcos, to “make it clear that we wanted to do something else” and that it would be very different from “the politics from above”(Bogado 2006).

Many supporters of the EZLN in Mexico wagered on the electoral process and the candidacy of Andres Manuel López Obrador of the PRD. Some of these voters took the position that the electoral and non-electoral path are complementary and others that the Zapatistas were negatively impacting the Obrador’s chances for victory. Many PRD voters distanced themselves from the EZLN when the Zapatistas asked those who participate in elections to refrain from participating in the Other Campaign. The Zapatistas were accused of sectarianism, of “playing the game to the right,” among similar criticisms. Thus it became necessary to ask: Would a left electoral victory damage the Zapatistas and the social movement as a whole?

In Mexico, there was a political shift when the PRD won the elections in the Federal District in 1997 and thus acceded in principle to governance. “This changes the relationship between the parties and the social movements, and between militants and the movement. Many of them have become functionaries and subordinate to the logic of government,” reflected Jesus Ramírez (2005, 301). Since the 1997 electoral victory, an important sector of the Mexican left has become embedded in government institutions, and key leaders occupy spaces leased to them by the state apparatus. One can conclude that “the defeat of many of the movements is a consequence of the role played by their leaders” (301). But this is only a first step, as we see in the cases of Brazil and Uruguay, where the Left first took municipal governments in cities like Porto Alegre, São Paulo, and Montevideo before then entering national government.

The second step occurs when the left embraces the positions of the right. This is what happened in Mexico in 2001, when all the political parties, including the PRD, united to reject the indigenous law. From that moment, “the split from the Zapatistas and other social struggles” intensified (302). In other words, the left begins administering parts of the state apparatus and veers rightward, leaving social movements without reference points, since the left came to power with the promise of resolving popular demands. Alongside the ideological and political disarmament induced by this, one can add an organizational crisis, as the leaders of these left movements are

obliged to carry out the right's program within the institutions.

This triple disarticulation of the social movements (ideological, political, and organizational) beheads the popular struggle while laying the foundation for the co-optation of what remains. This defeat comes not through massive repression but through the familiar authoritarian actions of the state, this time overseen by the left political parties. In other words, the politics of the left lead to the same objective that repression could not achieve: a historical defeat.

We are witnessing something like this in countries like Argentina, Ecuador, Uruguay, and Brazil, with varying degrees of intensity. The social movements that created the conditions for the rise of the governments of Nestor Kirchner, Lucio Gutierrez, Tabare Vazquez, and Lula are now isolated, divided, and on the defensive. Some movement leaders (like prominent personalities among the piqueteros in Argentina, the indigenous in Ecuador, or unions in Uruguay and Brazil) have been put in positions in which they must defend official government policies while still supporting important sectors of the social movement. The divisions within the movement and the difficulty of mobilizing for common objectives increases governments' freedom to pursue neoliberal policies.

While neoliberalism is more subtle and less directly predatory than it was in the years of savage privatization and crushing structural adjustments, its intensity and depth has not changed in the least.

It is helpful to consider comments made by one-time government supporters in the paradigmatic cases of Brazil and Argentina. In Brazil, the general secretary of the National Conference of Bishops, Odilio Scherer, says that the current government has transformed Brazil into "a financial paradise." The Archbishop of São Paulo, Claudio Hummes, a friend of Lula, was also disappointed with his management. The Bishop of Salvador, Geraldo Majella Agnelo, was categorical: "Never has there been a government so submissive to bankers" (Lavaca 2006). These statements were made in early March 2006, during Lula's reelection campaign—the Conference of Bishops had supported him directly or indirectly for several decades. Several analysts believe that relations between the government and the church are bad but feel they can get even worse. Frei Betto, a personal friend of Lula who coordinated the Zero Hunger Plan for almost two years, resigned, arguing that the government turned its back on the movements. In the case of the frustrated demand for agrarian reform, the bishops believe that Lula wagered that agribusiness would "modern-

ize” the agrarian sector, thereby strengthening exports and meeting the demands of the financial sector. Far from introducing agrarian reform, these policies have led to a greater concentration of property.

In the case of Argentina we cede the floor to an economist who was elected deputy for a list akin to Kirchner. Claudio Lozano, an economist at the Central de Trabajadores Argentinos (CTA), is not a radical but argues that “we are now worse off than in the 1990s,” the years of Menem. He insists that the policies of the previous regime have not been changed under Kirchner—not the high concentration of wealth, the regressive pattern of income distribution, the role of the state or even the country’s international integration. On the contrary, there is “a greater exploitation of the workforce and further impoverishment of society.” Despite the significant economic growth registered in the last three years, “in 2004 and 2005 inequality was exacerbated.” Lozano points out that Kirchner’s economic model focuses externally “toward placement of cheap natural products on the world market” and is also “a model from the top, in the sense of meeting the demands of the most affluent sectors of the population. This model organically maintains a more regressive distribution” (ibid.).

In both cases the continuation of neoliberalism is accompanied by policies targeted to address extreme poverty. But these policies do not address fundamental universal rights and instead attend to certain sectors that the state has deemed a priority based on its own criteria. This is because, as noted by Lozano, “universality puts into question a very good part of the political system,” which functions on the basis of clientelism. The popularity enjoyed by Lula and Kirchner is due to this crucial factor of clientelism, allowing them to keep winning elections. In parallel, both manage to weaken and isolate the social movements by means of explicit politics aimed at creating “reasonable” movements—that is, those with whom they can negotiate and bargain with—while considering other movements as “radical,” destabilizing forces that should be suppressed. In Argentina this is very clear in relation to the piquetero movement; in Brazil the government is privileging and building bridges with rural movements who are less combative than the landless movement (MST), with whom they tend to establish more fluid ties.

The Zapatistas understand this “progressivism” as a serious threat and compare the current situation with that of 1994, announcing a new *Ya Basta!* When Marcos said that the Zapatistas would fare very badly under López Obrador, he was saying the same thing that could be said today for the

piquetero movement, the landless movement in Brazil, and the indigenous people in Ecuador. It should be understood that this is not a question of the intrinsic evil of the project of the left, nor of any particular animosity of their leaders toward the social movements. The point is that progressive and left governments are the best ones to implement the development and poverty reduction policies promoted by international financial institutions.

These policies have devastated the movements where they have been implemented without obstacles, such as occurred for example in regions of Ecuador. International programs were introduced into the country under the guise of seeking to strengthen social organizations and were overseen by local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) on the ground.

However far from strengthening the social movements, these programs increase their level of internal bureaucracy, intensify their link with the state, aid in the creation of a specialized leadership separate from the base, and finally, facilitate the overall co-optation of the movements. Over time, leaders begin to change their profile within the movement, assuming a more technocratic character, specializing in dealing with external funding agencies and procedures in the realm of public administration.

The divorce between the electoral left and social movements has no solution. First of all there are too many material interests and complicity with the state apparatus to think there could be a shift, except that those from below become strong enough that those above cannot ignore them. The electoral left is not the enemy of the movements, but their access to state power can do them irreparable harm if the movements have not established sufficient material and political autonomy.

During his tour of Mexico, Subcomandante Marcos returned to the subject several times:

The future history not only of Mexico but of all Latin America will be constructed from below. The rest, in any case, are steps. Maybe false steps, maybe firm ones, that is yet to be seen. But fundamentally, it will be the people from below that will be able to take charge of it, organizing themselves in another way. The old recipes or the old parameters should serve as a reference of what has been done, but not as something that should be re-adopted to do something new. (Bogado 2006)

At this political juncture so filled with hope and yet so

difficult for the movements, the EZLN have launched the challenge of the Other Campaign, with their determination to build spaces of inter-communication between those from below, showing that they can create other forms of doing politics outside of established political institutions. The success of this campaign could be the necessary encouragement for all of us who continue to struggle around this continent without looking to those above for solutions. We know that the struggle for autonomy—an endless struggle—is linked to emancipation and only those from below, with others from below, from their own spaces, can do it.

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