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Working Paper

The speed of the snail: The Zapatistas' autonomy de facto and the Mexican state

Bath Papers in International Development and Wellbeing, No. 20

Provided in Cooperation with:

Centre for Development Studies (CDS), University of Bath

Suggested Citation: Dinerstein, Ana C. (2013) : The speed of the snail: The Zapatistas' autonomy de facto and the Mexican state, Bath Papers in International Development and Wellbeing, No. 20, University of Bath, Centre for Development Studies (CDS), Bath

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bath papers in international development
and well-being
ISSN 2040-3151

**The speed of the Snail:
The Zapatistas' autonomy *de facto*
and the Mexican state**

Ana C. Dinerstein

Working Paper no. 20
February 2013



Bath Papers in International Development and Wellbeing
A working paper series of the
Centre for Development Studies, University of Bath
<http://www.bath.ac.uk/cds/>

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Published by:
The Centre for Development Studies
University of Bath
Claverton Down
Bath, BA2 7AY, UK
<http://www.bath.ac.uk/cds/>

ISSN 2040-3151

Series Editor:
Susan Johnson

THE SPEED OF THE SNAIL: THE ZAPATISTAS' AUTONOMY *DE FACTO* AND THE MEXICAN STATE

Ana Cecilia Dinerstein, University of Bath

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Ana Cecilia Dinerstein

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Ana Cecilia Dinerstein

Abstract

The recent re-emergence of autonomy as a central demand in many social movements across the world (which involve claims for self-determination, organisational self-management and independence vis-à-vis the state and capital) has opened a theoretical space to re-think its meanings in novel ways. Particularly interesting are in this regard autonomous practices, which have been presented by movements as offering an alternative to social relations of capitalism. In this paper I offer an illustrative case study of new political and juridical bodies (the 'Snails' and Good Government Council) operated by the Zapatista movement in the Chiapas region, Mexico. I use this case to illustrate the Zapatista's struggle for autonomy with, against and beyond the Mexican State, and the role of the law and policy making in disciplining the rebel communities of Chiapas. By exploring the Zapatistas' critique of civil society and development, I engage with Bloch's 'principle of hope' in order to theorise autonomy as a form of 'organising hope'. I suggest that autonomy delineates spaces where a utopian impulse is articulated, made concrete, realised, experienced, and also disappointed. The data presented comes from the author's research project on social movements and collective autonomy in Latin America (RES-155-25-0007) funded by the 'Non-Governmental Public Action' programme of the Economic and Social Research Council, United Kingdom.

Key words: Autonomy; Bloch; civil society; development; hope; Zapatistas; Mexico

1 Introduction: On collective autonomy and hope

In our dreams, we have seen another world, an honest world, a world decidedly more fair [sic] than the one in which we now live ... this world was not something that came to us from our ancestors. It came from ahead, from the next step we were going to take (Subcomandante Marcos, 1/3/94 in Ponce de Leon, 2001: 18).

This paper explores the Zapatista movement's struggle for autonomy and their experience of self-government in the Chiapas region, Mexico. The practice of autonomy (i.e. self-determination, self-government, independence from unions and political parties) has come a long way in Latin America (predominantly among indigenous communities), but has recently been invigorated by social movements as the means for social transformation. Countless mobilisations and autonomous undertakings by those so-called 'socially excluded' groups have emerged and developed concurrently with a great sense of resistance to power, by those living in conditions of unemployment, poverty and repression. New movements led by rural workers, peasants, indigenous groups and the unemployed have recovered radical politics through the symbolic reaffirmation of collective values, such as dignity, democracy and social justice against dystopian neoliberal globalisation, state power and the power of transnational corporations. Quite opposed to the suggestion of Latin America being depoliticised and governed by technocratic democracies (Silva, 1999), these movements reintroduced *hope* in democratic politics (Dinerstein and Deneulin, 2012). If there is anything for what neoliberalism will be remembered for is its capacity to discursively reduce almost everything to the realm of 'possibility'. Inversely, if there is anything vital to many of the social movements that emerged out of neoliberal globalisation, it is the attempt to create collectively another reality in the belief that the world is essentially 'unfinished', and that without the possibility of an alternative, any reality is incomplete.

I explore how autonomous practices create symbolic and/or territorial spaces for what I call the *organisation of hope*. I suggest that autonomy creates a *territory of hope* where the utopian impulse is articulated, made concrete, put/move forward, realised, experienced, and, as I will argue below, also disappointed. The term *hope* is frequently used to describe 'romantic', 'utopian' and somehow 'unrealistic' projects. In the Zapatistas case, it has been used to describe their wish to change the world. By engaging with Bloch's (1959/1995) *principle of hope*, I deal with hope as the *real* and material process of anticipating the future, which, in the Zapatista case, means the pursuit of human dignity through the practice of collective autonomy. I treat hope as a political category, which must not be (mis)understood as a mere 'wish' or a 'remote utopia,' but as what Bloch (1959/1995) calls the 'not-yet-become' that lives within reality. As a 'lived utopia' (Mattiace, 2003: 187), autonomy, I suggest, is a form of mediating the *Novum*. i.e. as a new reality that is not yet fully assembled, that has not yet become.

Secondly, by focusing on the relationship between the Zapatistas and the state, I point to the 'irresolvable' tension that underpins autonomous practices, and that is the tension between autonomy as a tool for resistance (as above) and autonomy as a tool for integration by the state (Bohm, Dinerstein and Spicer, 2010) via policy and World Bank programmes, which encourage

‘participation from below’ (Evans, 2008), but, in fact, they are effective governmental tools directed to ‘discipline the poor’ (Cornwall and Brock, 2005: 7).

Finally, I translate the tension between rebellion and integration into the language of hope that is as the fluctuating movement between ‘real possibility’ and ‘disappointment’. On the one hand, the realisation of hope that inhabits the autonomous project is ‘really possible’. As Bloch (1959/1995) explains, this means that autonomy is not ‘scientifically to be expected’; while its conditions exist, they are not yet fully assembled. On the other hand, hope is “perpetually exposed to the radical danger of disappointment” (Richter, 2006: 51). What it really means is how autonomy opens a space for the anticipation of the future and the changes that are produced in such pursuit of human realisation.

In what follows below, I briefly introduce the Zapatista movement and explore the process leading to the formation of their new governing bodies. After briefly explaining their main features, I then address the contentious politics between the Zapatistas and the Mexican state; in particular, the Zapatistas’ practice of autonomy *de facto*, and how it influenced the government’s strategic shift from direct repression to the implementation of new state counter insurgent policy making, which aimed at incorporating the Zapatistas’ autonomy into new forms of governance in Chiapas. In the end, I decipher the tension underpinning the Zapatistas’ autonomous organising as the tension between ‘real possibility’ and ‘disappointment’ that underpins the process of organisation of hope, followed by a brief discussion of the implications of both the Zapatistas’ project and an understanding of autonomy as a form of *organising hope*.¹

2 The Zapatistas’ revolution

On 1st January 1994, the world woke up to the news that the insurrectionary group of indigenous Mexicans – the Zapatista National Liberation Army (*Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional*, EZLN) – occupied several counties of the Chiapas region of Mexico with the crying slogan of ‘enough is enough’ (*Ya basta!*). The Chiapas region (with almost four million inhabitants) is both an economic strategic area with abundant natural resources (biodiversity, oil, water, and hydroelectric energy) and one of the poorest states in Mexico (see Ceceña and Barreda, 1998; Pickard, 2004). The incorporation of Mexico to the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) obliged the Mexican state to undertake a constitutional amendment – under the presidency of Salinas de Gortari, which opened up indigenous lands (*ejidos*) for large agribusinesses. On the very first day of signing the NAFTA in January 1994, the Chiapas’ peasants took to the uprising, under the leadership of the EZLN, exclaiming *Ya basta!* (Enough is enough!). They declared war on the Mexican government, called the neoliberal globalisation ‘a war against humanity’ (Subcomandante Marcos, 1997), i.e. ‘a war to conquest the entire world, a world war’ (Subcomandante Marcos and the Zapatistas, 2006: 99) and, with their faces covered by ski masks ‘to make themselves visible’, they surprised the world but expressing no intention to seize power.

The EZLN was formed as a conventional guerrilla *foco* in 1983 by a small number of activists influenced by the Maoist and Guevarist ideologies, liberation theology and indigenous

¹ This argument is fully developed in my forthcoming book: *Social movements and the dilemmas of autonomy in Latin America: The art of organising hope*, Palgrave Macmillan 2014

communal tradition. During the years of preparation in the jungle, the incipient movement evolved into an insurgent movement of a new type, which contested revolutionary traditions concerned with class, exploitation and power with a new discourse centred on human *dignity* as the fundamental value and goal of their revolution. Adler Hellman (2000: 165) suggests, “unlike the classic guerrilla *foco* that hopes to attract a following after revolutionary activity has been launched, the Zapatistas were firmly supported by thousands of adherents in villages throughout their zones of operation”.

The overall meaning that the Zapatistas gave to their action, directed to ‘change the world’ through ‘simple demands’ of justice, dignity and democracy (Ponce de León, 2001), is quite different from those revolutionary proposals of the traditional left. The Zapatistas’ uniqueness is that they ‘want to change the world without taking power’ (Holloway, 2002b). The attainment of self-determination, solidarity and self-realisation are incompatible with the logic of state power and money. The Zapatistas are also famous for their electronic methods of communications (Cleaver, 1998), their capacity to convey an emotional intelligent discourse simultaneously based on respect for diversity and resistance against power, and their ‘intergalactic’ encounters for humanity against globalisation organised in Chiapas (1996) and Madrid (1997), have contributed to transforming the Zapatistas into an emblem of resistance for those seeking dignity and democracy against neoliberal globalisation worldwide.

In what follows below, I look at the Zapatistas’ relationship in and against the Mexican state during the period of negotiation, 1995–1996, and the political dynamics around the San Andres Accords, which led to the Zapatistas’ disappointment and a further reformulation of their organisational autonomous strategy.

2.1 Free municipality versus autonomous community: The San Andres Accord and the Zapatistas’ disappointment

Until 2003, the Clandestine Indigenous Revolutionary Committee (*Comité Clandestino Indígena Revolucionario*, CCIR) operated in five regions of Chiapas, called *Aguascalientes*. In 1995, after the cease-fire, negotiations between Zapatistas and the Mexican Government mediated by the Commission for Agreement and Pacification (*Comisión para la Concordia y la Pacificación*, COCOPA) began. In 1996, the San Andres Accords were signed between the Zapatistas and the Mexican government, wherein the latter promised to produce a constitutional reform that would lead to the recognition of the indigenous people’s right to autonomy and the guarantee of self-government and collective production. The COCOPA provided protection to the rebels, ensured a peaceful process of negotiation and opened a path for the potential creation of a *plurinacional* state (González Casanova, 2001).

But the San Andres Accords were *not* put into practice under the presidential rule of Ernesto Zedillo, who opted for a repressive policy instead. The massacre of Acteal occurred on the 22nd of December 1997, when forty-five people died (including many children), not only contradicted the government’s willingness to negotiate, demonstrated during the San Andres negotiations, but also marked a breaking point in the use of repression by the state (see Ceceña, 2001; also see Subcomandante Marcos and the Zapatistas, 2006).

The arrival of President Fox to power in December 2000 brought new hope among the Zapatistas as this indicated a political change with the end of seventy-one years of rule of the

Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). The Zapatistas demanded the new government to remove seven military bases in Chiapas, the release of all Zapatistas political prisoners and the implementation of the San Andres Accords (Replogle, 2005).

Since these demands were not fulfilled, the Zapatistas mobilised again in what it came to be known as the 'March for Indigenous Dignity', which began on 24th February 2001 and lasted for thirty-seven days, during which the demonstration passed through twelve Mexican states, gathering people in seventy-seven public acts and ended in Zocalo, the Mexico DF city centre (Ceceña, 2001: 10; Observatorio Social de América Latina, 2001).

The constitutional reform of 2001 was finally put into practice by the Mexican government but it soon became apparent that what was being legally validated was *not* what the Zapatistas had signed for and expected, i.e. the respect for autonomous communities. While the law accredited the right to self-government to indigenous communities, it also stated that this should be organised and administered as "free municipality" (Burguete Cal y Mayor 2003; 2004). The law also specified what kind of indigenous authorities were legally recognised by law and how they should be elected, i.e., by free and secret ballot. In short, the legislation proposed a form of local democracy (Burguete Cal y Mayor, 2004) that encouraged 'decentralisation', 'empowerment' and 'participation from below' as in the World Bank Development programmes. For governmental projects of decentralised governance, local 'autonomy' becomes "the organisational means by which governments channel resources down to local level and citizens channel demands up" (Lazar, 2006: 187). In Subcomandante Marcos' words: "The communities will not be capable of deciding within their own territories, nor will be able to design their own plans that have to do with ethno-development in which communities get to decide" (Subcomandante Marcos, 2003 cited by Otero, 2004: 229). Deeply disappointed, the Zapatistas embraced their dream of autonomy and rejected the constitutional reform of 2001 and after some reflection and the use of 'silence as a strategy' (see Muñoz Ramirez, 2008: 292), the EZLN began, in 2003, a process of demilitarisation of the movement towards the strengthening of its civil component, i.e., the autonomous communities.

2.2 Hope beyond the state: The Snails and the Good Government Juntas

The Zapatistas' disillusionment initiated a process of reflection and discussion about the development of autonomy among the communities, which culminated in the creation of their autonomous self-government political bodies. In August 2003, the EZLN announced publicly the death of the *Aguascalientes* and the creation of the Snails (*Caracoles*) and Good Government Juntas (GGJ). The Zapatistas Rebel Autonomous Counties (*Municipalidades Autónomas Rebeldes Zapatistas*, MAREZ) that constitute the Zapatista realm were reorganised in five bodies called Snails, each of which has a GGJ. By 2007, these self-organised and self-governed political spaces covered almost forty per cent of the Chiapas state, i.e., 30,000 km², involving 1.100 communities of 300/400 inhabitants each (Ouviña, 2007). The Snails are territorial spaces for the operation of the GGJ, the Vigilant Commission of the GGJ, the school, the hospital and the administration of the Zapatistas cooperatives. The Snails are the visible face of the movement and the expression of communitarian organisation: "The *Caracoles* are the doors of entry into and exist from communities; as windows so we can see into ourselves and so that we may see the outside; as horns that will broadcast our word far and wide and will allow us to hear another words from afar" (EZLN cited in SIPAZ Report VIII April 2003: 1).

The implementation of the principle of 'command while obeying' requires a process of consultation that constantly moves forward and backwards. The Snail and its spiral shell represent this. The Zapatistas revolution "spirals outward and backward, away from some of the colossal mistakes of capitalism's savage alienation, industrialism's regimentation, and toward old ways and small things; it also spirals inward via new words and new thoughts...they travel both ways on their spiral" (Solnit, 2008).

In the Zapatistas *Caracoles*, decision-making occurs at three distinguishable levels. At the local level, each of the many communities of every town elects its own authorities, i.e., the communal agent (*Agente Communal*) as well as representatives to the Autonomous Juntas (*Consejos Autónomos*), the decision-making body. All posts are voluntary. At the municipal level, delegates of each village meet in assemblies, which can last for 3 days, to reach consensus about decision involving design and execution of community projects. Representatives to the Good Government Juntas and the permanent representatives to the five Snails are elected. Finally, the state (*estadual*) level comprises five Snails: Oventic, Roberto Barrios, Morelia, La Realidad and La Garrucha. The Snails are also cultural spaces, gathering schools, assembly rooms, sport and rest zones, health centres, and cooperatives.

The GGJs work within the Snails. Two representatives per autonomous councils participate in the regional GGJ. Each GGJ administrates justice, mediates conflicts between autonomous councils and government councils, issues identity cards, discusses goals related to welfare provision, promotion and supervision of community projects and programmes in the health, education, work, agrarian areas; denounces violations of human rights, guarantees bi-cultural education. For example, the GGJ of the Oventic Snail has twenty-three members who hold monthly and *ad hoc* meetings. Within the GGJ, there are no division of powers and all representatives remain in their posts for a brief period of time to avoid bureaucratisation and the formation of technocrats and to practice horizontal democracy (Almeyra and Thibaut, 2006). Cortez Ruiz (2004: 79) highlights that 'the Assembly is the space of common identity' and decision making about daily issues. The GGJ suggests a course of action, which is discussed by the communities. It is also the voice of the Snail before the national and international civil society and deals with hosts, visitors, administrates resources and reception of issues from the autonomous councils as well.

Important is to mention that since the formation of the GGJ, the EZLN has retreated from its hitherto prominent political role in the construction of the Zapatista autonomy. According to Subcomandante Marcos and the Zapatistas (2006: 79);

"we also saw that the EZLN, with its political-military component, was involving itself in decisions, which belonged to the democratic authorities, 'civilians' as they say. The problem here is that the political-military component of the EZLN is not democratic, because it is an army. And we saw that the military being above, and the democratic authority below was not good..."

Since the creation of the Snails and the GGJ;

"the EZLN leadership has no longer involved itself in giving orders in the villages' civil matters, but it accompanies and helped the authorities democratically elected by the people. It has also kept watch that the people, and national and international

civil society, are kept well-informed concerning the aid that is received and how it is used. Now we are passing the work of safeguarding good government to the Zapatista support bases, with temporary rotating positions, so everyone learns and carries out this work. We believe that people that doesn't watch over its leaders is condemned to be enslaved ... [the EZLN] also handed over to the Good Government Juntas and the autonomous municipalities the aid and contacts which we had attained throughout Mexico and the world during these years of war and resistance" (Ibid: 83).

I now turn to the contentious politics and the tension between rebellion and integration that underpin the Zapatistas' practice of autonomy.

3 Steering the tension between rebellion and integration: Autonomy *de facto* and counter hegemonic 'policy'

In Chiapas, the Zapatistas practice autonomy *de facto*. Autonomy *de facto* means the creation of 'new jurisdictions and parallel governments in rebellion' (see Burguete Cal y Mayor, 2003: 1991; also see Mattiace, 2003; Mora, 2007). Thus, they rejected any kind of autonomy that could be integrated into institutional designs, and which embraces empowerment and participation. They vindicate instead an autonomy based on 'habits and customs' as a form of *resistance* (Aubry, 2003: 220). Burguete Cal y Mayor (2003: 206) mentions 8 non-linear phases that followed the declaration of autonomy: geographical and jurisdictional demarcation, creation of a normative framework, mobilisation and rebellious acts to reject state power, the physical and institutional organisation of the autonomous self-governmental bodies and a politics of alliances.

The self-government bodies replace or displace the state in addressing significant public concerns (e.g. justice, environmental protection, health, education, land distribution, work cooperatives). The GGJ administer justice to the communities. Justice is understood as the respect for the decision made by all those who belong to the community. Education is also central to the Zapatistas' autonomous enterprise. Nearly forty per cent (38.8%) of the indigenous population has no access to education. The formation of cadres (promoters) and the creation of secondary and primary autonomous rebel schools was a response to the neglect by the 'bad government'. In addition to making Castilian (Spanish) and Tzotzil accessible to the indigenous population, particularly women, autonomous rebel education facilitates that young people acquire knowledge and also acknowledge their background, history, and customs. Education serves the purposes of conscientisation of the political goals of Zapatismo. The main problems are: (a) how to fund the system, which is highly dependent on international solidarity (b) the lack of official recognition of Zapatista education and subsequent discrimination.

Each Snail has also an organised health system in coordination with the other four. In Oventic, the *La Guadalupeana* clinic facilitates access to health and preventive medicine. Paradoxically, despite 54 per cent of hydroelectric energy coming from Grijalva River, Chiapas communities have no access to electricity or sewage systems. In 2000, poverty affected 76 per cent of the population (Pickard, 2004). In rural areas, 85 per cent of the EAP lives in extreme poverty and 71 per cent of the population lives in unhealthy and poorly constructed housing. Malnourishment is the third highest in the country, affecting 71.6 per cent of the population. Death from curable

diseases, such as diarrhoea, amount to 34.8 per 1,000 among children. Health promoters work with patients as well as with the communities, improving hygiene and raising awareness about disease prevention. The Zapatistas health system aims to recover and socialise ancient and indigenous medical practices using herbs and massages. There are three main problems on this issue: training (need for volunteers, dependence on charity), financial (medicines, technology) and cultural (difficulties to promote reproductive health, family planning).

Finally, it is worth mentioning the Agrarian Revolutionary Law, which legislated the redistribution of land and the creation of production cooperatives (corn and coffee), aimed at recovering a form of community production that put the collective interest before individual needs. The law limits property of the land to up to 100 hectares of bad land and up to 50 hectares of good land. Since August 2005, the Zapatistas' communities have formed co-operatives for the production, commercialisation and fair trade of their products (e.g. coffee), which are advertised through Internet. The internal market and domestic consumption are priorities and the organisation of these cooperatives implies learning process through which the communities recognise their capacity to produce and sell their products autonomously avoiding intermediaries (*coyotes*). Not only does the community obtain a fair price for their products, but also looks after the environment, contributes to regional development and generates resources to be used in other community projects.

4 Counter-insurgent policy: Democratic planning and development

So far, I have addressed how the Zapatistas' autonomous practices articulate and organise hope, which for the indigenous communities of Chiapas means the possibility of being able to govern themselves. In this section, I explore the various responses from the Chiapas and the national states to the Zapatistas' uprising and their further exercise of radical democracy and autonomy *de facto*.

From the start, these responses aimed at dismantling the movement using inconsistent repression and negotiation techniques (Adler Hellman, 2000) that involved military and paramilitary forces and state policy-making (national, *estadual* and international). Between 1994 and 2000, the army had a strong presence in Chiapas both in the streets and within governmental institutions (Castro and Hidalgo, 1999). Paradoxically, violence perpetuated by the state between 1996 and 1997 increased in Chiapas after the San Andres Peace Accord, supervised by COCOPA, coinciding with the exponential growth of the support for the Zapatistas movement. During 2000–2006, under President Fox rule, there was some retreatment of military bases, camps, control posts, migrations and police controls in Chiapas. As a result of the demilitarisation of the movement and the change of strategy that put democracy and autonomy at the centre of the Zapatistas' political debates, the governmental strategies shifted from disarming the EZLN to disarming the communitarian power of the Zapatistas autonomous communities. This happened particularly after the Zapatistas' Sixth Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle was made public in 2006. In the Sixth Declaration, the Zapatistas assessed the progress of their revolution and discussed how to take it forwards. They to expand it through what they called the 'Other Campaign' (as opposed to the Presidential campaign of 2006. The main goal of the other campaign was 'to link non-partisan anti-capitalist national liberation struggles around

the country' (see Mora, 2007: 64; also Subcomandante Marcos and the Zapatistas, 2006). The 'Other Campaign' became the tool for both the creation of a space among and for those who struggle 'against neoliberalism and for humanity' like the Zapatistas (Subcomandante Marcos and the Zapatistas, 2006: 131), without imposing the Zapatistas' view). On the one hand, the Chiapas state went on to adopt more flexible approach, with a more subtle police and paramilitary control of the communities legitimated as the fight against narco-traffic. Direct military action was replaced by a low intensity war. The government intention was to influence public opinion by mobilising political forces and non-Zapatistas communities (Hidalgo Domínguez, 2006). Paramilitary organisations became NGOs and began to promote the formation of cooperatives and facilitated access to deeds to the indigenous land. Like this they took on board a key issue for the Zapatistas communities, i.e. the 'illegal' issues surrounding the revolutionary agrarian reform and the distribution of land led by the EZLN (see Dinerstein, Ghiotto and Pascual, 2013). For example, in order to dispute the Zapatistas' support, the *Organización Para la Defensa de los Derechos Indígenas y Campesinos* (OPDDIC), former Anti-Zapatista Indigenous Revolutionary Movement, organised productive projects among the Chiapanecos, which were subsidised by political parties, (CIEPAC, August 2008).

Although the low intensity war, repression and military surveillance of the Chiapas region remains in place, a series of (counter-insurgent) policies were launched and implemented between 2006 and 2008. The governmental goals were threefold: to re-organise and channel citizens' demands; to reorganise geographically the population of Chiapas; and to launch public policy directed to introduce and provide services to the Chiapas territory. A brief discussion on each of these is imperative here.

4.1 Organising civil society

The creation of the Chiapas Solidarity Institute (ICS) in 2007 aimed at organising 'civil society' through the state 'democratic planning'. With regional and municipal delegates and a large budget, the ICS members see themselves as 'an army, which supports society' (Interview ICS, August 2008). The explicit idea behind the creation of the ICS is to open institutional channels for participation to solve the crisis of democratic representation in Chiapas. Indigenous communities are being organised in neighbourhood assemblies, which are to deliver and identify needs, demands and priorities, which are then passed on to a series of committees for regional development.

The Zapatistas interpret this 'democratic planning' as an attempt to institutionalise governance in Chiapas. The strategy of re-municipalisation of the Chiapas territory (clearly 'anti-Zapatista) is abandoned on behalf of a new approach based on the recognition of the indigenous as 'citizens' and to help them to articulate their demands democratically. The Institute has a significant role in supporting the neighbourhoods and facilitate participation. The Institute mediates between the Chiapanecos and the state and, thus, competes directly with the Zapatistas self-government

4.2 The geographical reorganisation of the population

In 2007, the programme Sustainable Rural Cities was launched to fight against 'exclusion via dispersion'. In Chiapas, 15,000 out of 24,000 localities have had less than 100 inhabitants distributed in 8,000 households, generally enjoying few or no basic services. The programme

aimed to relocate and reorganise the population in eight new cities to maximise service provision.

To the Zapatistas, the plan matched the World Bank Programme Puebla-Panamá (PPP). According to Alvarez Béjar (2001: 127, author's own translation), as a regional development strategy, "[the] PPP intends to amalgamate a dense tangle of interests related to oil, gas and petrochemical, biodiversity, mines, construction and transport (railways and motorways), airports and telecommunications, which aspire to clean the legal and political obstacles to the exploitation of resources in the Southeast of Mexico up to Panamá interests, some of them involving indigenous lands". In this respect, the programme of Sustainable Rural Cities entailed a geographical reorganisation where the reallocation of the population will strategically vacate land for commercial, tourist and natural resources exploitation by private investors (CIEPAC, August 2008).

4.3 Social policy and development

The Chiapas government increased the portion of the budget dedicated to implement development policy that responds to community needs. There have been efforts to address indigenous poverty in Chiapas. As already mentioned, autonomous practices by non-governmental public actors at local levels have seen an encroachment from official policy as international bodies and national governments aim to integrate resistance, such as the World Bank funded Community Driven Development (CDD) programme, which supports 'participatory decision-making, local capacity building, and community control of resources'.² This official approach facilitates that social movements' 'autonomy' can achieve legal recognition by the state; for example, for the purpose of contributing to local development and/or receiving institutional financial and technical support (see Dinerstein, 2010). Within this framework, the Mexican government carried out the San Andres Accords of 1996 and the constitutional reform of 2001 unilaterally; hence, alternative development strategies seeking to incorporate the Zapatistas autonomy have been incorporated into policy.

The 'domestication of dissident claims' by means of the state's 'co-responsibility' with the affected population (Mora, 2007: 67 and 68) is key to the neoliberal governance. For example, through cash transfer schemes to women, the plan *Oportunidades* (formerly *Progreso*) aims to "transform the poor from passive recipients to active empowered modern subjects with the freedom to make choices about their lives"...and..."[the most important impact of the program] is the change in habits and in the attitude of the participating women" (regional *Oportunidades* delegate cited by Mora, 2007: 68).

5 The Zapatistas' critique – anticipating the future: Democracy and citizenship – or governing ourselves?

It has been highlighted that the Zapatistas practice of radical democracy – i.e. 'democracy in its most essential form' – distances itself from formal or representative democracy in that "it does not allude to a kind of government but to a government end ... with the word democracy people are not alluding to present democracies ... but to people's power" (Esteva 1999: 155). In a

² Source: <http://go.worldbank.org/24K8IHVVS0> last accessed on January 15, 2013

radical democracy, the idea of individuals who delegate power is rejected on behalf of women and men governing themselves. Indigenous movements, in general, have challenged the abstraction underpinning abstract democracy by calling into question homogeneous citizenship and demanding the recognition of 'diverse citizenry', homogeneous modes of representation and also homogeneous forms of political authority (Yashar, 2005: 285-287). The Zapatistas contest notions such as 'active citizenship' and 'participative governance' that underpin social programmes.

The practice of autonomy *de facto* has led to a conflict between legal and legitimate for both the Mexican state and the Zapatistas. To the government, a legitimate form of government needs to be legally recognised. For the Zapatistas, who live outside the liberal law, the constitutional legality is illegitimate. Not without problems, the Zapatistas aim to construct a new legitimacy based on their own understanding of the law, which is *incompatible* with the Mexican state's understanding of legal and legitimate (Aubry 2003; see *Colectivo Situaciones*, 2005). The following dialogue illustrates this point:

"Aren't the autónomos illegal? We asked Rodrigo, out of curiosity. "Pues, sí!" he answered. Yes, they're illegal. But they're legitimate" (Earle and Simonelli, 2000: 160).

6 Civil society: Governance or self-empowerment?

The fundamental difference between the liberal concept of 'autonomous civil society' and the Zapatistas' autonomy is that whereas the former can fit well into institutional designs that celebrate 'empowerment', 'participation from below' and 'autonomy', i.e. 'pseudo autonomy' (Esteva, 2003), the latter does not. The Zapatistas reject state power and, therefore, the *complementarity* between civil society and the state. Civil society would not counterweights [or substitute] the power of the state but makes it superfluous (Esteva, 1999). To those taking up mainstream notions of civil society for a conceptualisation of democracy, civil society has the crucial role of both restricting state power and of legitimising the state through various forms of consent as well as dissent. They tell us about the dangers of too much autonomy of civil society, as an alienated civil society from the state, and this can create a major tension in democratic development, and of the need for limits on autonomy (Diamond, 1994 cited in Dinerstein, 2009).

Those sympathetic to *Zapatismo* consider the autonomy of civil society as an attractive goal, but point at its pitfalls (Stahler-Sholk, 2007) and 'complexities' (Adler Hellman, 2000). For example, how much the Zapatistas' 'administrative decentralisation' would "alter existing political hierarchies or the role of the state as broker for global capital"? (Stahler-Sholk, 2007: 48). If autonomy is conceived as disengagement, there is a danger that autonomous communities are "cut off from resources and unprotected from the forces of the global market". (Ibid: 48). Similarly, in her critical analysis of *Zapatismo*, Adler Hellman (2000) points to the political importance of the Chiapanecan situation and the 'complexities' of the Zapatistas' project, such as the problems of land tenure, the role of religion, the relative support for autonomy, the use of internet, how information is produced and distributed, among many others. As for the civil society, she argues that when Subcomandante Marcos refers to civil society and the struggle for autonomy, he might not be representing the idea of many other political actors who think

differently. Her interviewees argue that despite its international support, many in Chiapas lack enthusiasm for autonomy (Ibid).

Without denying either the existence of serious problems and pitfalls for the collective construction of autonomy by the Zapatista movement, or the importance of maintaining a critical view rather than romanticise the movement, I think that what is missing in these analyses is the Zapatistas' *hope* which is their profound critique of civil society. Such critique *denaturalises and reconceptualises* the taken-for-granted separation between civil society and the state, and attribute it a different meaning than 'decentralisation' or 'participation' (Dinerstein, 2009). Liberal theories of civil society rely on the separation – complementarity between civil society and the state. What 'we' usually understand by 'civil society' is a Eurocentric definition rather than universal, as it is based on the separation of spheres, which leads to a particular form of democratisation and a specific role for 'civil society' actors (Baker, 1998). Such separation is at the centre of modern European social thinking (Lively and Reeve, 1997) and makes civil society such a 'powerful concept' (Colas, 2002: 26).

The Zapatistas' autonomy posits civil society as the *sphere of self-empowerment*: collective action is directed to build counter-power, and, therefore, make the power of the state superfluous (Esteva, 1999). In the Zapatistas' definition of civil society, binary splits dissolve and the 'very essence of society [becomes] political' (Slater, 1994: 29). In short, an autonomous civil society ceases to be the only site where the legitimisation of hegemonic social relations occurs in order to become a political and symbolic space where the contention between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic practices takes place.

7 (Alternative) development or alternatives to development?

Earle and Simonelli (2005, 20) suggest that Zapatismo is an 'experiment in alternative logic' of development. Like many other movements in the global South, they have been experimenting with, and anticipating, alternative forms of social and productive organisation, confronting capitalist production relations and challenging the (alternative) development discourse. The Zapatistas' experiment belongs to the post-development discourse (Esteva, 1985; Escobar, 1992a; 1992b; 2010; Santos and Rodriguez Garavito, 2006), which claims that human flourishing cannot be achieved by improving the 'management' [or alternative managerialism] and 'distribution' of wealth, but rather by articulating alternatives to development (Dinerstein and Deneulin, 2012) that emerged out of the civilisational crisis of modernity (Lander, 2010). To the Zapatistas, development and alternative to development are both part of the 'westernisation of the world' (Latouche, 1993: 161).

The Zapatistas imagine alternatives to development for which the role of social movements seems crucial, particularly in creating 'alternative visions of democracy, economy and society' (Escobar, 1992a: 22). Clearly, the search for autonomy as anti-development is contradictory and is embedded in political, economic and socio-cultural contexts that, somehow, determine such a pursuit (Bohn, Dinerstein and Spicer, 2010). My point is that the search for alternatives to development is a political struggle, which has been frequently (and wrongly) seen as a romantic 'return to the [indigenous] past', it is rather a form of *anticipating the future*: the Zapatistas' critique of development articulates the 'dialectical tendency-latency, open to the *Novum*, of

material process no pre-ordered' (Bloch, 1959/1995: 1373). In short, it embraces 'hope.' Lear (2006: 103, emphasis added) has correctly argued that "what makes *hope* radical", is not the plan to be fulfilled, but the fact that "it is directed towards a future goodness that transcends the current ability to understand what it is. Radical hope anticipates a good for which those who have the hope as yet lack the appropriate concepts with which to understand it".

8 Translating the tension: Autonomy between real possibility and disappointment

Autonomous practices are counter-hegemonic in that they widen the universe of what is politically thinkable, thus, showing that narratives and discourses are politically reversible (Cornwall and Brock, 2005. Autonomy creates the *possibility* (contradictory and contested) of creating a new world. To the Zapatistas: "autonomy is the heart and soul of our resistance. It is a new way of doing politics. It is part of the construction of democracy justice and dignity" (Member of the Zapatista Autonomous Municipality 17 de Noviembre, cited in Mora 2007: 64). The process of building autonomy makes room for the development of what Bloch (1959/1995) calls the *utopian function of hope*. Autonomy facilitates the experience of an anticipatory consciousness in that it relies on the 'not-yet-become', thus it escapes institutionalisation, integration, and regulation.

The Zapatistas "want to change the world but not by taking power, not to conquer the world, but to make it anew" (Holloway, 2002b). Indeed, to change the world would be, according to the Zapatistas, very difficult. The task, they controversially argue, is to create new worlds. Their revolution is expansive and is driven by the dream of attaining self-realisation, to realise the human capacity, to create collectively in solidarity with the purpose of *recovering the future*. The Zapatistas contentious project seems to indicate a move that Laclau and Mouffe (1999: 189) discuss well before the Zapatistas' uprising: the move from a 'strategy of opposition' to a 'strategy of construction of a new order'. Thus, from the viewpoint of a plural and radical democracy, the Zapatistas' revolution constitutes *one of the* "nodal points from which a process of different and positive reconstruction of the social fabric could be instituted" (Laclau and Mouffe (1999: 189).

Here, I pointed at the dilemma of the autonomy: rebellion and integration. The 'local', Dirlik (1996: 32) suggests is the site for both 'promise and predicament'. As the Zapatistas 'walk', their local autonomy opens up, on the one hand, the frontiers for resistance and change towards radical practices, and equal society and self-organisation. On the other hand, there is always a danger of hegemonic regimes to take up the call for autonomy and incorporate it into their own project (Böhm, Dinerstein and Spicer, 2010: 28). Since total subordination to the state or absolute autonomy from the state are both impossible, it is rather the contested relationship between movements and the state which facilitates the production of counter-hegemonic practices. Autonomy is then an '(im)possible project' (Böhm, Dinerstein and Spicer, 2010: 28).

Translated into the dialect of hope, the (im)possibility of autonomy is better informed by the movement between 'real possibility' and 'disappointment'. On the one hand, autonomy is 'really possible' in that it is capable of developing the utopian function of hope within it, capable of *organising hope*. In other words, autonomy, as argued above, is a practice interweaved with the

movement of hope that can superbly facilitate the 'organisation' of the 'not-yet-become'. The distinction between 'really possible' and 'objectively possible' made by Bloch (1959/1995: 196-197) in *The Principle of Hope* is relevant here:

"...we must of course distinguish between the merely cognitively or objectively possible and the real-Possible...Objectively possible is everything whose entry, on the basis of a mere partial-cognition of its existing conditions, is scientifically to be expected, or at least cannot be discounted. Whereas really possible is everything whose conditions in the sphere of the object itself are not yet fully assembled; whether because they are still maturing, or above all because new conditions – though mediated by existing ones – arise for the entry of the real. Mobile, changing, changeable being, presenting itself as dialectical-material, has this unclosed capability of becoming, this Not-yet-Consciousness both in its ground and in its horizon".

To Bloch (1959/1995: 237-238), real possibility...

"...does not reside in any ready-made ontology of the being of That-Which-Is up to now, but in the ontology, which must constantly be grounded anew, of the being of That-Which-Is-Not-Yet, which discovers future even in the past and in the whole of nature. Its new space thus emphasizes itself in the old space in the most momentous manner: real possibility is the categorical In-Front-of-Itself of material movement considered as a process: it is the specific regional character of reality itself, on the Front of its occurrence. How else could we explain the future-laden properties of matter? There is no true realism without the true dimension of this openness".

Autonomous practices defy 'objective reality', and, therefore, challenge the power that constructs hegemonic reality. According to Mouffe (2000: 147), "Social objectivity is constituted through acts of power. This means that any social objectivity is ultimately political. That is 'it has to show the traces of exclusion which governs its constitution".

On the other hand, as Bloch suggests, hope must be disappointable precisely because it "opens in a forward direction, in a future-oriented direction...is committed to change rather than repetition and what is more, it incorporates the element of chance, without which there can be nothing new" (cited by Richter, 2006: 51). Hope, argues Bloch, holds the condition of defeat precariously within itself: it is not confidence. It stands too close to the indeterminacy of the historical process, of the world-process that, indeed, has not yet been defeated, but likewise, has not yet won' ... 'And 'hope does not surrender when setbacks occur" (Bloch 1961 cited by Richter 2006: 51 and 52).

9 Conclusion

My argument has been that autonomy is a *form of organising hope* and that autonomous practices can create symbolic and territorial spaces for such an organisation. These are territories of hope. To Bloch (1959/1995: 197), concrete utopia requires mediation: "Concrete utopia has in process-reality a corresponding element: that of the mediated *Novum*. Only this process-reality, and not a fact-basedness torn out of it which is reified and made absolute, can

therefore pass judgement on utopian dreams or relegate them to mere illusions". Autonomy is one of the possible *organisational mediations of hope*. The process of 'organisation of hope' consists of a series of actions directed to realise the anticipatory consciousness that lives in the not-yet-become. The not-yet-become is indefinable, as it represents the 'lack' or the 'unrealised' (Dinerstein, 2002).

The organisation of hope results from an on-going movement between real possibility and disappointment. The Zapatistas' revolution is inspirational and, as Marcos has suggested, an intuition. Walking in the direction of the *Novum*, the Zapatistas' revolution made evident to articulate collective dreams is 'really possible' but such – anticipatory – dreams can be disappointed at any point. Two examples are the San Andres Accords and the unsuccessful 'Other Campaign'. The organisation of hope by social movements can differ enormously but there are at least two echoes of the Zapatista experience that might be of assistance. The first (practical) is the capacity to navigate the tension between resistance (hope) and integration (disappointment) by acknowledging that such tension works in the realisation of hope, but also that hope must be disappointable. The second echo refers to their talent of 'looking awry' (Žižek, 2000), i.e. to think outside the box and be able to materialise the 'lack' into political action by embracing hope. This exposes our urgent need to both engage with the movement's own theorising (Cox and Nielsen, 2007; Holloway, 2002b) and acknowledge our indecision in embracing hope. To Bloch (1959/1995: 3), and the Zapatistas...

"It is a question of learning hope. Its work does not renounce, it is in love with success rather than failure. Hope, superior than fear, is neither passive like the latter, nor locked into nothingness. The emotion of hope goes out of itself, makes people broad instead of confining them, cannot know nearly enough of what it is that makes them inwardly aimed, of what may be allied to them outwardly. The work of this emotion requires people who throw themselves actively into what is becoming to which they themselves belong".

Acknowledgements

This chapter draws on findings from the research projects entitled, "Social movements and autonomous organizing in Latin America" (comparative project form "The movement of the unemployed in Argentina") funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, Non-Governmental Public Action programme, Centre for Civil Society, London School of Economics, UK (RES-155-25-0007). I would like to thank the ESRC and the NGPA programme for their support and to research team members, Luciana Ghiotto and Rodrigo Pascual, for data collection, their research reports and insightful ideas. All the usual disclaimers apply.

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