

# Decolonising Politics and Constructing Worlds in the Everyday through Zapatista Autonomy

Written by Sebastián Granda Henao

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SEBASTIÁN GRANDA HENAO, APR 24 2022

**This is a pre-print excerpt from *Decolonizing Politics and Theories from the Abya Yala*. You can download the book free of charge from E-International Relations.**

The most known story of the *Zapatista* uprising tells that on 1 January 1994, a group of Indigenous peoples and peasants rose against the Mexican state to oppose the reforms on land and trade. Those legal modifications were mandatory for the inauguration of the North American Free Trade Area (NAFTA). Since then, they have declared to be in rebellion and have resisted the spread of capitalist narratives of progress and development. As such, they have argued that capitalist, neo-liberal globalisation threatens their modes of living, as well as of 'poor and simple people' all around the world at the margins of that system (EZLN 2005). Locally, they struggle for the preservation of their communities and the defence of their rights and dignity as Indigenous peoples and peasants. Despite changes in the discourses and their political ventures along these years, they have consistently tried to build spaces of autonomy, resistance and dignity.

Also, it is well known that since the late 1970s and the early 1980s, a group of urban insurgents from the National Liberation Front (FLN, *Frente de Liberación Nacional*, in Spanish) entered in the Lacandon Jungle, becoming familiar with this inhospitable environment to clandestinely regroup in order to have access both to the Guatemalan border – in case of defensive retreat – and the Yucatan peninsula – to dislocate from there to the northern and western regions of Mexico. As such, the *Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional* (hereinafter EZLN, *Zapatista National Liberation Army*) came out as a proposition by the FLN insurgents to establish guerrilla blocs throughout the country in a revolutionary strategy of taking over the state; however, it seems to have blossomed in Chiapas as it became ever more Indigenous than urban (Gunderson 2013 414; 452).

However, in the Lacandon Jungle there existed a multiplicity of social and political forms of organisation around the everyday issues of the communities. They preceded the formation of the EZLN, the support bases in the communities and the networks of activism and solidarity that compose the *Zapatista* movement we know today. Most of those organisations began with the migration of peoples that looked after a land to call their own – due to the land redistribution and agrarian reforms of the Mexican government since the 1940s – and escape from the bad life and working conditions in the old-time colonial *fincas* [Specific type of estate that used Indigenous Peoples as slaves for agricultural production]. Along with them, Theologians of Liberation, Maoism, ancestral Mayan knowledge and others also expanded the frontiers of the Jungle coming together in a communitarian sentiment that sustained those organisations (Leyva Solano & Ascencio 1996). Hence, *Zapatista* autonomy, emerges not only from the politico-military organisation that became the EZLN, and the *Zapatista* movement that develops around and along it, but also from the communitarian horizon that the communities construct in a longer framework of struggles for land and territory, political and religious militancies, collective works and everyday political practices of resistance and conviviality.

This chapter aims to bring forth different interpretations on the *Zapatista* autonomy experience as one based on a conception of life, development and politics *otras* – in their own terms, agendas and tools. This work takes in part some of the discussions on my PhD thesis (Henao 2019) in which I write about the experience of engaged, multisited

# Decolonising Politics and Constructing Worlds in the Everyday through Zapatista Autonomy

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ethnographical approach to the issue of security along with the *Zapatista* communities in resistance in 2018.

Nevertheless, here I thread rather with the written word. As such, different texts are brought forward to give testimony of the reflections, interpretations and voices about *Zapatista* autonomy as a project of good life shared elsewhere. It tries to portray how, in scholarly terms, 'autonomy' enacts a lively project of decolonising politics (see: Mora 2008), not only in its discourse but also in its everyday practices. These are some insights on how *Zapatista* autonomy offers a communitarian horizon and organisation to collectively face the challenges of Capitalism/Coloniality/Patriarchy (see: Gutiérrez & Navarro 2019; Gutiérrez *et al.* 2017), seen as the true enemy that threatens both communities in Chiapas and humanity as a whole (EZLN 2016).

It is also relevant to highlight that although sources here are predominantly from writings, the reflection as a whole is based on a multisited ethnography, revealing the multiplicity of voices that seek to interpret the meanings and directions of *Zapatista* autonomy while linking locations and sites of enunciation. As a disclaimer, it is not intended to practice academic extractivism or overlap the *Zapatista* voices on their own references to the self-will or that of other scholars and activists, rather I try to collect, from different sources and my feel-thinking, the sense of this lively concept and thus be able to argue in favor of it as a practice towards decolonization.

The lived project of *Zapatista* autonomy is as a proposal through which the communities intend to construct alternatives to war, based on the San Andrés agreements signed between diverse Indigenous groups, collectives, activists and the *Zapatistas* themselves and the Mexican government (see Chiapas 2003; CNI 2016). Here, I show three of the many possible interpretations that *Zapatista* autonomy may embody: first, the system of governance of the autonomy is portrayed, intending to show how autonomy also means resistance, and how resistance needs organisation to move forward. Second, *Lekil Kuxlejal*, the good life for Tsotsil and Tzeltal communities, is shown as the onto-epistemological basis for the incarnation and socialisation of a theory and practice of collective life in the communities. Third, I intend to look at a larger framework, situating the struggle of Indigenous rights and defence of land and territory, in *Zapatista*'s terms, as one of global scope, in the face of the 'Capitalist Hydra'. Finally, I reconvene my own interpretation of this discussion wondering if it is possible to look at *Zapatista* autonomy as an everyday theory and practice of decolonising knowledge, politics and security.

## Autonomy Means Resistance: on *Zapatistas*' *Gobierno Autónomo* and Doing Politics in their Own Terms

In 2003 the *Zapatista* communities decided that it was time for them to exercise self-determination and self-government as was proposed in the San Andrés Agreements – a law proposal that the Congress altered after being set with government, *Zapatista* and civil society representatives – and that they were going to do it with or without the authorisation of the Mexican state. They founded the *Caracoles* and walked along the principles of *Mandar Obedeciendo* (Ruling by Obeying, in free translation) to guide the political practice of Zapatismo and its networks.

Each *Caracol* is seat of a JBG, whose members are elected by naming of the members of each community and MAREZ to solve issues, coordinate collective works, mediate grievances and serve justice among *Zapatista* populations and also with non-*Zapatistas* (Alonso 2003, 51–53).

Still, the emergence of the *Caracoles* is not the same as the beginning of *Zapatista* autonomy as a political and organisational project. Autonomy is the very heart of the *Zapatista* experience. Autonomy is only the name they call what is in construction in the rebel territories; of the project present since the first years and inscribed in the San Andrés Agreements (Baschet 2018, 53). What is different, nonetheless, is the inauguration of a new stage and form of organisation, to deepen and concentrate in the different actions, forms of resistance and struggle, enacted as autonomy.

*Zapatista* autonomy, beyond the practice of an 'other' political organisation based on collective and shared works, has brought improvements in the day-to-day life of the *Zapatistas*. This is something that *Zapatistas* express in every conversation I was able to have with the people in the communities and that is emphatically stated by the *Juntas de Buen Gobierno* (Good Government Councils, JBG) I was able to interview in *La Garrucha* and *La Realidad*.

# Decolonising Politics and Constructing Worlds in the Everyday through Zapatista Autonomy

Written by Sebastián Granda Henao

These improvements are perceived in terms of the initiatives in areas such as education, health, justice, women's rights and economic alternatives led by the JBG. For instance, in the documentary *¿Quién vive mejor? Spajel Kuxlejilil (comparando vidas)* (Tercios Compas, 2017) they make evident the improvements that organisation and the practice of *Zapatista* autonomy have brought, in comparison to their neighbours and other non-Zapatista communities. The first of them is the recovery of lands, which has allowed having spaces for other improvements such as collective crops, to set a place for JBG and the activities for their peoples; it has allowed the construction of *Zapatista* schools and healthcare centres. Nevertheless, autonomy may also be seen as a form of open government whose benefits are enjoyed by non-Zapatistas in the disperse and expanded territory that *Zapatistas* occupy (Ornelas 2005).

Autonomy should not be confused with co-existence with Mexican government structures and its rules. On the contrary, the constitution of autonomous municipalities (MAREZ, *Municipio Autónomo Rebelde Zapatista* in Spanish) is a direct challenge to Mexican sovereignty and legitimacy of the official government. Autonomy has faced many challenges as well, as it is placed as a form of resistance to state's power and a response to its low-intensity warfare and counter-insurgent strategies (Henao 2019; Baschet 2018; Martínez Espinoza 2007).

In the testimonial of Doroteo, a member of the Caracol No. 1 in the MAREZ La Realidad he explains about the constitution of autonomy as a system of governance:

Our resistance in the autonomy began in the year 1994 with the publication of our autonomous municipalities. We began by forming the autonomous municipalities even though we did not know how to begin, but we did it anyway. We did it in spite of not knowing how to govern, in spite of all our villages and zones being militarised. We did it without the need of creating political parties, because we think they are not useful, we did it without knowing whatever could happen afterwards; [...] Also, years later, [the Mexican government] betrayed us in the dialogues we established [...] with all the Indigenous peoples of Mexico [...] To that we responded forming our *Juntas de Buen Gobierno* and saying: with the law or without the law we will govern ourselves, whether you want it or not (EZLN 2013, 23).

Roberto, from the Caracol IV in La Garrucha, and part of the MAREZ Ricardo Flores Magón, further explains what the autonomous government means for them in the everyday and how it is constructed:

When we were already in the resistance we constituted our authorities, we organised to work together along our peoples, regions, municipalities and zones. We made collective works in the *milpa*, we grew beans, we catted and grew coffee to strengthen our autonomy, to ease the works of the authorities in every centre and region, in the municipalities and the zones, so that we could exercise autonomy. Resistance does not mean that we will not work. Resistance is to work because it is done and built by the people; that means that resistance is our house, our roof, the tent that we will be as peoples and families, with our *compañeros y compañeras* that we work. [...] The task of the *Zapatista* autonomous government [...] is to bring our work in coordination with every instance of the autonomous government, as our municipal and regional authorities. We have to do the work and see how to bring advancement for our work in collectives, training in healthcare, education within our village and people to see the achievement and fruit of our work that we do in the resistance (EZLN 2013, 38).

Also, as Valentina from the Caracol at Roberto Barrios states:

The politics that our peoples and their autonomous governments focus on is the construction of autonomy, then our own thought and plan is to change the situation that our peoples suffer because of the bad government of the rich people, such as poverty, inequality, exploitation, injustice. We fight for having a life with dignity for all the children, young people, men, women and elders and that we all have the same opportunities and place, without any exclusion (EZLN 2013, 72).

These testimonies, collected from the memoirs of the *Escuelita Zapatista*, portray the spirit of *Zapatista* autonomy. In their words flourishes the experience of organisation for self-government, to build a communal horizon – 'a world where many worlds fit' – little by little. This means to build a pluriverse while defending their territories from the military

# Decolonising Politics and Constructing Worlds in the Everyday through Zapatista Autonomy

Written by Sebastián Granda Henao

incursion, the co-optation by institutional politics and the influence of capitalist global value-chains. This form of government promotes a radical democracy based in co-responsibility and a justice system based on the communities' uses and costumes. Whether it impacts the capitalist system, overthrows (white heterocis-) patriarchy and breaks ties with the Western/Modern world, or not, is irrelevant. What matters at this stake is to be alive, to live in harmony both with human and non-human beings.

From another standpoint, *Caracoles* and *Zapatista* autonomy, as concrete forms of resistance, are seen as a response to the organisational needs of both strengthening and balancing the processes embedded in the *Zapatista's* political practices, being aware of the inequalities among the communities and regions. *Caracoles* thus appear to also monumentalise the presence of the *Zapatista* movement, in the places most harassed by the Mexican authorities, the military forces and paramilitary groups. They make the application of the rights reclaimed in the San Andrés agreements feasible, as Indigenous Peoples, as well as organising the recovered territory and culminating the process of building legitimacy of the political actions aimed at self-government in the area since 1994 (Arevalo 2008).

Besides the political meaning of the *Caracoles*, as described above, it also shifts the action and modes of the organisation, setting boundaries and assigning roles in its structure: the EZLN, conformed by insurgent militias, limit themselves to assure physical security of the communities in the face of the possible paramilitary or military offensives; the JBG are in charge of the political struggle and the strategies for communication and connection between the communities and the civil society (*ibid.*). The governance of the recovered territories is in the hands of the support bases in the communities in resistance and the autonomous councils that constitute the MAREZ, and the JBG that are in charge of coordinating tasks and resources among the MAREZ; as such, *Zapatista* autonomous government operates in three levels of governance: from bottom-up, the communities, MAREZ and JBG.

In 2003, there were five communities. More recently, the EZLN announced the creation of another seven – making a total of twelve *Caracoles*. This was due to two main reasons. First, the organisational political work and example of their members to the places they inhabit. Second, traditionally state-aligned communities have felt the racism, contempt and voracity of the Mexican administration (led by President Andrés Manuel López Obrador since 2018) and have moved into hidden or open rebellion. The 12 *Caracoles* are currently composed by 43 autonomous municipalities (see: EZLN, 2019).

From another perspective, Mariana Mora (2008) argues that *Zapatista* autonomy fills in the void spaces left by the dismantling of the welfare state in Mexico. It is in the low capacity of governance, breach of agreements and failed promises that autonomy gains strength and is implemented. For her, *Zapatista* autonomy is able to burst and reverse hegemonic processes insofar the individuals and collectives exercise practices for implementation in the everyday, leading to the production of knowledge, senses of political doing, alliances with other actors and forms of self-understanding and acting in the world regarding recent and residual expressions of domination (Mora 2008, 308).

By *filling in the void*, I also understand that 'autonomy' is the emergence of self- and coordinated forms of resistance. On the one hand, it means resistance in the face of the need of the state as the default political organisation of the modern/capitalist/colonial system, contested through the very organisation of autonomous governance, in which a government serves without self-servicing for the people, and not for the foreign interests that the former model supposes. On the other hand, it means resistance in the lookout for anti-capitalist, anti-hegemonic, anti-patriarchal alternatives to establish social, economic and political relations from their own world views.

Meanwhile, the establishment of the *Caracoles* and *Mandar Obedeciendo* also represent a direction towards territorial peace, as it promotes autonomous expressions of development, in accordance to their political principles, ontologies, modes and rhythms. It is, at the same time, a proposal and the practice of building while walking towards an unknown horizon. It is a shout out claiming 'Enough!' transformed in movement and the possibility of creating co-existence and conviviality.

*Zapatista* autonomy as a form of governance in resistance – arguably –, also means that resistance is a condition of possibility for autonomy. Both, resistance and autonomy are interlinked. One sustains the other and together they

# Decolonising Politics and Constructing Worlds in the Everyday through Zapatista Autonomy

Written by Sebastián Granda Henao

provide sustenance for an alternative project of self-government. Autonomy, hence, becomes a political onto-epistemology through which collective action, a word that walks, transforms and creates. The autonomous government of *Zapatismo* would then politically orient the ethics and epistemologies of a way *other* of reaching agreement and self-organise as communities in resistance.

## ***Lekil Kuxlejal*, Autonomy and the Good Life:**

*Zapatista* autonomy could also be defined in terms of *Lekil Kuxlejal*, as Jaime Schlittler (2012) understands it. It means 'the good life', or 'the blossoming of the three of life' for Tzeltal and Tsotsil communities in Chiapas. *Lekil Kuxlejal* enunciates, embodies and practices well-being, not only as material welfare, but as good life in relation to others, nature, and the environmental and spiritual realms one inhabits as part of a collective, part of the whole.

Autonomy, on the one hand, represents a political aspiration in motion towards a collective government from below, in which the peoples are the conductors of their tasks, duties and political and social modes; on the other, it represents a political economy *other*, that challenges the notion of development centred in economic growth for another based in well-being, from a conception of a good and abundant life, in harmony with nature, the spirit and the human collective.

The notion of *Lekil Kuxlejal* is not exclusive to the *Zapatista* communities in resistance; on the contrary, it is rooted in Mayan-Tzeltal and Tsotsil thought, shared by *Zapatistas* and non-*Zapatistas* alike. Juan López Intzin, a Tzeltal thinker, expresses, for instance, about the meaning of this idea in Tenejapa, in the Chiapas' heights:

*Lekil kuxlejal*, whose base is *Ich'el ta muk'*, as an experience of the sacred and aspiration to an excelsior degree of kindness in abundance *Utsilal-Lekilal*, has both material and spiritual bases from our peoples. The recognition and respect for the greatness among living beings and with the supernatural entities will bring us peace and harmony in the heart and life in plenitude (*Lekil kuxlejal*), because, insofar we are co-responsible and reciprocal, our heart will laugh in joy as manifestation of what is full and dignifying.

The material part in which both *Lekil kuxlejal* and *Ich'el ta muk'* anchor is related to the non-exclusion, to eradicating poverty, real recognition of others, sincere dialogue, the exercise of all rights in plenitude, real justice, truthful and not simulated, and equity for all.

[...] It can be said that *Lekil kuxlejal* is not only a product of harmonic relations with nature, it is not a given fact, we have to collaborate together to achieve it [...] *Lekil kuxlejal* is not a gift that we will receive just by wanting it, it is not imposed by force, it is not the *Lekil kuxlejal* of those above, or of the banking centres or economic models, it is not an impossible dream, it is a constant edification in which men and women participate by recognising and taking into account their own greatness, their *Ich'el ta muk'* (López 2013, 102-104; free translation, emphases in the original).

In this passage it is possible to see how *Lekil kuxlejal* is part of something greater than just an idea of Indigenous autonomy or development. It is part of a *cosmovision*, a *cosmopolitics* that goes beyond a communitarian horizon, the construction of the commonalities, conviviality and relationships with the different dimensions of life; it represents the hoping for a life in plenitude, peace, dignity and equity with all living beings and other human communities.

A *cosmovision* may be understood furthermore than just a look about/to the world that surrounds. It means to look at the world as a whole in relation to place and context in which human groups take action and are part of, and is made by the assumptions and convictions that allow humans to guide and orient themselves in such worldly space (Ferrer 1981). For *Zapatistas*, such *cosmovision* encompasses traditional Mayan forms of knowledge about their territory and the world they inhabit and a special outlook and interpretation about the situation of world affairs, felt as a multiplicity of forms of exploitation and injustice, produced through/by centuries of colonialism, capitalism and white patriarchy (Tunali 2020, 345). Perhaps it is better expressed in texts such as the *Sixth Declaration from the Lacandon Jungle* (EZLN 2005) or the series of seminars entitled *Critical Thought in the Face of the Capitalist Hydra* (EZLN 2016), in which they advert of the nature of capitalism, how they see the world and justify their rebellion.

# Decolonising Politics and Constructing Worlds in the Everyday through Zapatista Autonomy

Written by Sebastián Granda Henao

Just as equal, the notion of *buen vivir* (the good life) is shared as a communitarian horizon in other places than Chiapas. It is a shared notion in the different 'geographies and calendars' of Indigenous and rebel movements; it is called *Sumak Kawsay* in Kicwhua and *Suma Qamaña* in Aymara, and all of them refer to life in harmony and plenitude, in their own terms. These lived concepts have been, for instance, consecrated in the constitutions of Ecuador and Bolivia, respectively, as they become plurinational states, and represent an achievement of the Indigenous struggles in Abya Yala, guiding new models of integrative development among the pluriverses. These concepts are often read as 'Indigenous socialism', political ecology or post-developmentalism; however, they are rather open questions to the interpretation of those who advocate for them, from their territories and ancestralities. Moreover, they represent an aspiration towards building the common ground under the premise of a good life with self-determination (Hidalgo-Capitán 2014).

When discussing development and post-developmentalism, Gustavo Esteva brings the following reflection from his experience along and accompaniment of the *Zapatista* communities in resistance:

Post-development means, above all, to adopt a hospitable attitude towards the real plurality of the world. It means, as *Zapatistas* say, to put oneself in the construction of a world in which many worlds fit. [...] it is to be hospitably open to a pluriverse, in which cultural differences are not only recognised and accepted but also celebrated [...] In a very real sense, to go beyond development means to meet the good life, healing the planet and the social tissue from the harms that the developmental endeavour has caused (Esteva 2009; free translation).

In that sense, *Zapatista* autonomy also represents a way to promote development in the terms and common aspirations of and for the peoples, according to their needs and rhythms. In a way, autonomy represents the practice of that which theorists, such as Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2018; 2009), refer to as looking to do the unimaginable, looking for solutions to the problems caused by modernity from other knowledge standpoints.

On *buen vivir*, as a relational epistemology located in the global South, incarnated and practiced around the experiences of *sumak kawsay*, or well, in *Lekil kuxlejal*, Yolanda Parra (2013, 118; free translation) explains that:

These postulates are enacted in everyday pedagogical practices that are performed in every moment of both the public and private life, a space to: teach and learn the rituality of the spoken word, food, music, planting, harvesting, service, dialogue and respect with all the forms of Life that inhabit the territory where the communitarian life takes place as an expression of the true "*wealth*" of the People. That is to say, the foundations of the Good Life easily contain the requirements of that which the contemporary Western society has built at a high cost, such as the so-promoted *sustainable development*, the much-sponsored *intercultural education* or the famous *terrestrial identity*.

In other words, *Zapatista* autonomy sets in motion the *Lekil* (the good, the well-being) and animates the *Ich'el ta muk'* (respect, dignity).

## ***Zapatistas* Against the Capitalist Hydra: Locating the Struggle for Autonomy from the Local to the Global**

For *Zapatistas*, autonomy is understood as a meta-theory in practice. As *subcomandante* Galeano puts it, in a speech of solidarity to the families of the missing students of Ayotzinapa:

The system does not fear social explosions, as massive and bright as they may be. If a government were to fall, there's always another one waiting on the shelves as a replacement and as another imposition. What terrifies the system is the perseverance of rebellion and resistance from below. Below the calendar is different. It has another way of doing things. It has another story to tell. There is another pain and another rage.

[...] We do not protest in order to defy the tyrant but to salute those who confront him from other geographies and other calendars. To defy him, we construct. To defy him, we create. To defy him, we imagine. To defy him, we grow and multiply. To defy him, we live. To defy him, we die. [...] What we *Zapatistas* have learned is that the answer is no, that the only thing offered from above is exploitation, dispossession, repression, discrimination. That is, all we can expect from above is pain. (SCI Galeano in EZLN 2016, 159–162).

# Decolonising Politics and Constructing Worlds in the Everyday through Zapatista Autonomy

Written by Sebastián Granda Henao

By bringing this excerpt I want to call attention to the multiple directions, dimensions and scales in which *Zapatista* autonomy operates. Rather than proposing an *avant-garde* or unique model of resistance and rebellion for self-determination, they instigate other movements and collectives to organise and engage in practices of social reproduction while challenging social orders that produce forms of oppression and dispossession. For that, is used the figure of a 'wall to crack', representing the system that the communities oppose and resist to; as expressed in the words of *subcomandante Galeano* – a spokesperson, translator, interpreter and analyst of the *Zapatistas*, rather than a commander or chief.

This wall is not new, or appears only after 1994; it has been there for at least 500 years when European colonialism-capitalism-(heterocis)patriarchy invaded their lands and took the freedom to be themselves. What they theorise and practice, as a political methodology, is to resist its different manifestations, to crack it, to dismantle the system little by little, opening paths beyond what is known and seen. As such 'the purpose is not to defeat a supposed ideological opponent, but to respond to the question that all of us (*todos, todas, todoas*) will end up asking: What's next?' (ibid., 178; emphases in the original).

When stating that they oppose capitalism and its manifestations, another figure emerges, that of the *Hydra*, the mythological figure of many heads, one that they claim to know and have clarity about. Thus the assumptions they base their perception on are:

1. The current dominant system is capitalism [...]
2. This capitalist system is not dominant only in one aspect of social life, but rather has multiple heads, that is, many forms and ways of dominating in different and diverse social spaces. [...]
3. There is a disconcerting element in this Capitalist Hydra. If you understand the Hydra as a mythological animal you know that it has many heads and if you cut off one head, two more are born. One of these heads is like the heart of the Hydra, "the mother head" to give it a name. [...] It is the bloodiest and most cruel monster ever known in reality or fiction since humanity became divided into dominators and dominated. [...] there may be others who insist that is the state that is the mother head of the Capitalist Hydra and not the social relations of production, where some have capital and others have only their capacity to work (ibid., 179)

For *Zapatistas*, that is a manner of knowing themselves and learning to be (in) collectives, because it is always possible to lose the capacity for observation and surprise, to lose the whole by focusing on a part; it is thus necessary to be accompanied, to cover more focal points among all, to keep a peripheral look (ibid., 15–18).

Still, it is not enough to know themselves in the world, it is necessary to change themselves to change the world, to observe with other eyes and learn from the lessons from other geographies and calendars. As such, the politics of *Zapatista* autonomy represent itself a manner of collectively gathering knowledge, whether it is knowledge of politics, self-government, the manifestations of the *Hydra* in other places and times, or about the world, both the one that surrounds them and the world as a whole.

On the other hand, *Zapatistas* have claimed that to look further it is necessary to look inside. In that sense, a *Zapatista* methodology appears in their declarations and *comunicués*: analysing from the outside inwards, from the larger picture to the smaller, and then constructing from below. Hence, besides generating a critical and *heartened* understanding on the economic, political, ethical and epistemic system, represented through the figure of the Hydra, *Zapatistas* also comprehend that:

- There is an element that is not explicit but which is fundamental: practice. What led us to begin this theoretical reflection [...] is the transformation of reality.
- Although we begin from the assumption that the capitalist system is dominant, that is accompanied by the certainty that it is neither omnipresent nor immortal. Resistances exist, whether we know about them or not. The system does not impose its domination evenly and without disruptions. [...] we are not talking about something that could be, we are talking about something that we are already doing. [...]
- 'Neither theory without practice nor practice without theory', we have said. In saying that we are not talking

# Decolonising Politics and Constructing Worlds in the Everyday through Zapatista Autonomy

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about a division of labor [...] critical thought carries within it this poison: if it's only thought, it doesn't manage to be critical. [...]

- No lazy thought, no dogmatic thought, no deceitful thought [...] Critical thought has as its motor the act of questioning. Why this and not something else? Why this way and not another way? Why here and not in another place? As we *Zapatistas* say, one walks by asking questions'. (ibid., 180–181).

In yet another declaration, it is described this specific way to walk with collective thinking, integrating the whole and the part, the problem and the proposal, in a loop of feedback. It is, thus, a *snailed* thought, which, as explained above, parts from a larger situation downwards to the very heartened comprehension of the surroundings, the embodied and incarnated experience of the *Zapatistas* in regards to the whole; and then builds up from the experience and lessons of being in the world to affirm the need of a world *other*, to propose other possibilities to crack the wall and hew the Hydra:

For hours, these beings of brown hearts have traced, with their ideas, a big snail. Starting at the international, their look and thought has followed inwards, passing sequentially through the national, the regional and the local, until they arrive to what they call “the *Votan*, the guardian and heart of the people”, the *Zapatista* peoples. So, from the most external curve of the snail, words like “globalisation”, “war of domination”, “resistance”, “economy”, “ciudad”, “countryside”, “political situation”, and others that are erased after the rigor question “Is the question clear?” After the road inwards, at the core of the snail, only a few acronyms are left: “EZLN”. Afterwards there are proposals and drawings of, in thought and in the heart, windows and doors that only they see (among other things, because they do not exist). The uneven and disperse word begins to make a common and collective path. Someone asks ‘¿Is there agreement?’ “There is”, responds stating the already collective voice. The snail is traced again, but now in reverse, from the inside out. The draft also follows the reverse path until it only remains, filling the old blackboard, a phrase that for many is delirium, but for these men and women it is a reason for struggle: “a world where many worlds fit.” Later, a decision is made (SCI Marcos 2003).

At last, a key element of *Zapatista* meta-theory is organisation. It allows an articulation of collective thinking and practice as an onto-epistemic-politico-ethical horizon: looking out the world inwards and then walking together from the small to the larger, from the personal to the global, in a conjoined struggle of all those below. In regards of organisation, *subcomandante* Moisés says:

As *Zapatistas*, every time we get the chance, we tell people they should organise to resist and to struggle for what they need [...] We say that these are pieces of the little histories that have to play themselves out, that people have to learn for themselves that no one will solve their problems for them. We say that instead we will have to solve these problems ourselves, as organised collectives. It is the people who create solutions, not leaders or parties [...] We say that we shouldn't be afraid of having the people rule. It is the healthiest and more just way. It is people themselves who are going to make the changes that are truly necessary. [...] What interests us as *Zapatistas* is knowing how to resist and confront the many heads of the capitalist system that exploits us, represses us, disappears us, and steals from us.

It is not just in one place or in one way that capitalism oppresses you [...] It's not to provide recipes for how to confront capitalism. Nor is it to impose our thinking on others. [...] We think that each of us has an obligation to think, to analyse, to reflect, to critique, to find our own pace, our own way, in our own time and places [...] Each person where they are must struggle to organise themselves (SCI Moisés in EZLN 2016, 287–297).

Then, it is with critical thinking, practice and organisation that *Zapatistas* show the way they build hope for themselves; little by little, breaking down walls and hydras that seem invincible; imagining, walking, questioning and doing a world in the pluriverse. It is interesting to notice how this figure of ‘opening cracks to the wall’ is related to Catherine Walsh (2018; 2008)’s decolonial cracks and insurgent epistemologies to analyse and track the challenges and changes in Latin American state politics in the last 20 years.

What is intended to show with all these excerpts is yet another interpretation of *Zapatista* autonomy, one that links several levels of analysis, from the personal to the global and vice-versa. Autonomy, in that sense means to put a



# Decolonising Politics and Constructing Worlds in the Everyday through Zapatista Autonomy

Written by Sebastián Granda Henao

localised and communal effort to defeat capitalism, at least in their territories, and a call to share struggles and experiences, to organise and to learn along other movements and rebellions. For instance, at the time this text is written (2021), *Zapatistas* have embarked in a rather unimaginable endeavour: They have travelled across the ocean and flown over to meet the *Europe of below*. They have travelled to share with collectives and social organisations that declare opposition in the core and origin of the colonial system, thank for their existence, tell them that resistance is worth the pain and struggle, see and analyse what is happening in other geographies, learn from their rebellions and bring hope of a *world without fear*. They began a tour (*La Gira Zapatista*, in Spanish) through Europe. This follows the call they have continuously made to create networks of resistance and rebellion all over, building with little efforts, according to each one's geography, possibility, mode and thought, but always looking forward to 'crack the wall and destroy the hydra' (see: EZLN, 2021).

## Decolonising Knowledge, Politics and Power?

Throughout this chapter I portrayed three possible interpretations of *Zapatista* autonomy, a complex and holistic theory and practice that guides the struggle that the communities in resistance have practiced even since before theorising about it. Autonomy, as an incarnated political practice, transcends the theoretical-political discourse, and enacts a response to the challenges imposed by neo-liberal globalisation, and in this march, walks towards the construction of what they understand better for themselves.

In a sense, when *Zapatistas* reclaim autonomy as their meta-theoretical practice they go beyond reclaiming self-determination. This is an issue that the Mexican state still denies, even after the San Andrés Agreements to recognise Indigenous peoples' rights. Self-determination As Marc Woons (2014) argues, Indigenous self-determination is not something that has been lost or destroyed, but rather ignored through the logic and practices of colonialism. Meanwhile, Indigenous peoples are forced to adapt to assert their authority according to their modes and costumes, to feel-think with a land and a territory that provides a sense of community and shared identity (an ontological security perhaps, see: Mattos and Henao 2021) and make sense of the world and their place in it through the optics of difference.

This is to say that *Zapatistas* not only reclaim and insurgently assert self-determination over their Mayan culture and heritage in political terms in Chiapas, but also reclaim that for all the other peoples in Mexico and the World. They see themselves entangled in a larger frame of struggles; what affects them also affects others in different geographies, whether in other regions of Mexico or elsewhere. To assert their right to a territory, an authority and an organisation of both everyday life and political meaning, they declared rebellion and determined that there would never be a Mexico without them. For that, they covered their faces and rose up in arms against both the Mexican state and Capitalism. Then, they declared that their territories would be governed by their own authorities, embodied in the Good Government Councils and that through collective work and their own modes and costumes, calendars and rhythms they would give shape to a radical form of democracy; autonomous education, healthcare and justice systems; make their own economic development, and establish relations with other movements and collectives throughout the planet to make networks of resistance and rebellion.

In terms of decolonising power, politics and knowledge, the communities in their assemblies and everyday actions define more precisely the scope and range of whatever means good life for them. It is a way of responding to the colonial world by constructing the other worlds they aspire as a pluriverse, guided by a curiosity on how to solve modern problems from their ancestral and current knowledge. This is to say, they reclaim a future without the intromission of the system that oppresses them and many others. More than decolonising theories, *Zapatistas* question, walk and do decolonial futures. Authors such as Walter Mignolo (2011), Catherine Walsh (2018) or Ramón Grosfoguel (2007) have already referred to practices that may be understood as decolonial, even when *Zapatistas* do not make mentions to that concept, from the revolutionary sense of their struggle/being/feeling/doing. Perhaps *Zapatistas* do not need a category to mean this, but have mentioned that their actions look forward to challenging and dismantling empire-like (capitalist) globalisation. They refer to their struggles as anti-racist, anti-patriarchal, and anti-capitalist.

*Zapatista* autonomy, thus, rearticulates the dynamics of power within their communities. It enacts and asserts self-

# Decolonising Politics and Constructing Worlds in the Everyday through Zapatista Autonomy

Written by Sebastián Granda Henao

determination and aims to reshape social relations from their localities to the global. The way to decolonise politics for them is to defend life above all things, constantly, in all its dimensions, at their own pace and mode. That is how, for instance, by establishing self-government, autonomy, and reclaiming their rights – regardless of state authorities – they are strengthening the community and building horizons of hope. It could be said, to conclude, that autonomy is where the principle of pluricultural conviviality rests. It enacts an acknowledgement of other worlds and the *Zapatista* world amidst them, one that is constructed by walking with/towards *Lekil kuxlejal*, the good life, in plenitude and harmony; instead of a hegemonic, homogenising world of capitalist destruction.

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