A WORLD IN WHICH MANY WORLDS FIT:
ZAPATISTA RESPONSES TO GLOBALIZATION

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The Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) announced its presence by armed uprising on January 1, 1994, and having captured the world’s attention, then concentrated on the political struggle for democratization from below (building on the 38 “autonomous municipalities” declared in December 1994). Viewed against the backdrop of previous social movements and rebellions, the Zapatista movement seems to contain many paradoxical elements. The Zapatista discourse defies easy classification, linking the rights of indigenous peoples in Chiapas to calls for an insurrection of civil society, for the democratization of Mexico, and for a global struggle against neoliberalism. As the Zapatistas insisted in their Fourth Declaration of the Lacandón Jungle in 1996, “The world we want is one where many worlds fit” (Womack, ed. 1999:303).

My limited purpose in this essay is to address two of the seemingly paradoxical aspects of the Zapatista movement: 1) How can such a local movement, rooted in the remote jungle and highlands communities of Chiapas, be a response to a phenomenon as large and abstract as “globalization”? And 2) How can a movement for indigenous autonomy also make citizenship demands on the nation-state? These reflections are intended to highlight why the Zapatista rebellion is not sui generis or narrow in focus, but rather is broadly relevant to a diversity of interconnected popular movements.

RESISTING NEOLIBERAL GLOBALIZATION

Mexico after the 1982 debt crisis began a process of rapid economic liberalization, involving not only the restructuring of the economy for integration into global markets, but also the corresponding reorganization of society. The implementation of the so-called “Washington consensus” involving privatization, state rollback, and market opening in an era of new global integration of capital—i.e., neoliberalism—created new “worlds” of winners and losers. The Zapatista rebellion, which of course did not spring from nowhere on New Year’s Day 1994 when NAFTA took effect, occurred in the context of a wide variety of new forms of resistance to the impact of globalization in Mexico (Otero 1996, Barkin et al. 1997). These protests intertwined with the growing delegitimation of the dominant-party political system, with expressions as varied as the rise of independent unions and post-1985-earthquake barrio associations, the PRD electoral challenge, the middle-class debtors’ movement “El Barzón,” armed rebel movements in Guerrero and Oaxaca, and most recently the General Strike Committee of students at the UNAM.

The origins of the Zapatista rebellion were multiple and complex, but the impact of neoliberal reforms, particularly on peasant agriculture in the 1980s-90s, figures prominently in the chain of causality (Barry 1995, Harvey 1998, Collier & Quaratiello 1999). The oil boom and bust, followed by market liberalization in the form of the dismantling of the coffee marketing board INMECAFE, withdrawal of corn price supports, and the threat of a flood of cheap grain imports from North American agribusiness, wreaked havoc on the peasant economy. Following INMECAFE’s withdrawal from coffee marketing and the International Coffee Organization’s failure to fix production quotas in 1989, world prices fell 50%, in a sector where some 70% of producers were small growers on plots of less than two hectares (Harvey 1998:176-80). Similarly with grains, the financial liberalization (peso devaluation) raised input prices while rural credit was cut and price supports removed in the 1980s, a combination accelerated under conditions imposed by a 1989 World Bank structural adjustment loan; again with particularly devastating impact in
Chiapas, which produced more corn for the national market than any other state. The 1992 “reform” of Article 27 of the Constitution in preparation for NAFTA eliminated the last hope of land reform for poor peasants, with acute impact in Chiapas, where the corrupt state government had long held up land claims under the agrarian reform laws. If the indigenous peoples of Chiapas rebelled against much more immediate and concrete circumstances than the abstract concept of “globalization,” the policies and practices which they experienced as affronts to justice and dignity were clearly shaped by neoliberal restructuring (Gilly 1998:327-32).

Mexico’s opening to the global market, and the accompanying modification of the property regime to allow the privatization of the social sector established under Article 27 of the 1917 Constitution, represented a threat to the ejido system in general. The globalization of agriculture—represented in the conditionality of the 1989 World Bank loan—weakened the traditional role of the state as a political intermediary for capital, managing the national agro-food system (McMichael & Myhre 1991). It was not only in Chiapas, but throughout Mexico that independent peasant organizing initiatives responded by reasserting autonomous rights to mobilize around local models of rural development (Moguel 1992). Not only indigenous communities, but the entire social sector of community-managed agriculture would be subject to disintegration into individual parcels and/or control by outside investors (Díaz-Polanco 1997:130-41). The neoliberal offensive, while hardly intended to open political space, in effect gave new impetus to autonomous peasant organizing initiatives, which were reacting as much to the undermining of community as to the expanding commodification of land. In the case of Chiapas, a variety of independent peasant organizations focusing on land, labor and credit issues since the 1970s—precursors to the Zapatistas—created pressure for the government to make concessions to groups organizing outside the officialist CNC peasant confederation (Harvey 1998:118-68, Collier & Quaratiello 1999:70-83).

More generally, the neoliberal dynamic of state rollback jeopardized the elaborate pattern of clientelist networks, managed under the corporatist system controlled by the PRI through its monopolistic sectoral associations. In highlands communities in Chiapas as well as indigenous communities elsewhere, that system had historically been grafted onto traditional customs of community governance, giving the PRI a lock on local political power (Rus 1994). In the neoliberal era, what might be thought of as a more pluralistic form of clientelism emerged (Hellman 1994), in which the state needed to offer material resources on a more competitive basis to independent as well as officialist organizations. This was a precarious strategy, as the political loyalties it purchased were only attached to the government insofar as specific programs delivered the goods; a link which could be broken by financial constraints, or by the intrusion of local bosses from the PRI’s “dinosaur” wing (Teichman 1997). The irony of this new space for competing loyalties is suggested by a study from rural Oaxaca (Stephen 1997), where peasant supporters of the PRI also consider themselves pro-Zapatista.

In ideological terms, the PRI would have to do some fancy footwork to sustain its claim to representing the institutionalized continuation of the revolution of Zapata, while embracing market-oriented globalization and the dismantling and privatization of ejido lands. Many communities in Chiapas had a different historical interpretation of contemporary conditions; like the Tojolabal man who despaired of the possibility of getting land and autonomy from powerful landowners, explaining, “Here we are living like mozós [peons] in the time of Porfirio Díaz.”

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If the neoliberal rollback of the state created a new space for contested negotiation of state-society relations, this does not automatically imply democratization. Top-down strategies for restructuring this space have taken the form of “targeted social compensation programs” or “social investment funds” throughout Latin America, designed to selectively compensate for the impact of neoliberal programs on the poorest social sectors through discretionary disbursement of resources. One of the better known of these programs is Mexico’s National Solidarity Program, PRONASOL, administered under the 1988-94 Salinas presidency as a neopopulist political concomitant to neoliberal economic reforms (Dresser 1991).

PRONASOL was intended not only as a noisy cover-up for the overall devastating impact of neoliberal policies on the poor, but also as a participatory program of community development committees that would undercut or coopt other autonomous organizing. PRONASOL funds were showered on Chiapas, particularly after the 1994 rebellion, but they were channeled to public works projects that benefitted caciques and excluded independent organizations, while reinforcing the power of government bureaucrats in the National Indigenous Institute INI (Fox 1994, Harvey 1998:183-6). PRONASOL public works projects required communities to contribute labor or resources in return for services that were basic obligations of the state, thus they actually imposed a burden on poor communities in Chiapas, where the government’s own internal evaluations acknowledged that the program was a disaster (Díaz-Polanco 1997:104-25, 154-9). The top-down structure of the program can be seen in the cookie-cutter mold of INI/PRONASOL “urbanization” imposed on indigenous villages throughout rural Chiapas, in the form of basketball courts, kiosks and meeting halls constructed around a central plaza in a uniform model, considered totally alien and insulting to the communities (Aubry 2000). In Chiapas as elsewhere, PRONASOL and related credit and targeted social compensation programs were distorted by blatantly partisan and electoral considerations (Molinar & Weldon 1994, Collier & Quaratiello 1999:142-5), a trend which only bolstered the credentials of the autonomy movement which the Zapatistas continued to build after 1994.

Community Control vs. the Logic of Global Capital

Another way in which the Zapatista movement can be seen as a form of resistance against the neoliberal model of globalization, is in the struggle for community control of natural resource development. The neoliberal drive for privatization and opening to foreign investment would privilege global market forces over local priorities. Among the potential resources of great market potential in the conflicted region of Las Cañadas in Chiapas are (1) oil reserves perhaps even greater than publicly acknowledged in the Ocosingo field, (2) the tremendous hydroelectric potential of the Usumacinta River system, and (3) biodiversity in the Montes Azules biological reserve and surrounding Lacandón Jungle (Ceceña & Barreda 1998:44-9). In 1999/2000, the Mexican government began planning with a consortium of domestic and international investors and World Bank financing for a major integrated development scheme in the Lacandón region, not surprisingly coordinated with counterinsurgency strategies (Henríquez 1999, Pérez 2000). The road construction and population displacement involved in a project of this scale go hand in hand with the heavy militarization of the region since the 1994 rebellion.

The events surrounding the Chase Manhattan Bank memorandum of 1995 had previously illustrated how the Zapatista movement was seen as problematical for the investment climate
preferred by transnational capital. The leaked memo from one of Mexico’s largest creditor banks to its corporate investors suggested that the government would have to “eliminate the Zapatistas,” and “carefully consider whether or not to allow opposition victories if fairly won at the ballot box” (Roett 1995). This warning, at a time when the Zapatistas had declared 38 municipalities in Chiapas to be autonomous, was immediately followed by the government’s February 1995 military offensive which violated the ceasefire in an unsuccessful attempt to capture the Zapatista leadership. Since then, the government expanded militarization of the state along with its “low intensity warfare” strategy of promoting paramilitary repression, while the Zapatista communities continued efforts to advance autonomy in the midst of this counterinsurgency environment (Stahler-Sholk 1998a, 1998b).

The Zapatista movement is much more than just a battle over oil and forest resources, but the struggle for control over strategies of development does highlight one way in which the Zapatista model of autonomy is in contention with forces of globalization. The proposed World Bank project for the Lacandón laments that “...the youth have in their aspirations the goal of reproducing themselves as peasants, which leads to strong pressure on the land, at the same time accumulating strong social explosiveness” (Henríquez 1999). The neoliberal model would turn those stubborn peasants into interchangeable workers in a global economy, free to be relocated from valuable land and other marketable commodities. Under the logic of time-space compression that defines globalization, the accidents of geography and history are irrelevant to the strictly market-determined use of resources in the most profitable combinations. Thus biodiversity is seen as a natural resource, and the rights to exploit it are considered the property of those who have the necessary concentration of capital. Transnational corporations can appropriate, modify, and patent genetic forms, without regard for the non-marketed custodianship of native peoples of Chiapas or the Amazon or India, nor for the local preferences of European consumers to be free of genetically modified foods. In this sense, the Zapatista insistence on autonomy can be seen as linked to the Seattle protests against the WTO and other acts of resistance against globalization.

**Technocratic “Good Governance” vs. Participatory Decision-Making**

The Zapatista project also represents a challenge to the technocratic model of decision-making that is inherent in neoliberalism. According to the neoliberal orthodoxy, integration into the homogenizing logic of the global market is inevitable and its facilitators are modernizing reformers, dedicated to sweeping away the forces of backwardness and provincialism. In Mexico as elsewhere, market opening without a commensurate political liberalization has drastically increased the discretionary power of technocrats, whose interest in compensating for the harsh social impact of the unrestrained market is limited to a managerial perspective on maintaining order (Otero 1996). Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that the technocrats under President Zedillo became more reliant on the military and, indeed, that the military itself showed increasing signs of impatience with “politics.” The occupation of Chiapas by over one-third of the Mexican army (Stahler-Sholk 1998a) is an example of the official framing of the rebellion as a problem of order rather than an issue of democratization.

An example of the Zapatista challenge to the technocratic “good governance” approach could be seen in the two years of negotiations that finally led to the signing of the San Andrés
accords on indigenous rights and culture in February 1996. Government negotiators were constantly frustrated by the Zapatistas’ need to pause at each stage of the talks while they returned to their remote communities for consultations and consensus-building (Esteva 2000). Once the accords were signed, the government then proceeded to reinterpret their implementation by executive fiat, ignoring even the efforts of the multi-party Congressional Commission for Concord and Pacification (COCOPA) to draft compromise legislation.

The Zapatistas responded by reaching out for wider support in civil society: A national indigenous forum which had endorsed the San Andrés accords in January 1996 was followed by the inauguration of a National Indigenous Congress (CNI) on the symbolic date of 12 October 1996, bringing together 500 delegates from 36 ethnic groups across Mexico (Aubry 2000). Following the government’s rejection of COCOPA’s draft legislation and the breakdown of San Andrés implementation in December 1996, the Zapatistas resumed their political outreach, sending 1,111 delegates to the Mexico City founding of a civic Zapatista Front for National Liberation (FZLN) from 13-15 Sept. 1997. Despite the message of intimidation represented by the December 1997 Acteal massacre by government-supported paramilitaries, the Zapatistas continued the de facto implementation of the San Andrés accords by building autonomous municipalities that rejected aid from the officialist government (Stahler-Sholk 1998b).

Even when the Army launched a series of offensives beginning with the dismantling of the “Flores Magón” (Taniperlas) autonomous municipality in April 1998, the autonomy movement continued at the community level, building on bonds of solidarity and complicity that could not be controlled from above. Once again, the Zapatistas refused to allow the movement to be dismissed as a local problem of administration: They organized meetings with other sectors of civil society and with COCOPA from 20-22 November 1998; followed by a “National Consultation” on 21 March 1999 in which 5,000 Zapatistas fanned out to over half the municipalities in the country, with over 3 million Mexicans participating in over 15,000 roundtables and discussions (Collier & Quaratiello 1999:173-5, Esteva 2000). This had the effect of modeling participatory democracy and puncturing the military and information siege of Chiapas, but also was tremendously empowering in terms of leadership training for the delegates themselves, many of whom had never left the environs of their local communities before.

Meanwhile, President Zedillo continued on a course of replacing a series of resigning state governors in Chiapas with new appointees, and relying on steadily increasing militarization; while making a record number of visits to the state, inaugurating new aid projects, and introducing unilaterally drafted “indigenous rights” and remunicipalization legislation, totally ignoring the process of mobilization and consultation that had led to the San Andrés accords.

**Globalization and Civil Society**

Another way in which the Zapatista movement might be seen as a response to globalization is in its attempt to forge connections with the wider civil society. The growing global integration of capital, based on its increasing mobility and flexibility to operate above the restrictive context of the nation-state, creates the need for new forms of countervailing organization of society. The Zapatistas have resolutely refused to be reduced to an armed guerrilla movement fighting for state power. Instead, they have insisted that they are part of an inclusionary vision of civil society, seen not just as a collection of organizations that are
independent of, or antagonistic to the state; but a movement to recover community and autonomy in the face of larger structures of globalization. Rather than seeking state power, they seek to rediscover the power in society (Esteva 2000). From the November 1994 convocation of a National Democratic Convention (CND) at the symbolically named Aguascalientes site (Stephen 1995), to the January 1996 Fourth Declaration of the Lacandón Jungle calling for a broad civic front (FZLN) and the July 1996 International Encounter for Humanity and Against Neoliberalism, the Zapatistas presented their movement as a wake-up call to civil society.

As Zapatista spokesperson Subcommander Marcos explained,

That is something not understood by those who view the National Democratic Convention with bitterness. They see it is a failure. Why a failure? . . . The truth is from there we can already start to speak of a civil zapatismo and an armed zapatismo. Even the EZLN starts to modify its discourses and its initiatives to be more participatory in that dynamic. That’s where the San Andrés dialogue starts to develop. The guerrillas insist that it be a bigger table where others sit, not just the government and guerrillas. That’s where the Consultation starts to take shape, the Fourth Declaration, then the encounters, later the forums. . . . Arms still have their function, in this case the most evident is that the government only dialogues with an armed force . . . with the social citizenry forces it does not dialogue except when presented with an armed event . . . (quoted in LeBot 1997:256-64)

Elaborating on the concept of civil society, Marcos extended the invitation to the international plane, and welcomed the networking:

It took awhile for zapatismo to become known abroad, digested, assimilated. . . . They come here and have their own idea of what zapatismo is, their own wish for what zapatismo should be, in reality their own project. But it is a phenomenon that exists, that is real, that keeps branching off beyond the indigenous question and points more toward finding a series of universal values that will be useful for the Japanese, the Australian, the Greek, the Kurd, the Catalan, the Chicano, the Chilean Mapuche and the indigenous of Ecuador, for example . . . [but] It cannot pretend to constitute itself into a universal doctrine, to lead the new international or anything like that. (in LeBot 1997:260)

At the International Encounter attended by some 3,000 people from around the world, this global approach to civil society organizing was also made explicit:

Of the many expressions of resistance and opposition to neoliberalism and globalization expressed in the world, two can be emphasized: On the one hand, the emergence of civil society as the opponent that is most experienced, diverse, inclusive and radical in the face of ‘savage capitalism’; on the other hand, the situation of oppression that exists in all countries has highlighted common interests and needs throughout the planet . . .
The universal need for a more just and inclusive world, in opposition to the commodified and exclusionary world of neoliberalism, is the great event of our century; it opens the possibility of joining together local, national, sectoral and class struggles, in one single struggle for the formation of a Planetary Community, the self-realization of civil society and the construction of a world ‘where many worlds fit.’ (EZLN 1996:151)

Globalization involves not only the kind of shrinking of space that puts Mexican rainforest resources on the drawing boards of the World Bank and transnational corporate consortia, or brings European anarchists to the Lacandón Jungle for a conclave against neoliberalism. It also involves awareness of the implications of this compression, and a corresponding struggle to reformulate identities and communities based on subjective interpretation of this changing reality. Much has been made of the Zapatistas’ recourse to the Internet (Cleaver 1998). The significance of this aspect of the movement is not in the technology per se, but in the Zapatistas’ creative use of the porosity of the state to reach out through it and beyond it, choosing their interlocutors in an act of self-affirmation and self-determination.

In Mexico as elsewhere, globalization has multiplied points of contact for local communities and increased their capacity to autonomously define their forms of global insertion. By undermining the prevailing ideological construction of nationalism—for example, by wresting Zapata away from the PRI and reinventing his historical struggle as part of a more inclusive nationalism—it poses a fundamental threat to state hegemony (Long 1999). That more inclusive nationalism has resonated with “deep Mexico” (Esteva 2000), and indeed with the experience and imagination of oppressed people around the world (Rabasa 1997), in ways that cannot be easily contained within the established structures of the nation-state. Ironically, the same state that surrendered so much national sovereignty through neoliberal policies found itself invoking narrow nationalism, in expelling hundreds of foreign human rights observers and aid workers from Chiapas beginning in the late 1990s.4

The concept of an emerging “global civil society” is a problematical one, not least because there is no corresponding global state. The related notion of “transnational advocacy networks” (Keck & Sikkink 1998) suggests a way in which oppositional movements can do end-runs around repressive states by plugging into structures above the level of the nation-state. This kind of networking has provided some protection through the globalization of human rights norms and “accompaniment” in various parts of the world (Mahony & Eguren 1997). Globalization may create some new space for this kind of reorganizing of civil society, as Marcos recognized in the case of Chiapas:

... Contact with this international zapatismo means, for the communities, the possibility of resisting and having a more effective shield than the EZLN, than civil organization, than national zapatismo. And that has to do with the very logic of neoliberalism in Mexico, which stakes a lot on its international image. (in LeBot 1997:260)

A similar aspect of globalization can be seen through inter-governmental organizations,
specifically in the case of the International Labor Organization (ILO). The forces of globalization induced the Mexican government in 1989 to ratify Convention 169 of the ILO, which recognizes the rights of indigenous peoples as collective owners of resources in their territorial “habitat” (Aubry 2000). This in turn gave leverage to the Zapatistas and to the national civil society networks they helped inspire, such as the National Indigenous Congress (CNI), to claim collective rights for indigenous peoples within the nation-state.

The “transnational advocacy network” approach is limited in that it conceives of those networks essentially as backboards for bouncing off shots that will hit the state from another direction. It focuses on the resources and political opportunities for domestic mobilization, rather than the interactive causes. It still treats the state as autonomous, rather than analyzing the class content of the opposing state and transnational “networks.” A more nuanced approach to civil society organizing in response to globalization would locate both state and oppositional networks in their historical contexts, and also consider the “meso-level” networking that allows local communities (e.g. Zapatistas) to connect with each other across state-structured divides (Yashar 1998a, 1998b). The real novelty of the Zapatista movement is not just that it connects the very local to the global, but rather in its insistence on the autonomous right of local communities to choose and define the manner of their connection to larger structures.

**AUTONOMY AND CITIZENSHIP**

The Zapatista autonomy project in some ways appears paradoxical. It is a movement in resistance to globalization, yet it establishes links to global networks to challenge the hegemonic power of the state. It is a movement rooted in local indigenous communities of Chiapas, yet it embraces national symbols and makes citizenship claims within the framework of the Mexican nation-state.

**Redefining State-Society Relations**

One source of confusion is that indigenous communities in Chiapas, as in other parts of Latin America, had historically had a kind of local “autonomy” in the sense that states dealt with them as corporate units, generally through coopted traditional leaders who brokered the delivery of benefits outside the framework of liberal democracy (Yashar 1996, 1998b). The neoliberal contraction of the state undermined that de facto local autonomy, with its associated corporatist channels of access to state resources. Particularly in the wake of the reform of Article 27 of the Mexican constitution that ended the protected status of ejido communities, there was a sense that the existing compact between the state and society had been abrogated. That left open the possibility of a resurgent demand for justice, based on the local, historically-rooted understanding of rights as essentially collective (i.e., as peasants and indigenous communities). Such resurgent demands from below were a challenge to the existing definition of the nation-state throughout Latin America (Stavenhagen 1992), just as the forces of globalization pressed for a redefinition of the role of the state in mediating the global organization of capital.

With the dismantling of the prevailing corporatist mode of citizenship in Mexico, the Zapatista movement formed part of the struggle to renegotiate the terms on which groups in
society would relate to the state. Rejecting the state’s reformulated clientelist attempts to grant resources as a favor, the movement struggled for the democratic construction of citizenship (Fox 1997) which had never effectively been extended. Adapting the promise of the liberal construct of citizenship, it was a struggle for “the right to have rights” (Harvey 1998:11-12, 26-7); in the same sense that African-Americans after the U.S. Civil War, and Third World national liberations movements after WWII, sought to expand the applicability of existing concepts of political rights.

Alternative Visions of Autonomy

In the case of Chiapas, the Zapatista movement promoted the concept of autonomy not in terms of narrow indigenous separatism or secession, nor as a petition for permission to devolve governmental functions, but rather as a demand for recognition of ongoing practices. Since the state was widely perceived to have abrogated its compact with social collectivities through the reform of Article 27--eroding the rights of ejido peasant communities, which represented 54% of the land in Chiapas (Yashar 1998b:54)--and other neoliberal policies, this demand for renegotiation of the social pact had broad resonance beyond Chiapas. Autonomy, as negotiated in the 1996 San Andrés accords on indigenous rights and culture, was supported by the new National Indigenous Congress. It was also backed up by ILO Convention 169, which recognized the collective rights of indigenous peoples to control resources in their communities (Aubry 2000). Mexico’s ratification of this convention was followed by the 1992 revision of Article 4 of the Constitution, recognizing Indians for the first time as existing with a distinct identity within a multiethnic state (Collier & Quaratiello 1999:173).

This vision of autonomy incorporates part of the liberal democratic ideal of rights on the basis of citizenship, but it rejects the homogenizing implications of the market-oriented model of globalization. In its place, the Zapatista demand for a “world in which many worlds fit” would allow for a diversity of forms in which people may define their relations with the state. By demanding both political and collective rights, in the form of “ethnic citizenship” for indigenous communities (Mattiace 1998, Aubry 2000), the Zapatistas were really inviting others to cast their local struggles in terms of the political construction of democratic citizenship (Harvey 1997). This meant not only decentralization of administrative functions of the state, but the bottom-up definition of autonomy, involving the freedom to choose political and jurisdictional space and relations with other units (Esteva 2000). It was precisely because of the radically democratic implications of this model that the Zedillo administration insisted on torpedoing the COCOPA congressional commission’s efforts to legislate implementation of the San Andrés accords; and then disingenuously offered administrative decentralization as an alternative, in the form of “indigenous rights” and “remunicipalization” laws written by the Executive.

As Yashar (1998a) has noted, this kind of “ethnic citizenship” demanded by indigenous communities in Mexico and elsewhere in Latin America challenges liberal ideology’s assumptions of unit homogeneity (individuals as the constitutive political unit), administrative homogeneity (uniformly defined boundaries and relations with the central state), and identity homogeneity (with the corollary assumption of correspondence between nation and state). However, this kind of new federalism, rooted in collective and historic rights to protection from central power, could be confused in the neoliberal context for the central government’s abandoning of its obligations by sloughing off the costs of social services and public works to peripheral units (Aubry 2000).
This danger led to some ambiguity in the Zapatista call for autonomy. One historic current within the autonomy movement in Chiapas was the “Pluriethnic Autonomous Regions” (RAP) project, promoted by some indigenous leaders such as Margarito Ruiz of the Independent Front of Indigenous Peoples (FIFI) and some academics (Mattiace 1997, Díaz-Polanco 1997). This approach calls for a regional, fourth level of government (besides national, state, and municipal) which would give juridical representation to indigenous regions. An alternative, communalist approach emphasizes local practices of direct democracy and self-government at the community level. Critics of the RAP model were wary of the possibility of caciquismo and cooptation, and noted that it accepted the basic design of the existing state which was less than democratic (Esteva 2000). Skeptics of the communalist model noted the vulnerability of local communities to isolation and government attack, arguing that sustaining empowerment would require a broader mechanism of engagement with the national state (Mattiace 1998).

The Zapatistas avoided exclusively embracing either model of the autonomous unit, in effect supporting a kind of “autonomy of autonomies.” As a result, both the RAP and the CNI (which leaned toward the communalist model) supported the San Andrés accords and roundly rejected the Indigenous Reform Initiative presented by President Zedillo to the Senate on 15 March 1998. The tradeoff of inclusiveness for coherence of political strategy was perhaps a central dilemma of the Zapatista response to globalization. While arguably a necessary challenge of democratization-from-society within the framework of an authoritarian regime, this remained both a source of weakness and a source of strength of the Zapatista movement going into the 21st century.

**Concluding Reflections on Globalization and Autonomy**

Challenges to globalization may increasingly take the form of seemingly local or sectoral rebellions against the loss of decision-making power to far-off, hidden market forces. The Zapatista movement has rooted itself in local conditions in indigenous communities in Chiapas, while at the same time explicitly recognizing that the demand for autonomy poses the challenge of democratizing Mexico and renegotiating the terms of globalization.

For such an ambitious program, the political strategy of accomplishing it is unclear. Direct democracy might work in indigenous communities in Chiapas, but it may not point to a viable national model. By focusing on mobilizing civil society rather than assaulting state power, the Zapatistas have avoided some of the shortcomings of vanguard parties and made their wake-up call resonate beyond borders. Yet they could find themselves in a position like that of Zapata and Villa, who won the revolution and entered Mexico City without a plan for the state, returning home to be true to their social bases and inadvertently allowing others to take over from above.

In the meantime, the challenge is how to sustain and give coherence to the diverse forms of mobilization of civil society that have been inspired to counterpose autonomy to globalization. The year-long 1999-2000 struggle of students at the UNAM, the largest university in Latin America, is an important example of this kind of mobilization (Hernández Navarro 2000). Triggered by seemingly mundane issues such as tuition and exams, the movement has framed the issues in terms of a struggle against the neoliberal project of privatization, rollback of historically won collective rights (Constitutionally guaranteed free public education), and the imposition of market-determined priorities (couched as technical “efficiency” and “rationality”) over values that...
emerge through participatory self-government. Universities in Latin America have historically been sanctuaries of autonomy, a tradition based on the eminently reasonable premise that the universe of ideas can only be freely explored without the intrusion of the state and the prevailing power configuration it reflects. Mutual expressions of solidarity between this and other movements and the Zapatistas are extensions of the concept of autonomy, not as local isolation and withdrawal, but as an affirmation of the right to choose relations with others. Networks like the FZLN will be key to the success of this kind of challenge to globalization, which is based on a novel set of principles:

The Zapatista Front of National Liberation, with the inclusive character it holds high, because it knows that its objective cannot be the work of a single force, but a collective labor, recognizes that it is necessary to promote and take part in a broad national movement where other independent opposition political forces will flow together and whose task is the transformation of Mexico into a country with democracy, liberty, and justice for all....

The Zapatista Front of National Liberation knows that its struggle is part of a new international movement that opposes neo-liberalism, and in this great battle it proposes to contribute, working from its country, to the victory of all the peoples of the planet in favor of humanity and against neo-liberalism, the construction of a world with room for many worlds. (in Womack, ed., 1999:335-6)

2. In one highland community I visited in summer 1999 after military/police operations (often in tandem with paramilitaries) had dismantled a number of autonomous municipalities, I observed a rebuilt autonomous structure of government that was essentially functioning underground despite the heavy militarization of the region. The location of the autonomous municipal seat had been quietly relocated, while meetings and communications and election of authorities all continued among those who knew each other as supporters of the autonomy project.

3. In January 1999, I interviewed leaders and delegates who were preparing to participate in the national Consulta in a Tzeltal community in the municipality of Ocosingo, Lacandón region, and in May-June 1999 I met with delegates after they had participated in the Consulta from a Tzotzil community in the highlands. They reported that the preparation and the trip had given them a new sense of self-confidence and perspective, and they were quite struck by how far away the Zapatista movement was known and discussed.


5. In May 1999, I interviewed a Zapatista supporter who had been a peasant organizer since the early 1980s in a Lacandón area that was immersed in the RAP model of regionally-based pluriethnic autonomy, then had migrated to the highlands where he became active in a communally-oriented autonomy project in a Tzotzil community. Summarizing his perspective on local traditionally-based government (usos y costumbres) and autonomy, he observed, “Not all traditions are good. But the important thing is, we want to choose what we want to accept from outside, and how we want to live.”
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