

THE CONSTRUCTION OF ZAPATISTA AUTONOMY (texto ampliado).

"When the struggle began in '94 we were fighting for eleven points. There weren't thirteen yet (land, housing, work, food, health, education, culture, information, independence, democracy, liberty, justice and peace). The thirteen were after the San Andrés Accords. We didn't know how we were going to achieve them, but we are seeing it now. We imagined that a lot of food or doctors and hospitals were going to come, but we didn't imagine that we, and our own children, were going to be the doctors, the architects, engineers, teachers, that we were going to be teaching ourselves. We didn't imagine that we were going to create an autonomous municipality and that we were going to have the Good Government Councils (*Juntas de Buen Gobierno*)."

(Interview with José Luis, Autonomous Council Member, August 3, 2003. Text at the beginning of the Thesis of Alejandro Cerda García: "Imagining Zapatismo, Multiculturalism and Indigenous Autonomy in Chiapas from one Autonomous Municipality: 2011)

1.- This topic of inexhaustible richness cannot be seen in isolation from all of the processes of construction of alternatives to capitalism and the structures of colonial domination.

2.- Autonomy is an alternative to the model of colonial society, it is a way of organizing to stand up to relationships of power.

An example of this long term construction is described by a reference to The Zapatista Rebel Autonomous Municipalities citing the Sixth Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle, in the sixth month of the year 2005.

"So we then began putting a lot of effort into the autonomous rebel Zapatista municipalities, which is how the communities are organized in order to govern and to govern themselves, in order to make them stronger. This method of autonomous government was not simply invented by the EZLN, but rather it comes from several centuries of indigenous resistance and from the Zapatistas' own experience. It is the self-governance of the communities. In other words, no one from outside comes to govern, but the people themselves decide, among themselves, who governs and how, and, if they do not obey, they are removed. If the one who governs does not obey the people, they go after him, he is removed from authority, and another comes in.

But then we saw that the Autonomous Municipalities were not balanced. There were some that were more advanced and had more support from civil society, and others were more neglected. We were lacking the organization needed to make them more on a par with each other. And we also saw that the EZLN, with its political-military component, was getting involved in decisions which belonged to the democratic authorities, "civilians" as they say. And here the problem is that the political-military component of the EZLN is not democratic, because it is an army. And we saw that it was not good that the military was above, and the democratic below, because what is democratic should not be decided militarily, it should be the other way around: the democratic-

political governing above, and the military obeying below. Or, perhaps, it would be better with nothing below, just completely level, without any military, and that is why the Zapatistas are soldiers so that there will not be any soldiers. So, what we then did about this problem was to begin separating the political-military from the autonomous and democratic aspects of organization in the Zapatista communities. And so, actions and decisions which had previously been made and taken by the EZLN were being passed on, little by little, to the democratically elected authorities in the villages. It is easy to say, of course, but it was very difficult in practice, because many years have passed - first in the preparation for the war and then the war itself - and the political-military becomes what we were used to. But, regardless, we did so because it is our way to do what we say, because, if not, why should we go around saying things if we do not then do them.

That was how the Good Government Councils were born, in August of 2003, and, through them, self-learning and the exercise of "govern by obeying" has continued.

From that time and until the middle of 2005, the EZLN leadership has no longer involved itself in giving orders in civil matters, but it has accompanied and helped the authorities who are democratically elected by the peoples. It has also kept watch that the communities and national and international civil society are kept well informed concerning the aid that is received and how it is used. And now we are passing on the work of watching over the good government to the Zapatista support bases, with temporary positions which rotate, so that everyone learns and carries out this work. Because we believe that a people that does not watch over its leaders is condemned to be enslaved, and we fought to be free, not to change masters every six years."

3.- Autonomy can not take root without resistance to domination and the mechanisms of control that make up the system of capital that subjugates and dominates, with the final goal of appropriating strategic resources and accumulating wealth for groups with local, national, and international power.

4.- Zapatista autonomy is part of the EZLN strategy to build an alternative to capitalism and domination on a global level.

5.- Zapatista autonomy would be meaningless if it wasn't built in terms of being an alternative to the neoliberal model.

6.- Zapatista autonomy is anti-systemic.

7.- It entails transcending war and wars.

8.- It is a construction of peace.

9.- It has to do with the future and humanity.

In the future are the neoliberal model and the capacity of the communities. There is the construction of a social and political force that can act autonomously with alternative, fair, just models that are ethically superior to the models that drive market competition.

Conditions in which an alternative model is being generated: a permanent change.

The traditional agrarian community no longer exists, one where a common identity prevails, where events can be explained within internal factors, where the resources that exist are used for wellbeing and subsistence, where authorities and political and cultural structures exist that allow for the regeneration of the community and that to some extent considers itself isolated and marginalized.

Now we are moving toward the construction of a globally integrated community, where each element is explained by broader references, in such a way that a local event has to do with a broader context, there exists a relationship that explains the situation of a community within a larger complexity and within a globality.

The alternative to the neoliberal model is present and there is no turning back, it is being searched out and it is being built, generated from the communities, with their work, with their thought, with their ways of organizing, and with collective work. It is part of what the communities carry inside themselves, it is part of their culture, it is part of their new vision.

10.- The hope for humanity is in the construction of a new paradigm that respects life; a new form of dialogical communication with all beings and their relationships; not in the reproduction of the current system of power.

In order to understand this New Paradigm, it is important to consider that we are facing a very complicated situation that we could call war; wars that are being waged in local, national, and international contexts and that affect our lives and especially our families.

"Today we are entering into a New Paradigm. This means that a new dialogical way of communicating with the totality of beings and their relationships is emerging. Clearly the Classical Paradigm of the sciences still exists with its famous dualisms like the division of the world between material and spiritual, the separation of nature and culture, human beings and the world, reason and emotion, feminine and masculine, God and the world, and the atomization of scientific knowledge." ("Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor. Toward a planetary ecology". Leonardo Boff. Ediciones Dabar; Mexico City. 1966. Pg. 29).

"But in spite of all that, due to the current crisis, a new awareness is being developed toward the planet as a whole. From there new values, new dreams, new behaviors are emerging, assumed by an ever growing number of people and communities. It is from that prior awareness that, according to T. Kuhn, a New Paradigm is born. It is still in a period of gestation. It has not been

born completely. But it is giving its first signs of existence. A new relation of dialogue with the universe has already begun.” (Leonado Boff; op.cit. Pg. 29).

11.- What is present in the effort of Zapatista autonomy is the construction of a new world; an alternative society. It's about reaching these heights in relationships of production, in collective ownership of the means of production, in ways of living, in expectations, in abilities, in the methods and mechanisms for resolving conflicts, in “leading by obeying”, in “walking by asking”, in the way of proposing solutions and in the need for growth.

In this alternative society it is important to take into account the importance of the participation of women and their rights.

It is within this search that the “EZLN's Revolutionary Women's Law” is situated.

- Women, regardless of their race, creed or political affiliation, have the right to participate in revolutionary struggle wherever and to the degree that their desire and capacity determine. -
- Women have the right to work and to receive a fair wage.
- Women have the right to decide the number of children they want to have and take care of. -
- Women have the right to participate in matters of the community and to hold positions of responsibility if they are elected freely and democratically.
- Women and their children have the right to primary health care and food.
- Women have the right to education.
- Women have the right to choose their partner and to not be forcefully obligated to enter into marriage.
- No woman should be hit or physically mistreated by family or strangers. Crimes of rape or attempted rape will be punished.
- Women can hold leadership roles in the organization and have military ranks in the revolutionary armed forces.
- Women will enjoy all of the rights and responsibilities indicated by laws and regulations.

12.- It requires work, study, training, understanding reality, organization, understanding the conditions in which we currently live; it requires structures of leadership and work plans.

13.- Growth similar to the growth of plants, permanent, imperceptible.

14.- The task of the construction of a new society is everyone's.

15.- It is not a task particular to the indigenous people and it has to do with being protagonists, being responsible and participating in the construction of alternatives to the structures of power that deny people dignity, that subdue, subjugate, dispossess, and impose models of society.

16.- We can take into account some of the elements that are necessary in the construction of autonomy:

- Being the protagonists of our own history.
- Equality within difference.
- Working to change the root of the problems: the relationships of power and domination.
- Equitable distribution of work.
- Equitable distribution of goods.

- Collective work.
- The decision of women and men.
- Respect for nature, for ourselves, both men and women.
- Agreements. Collective reason. Collective voice.
- Non-violence.
- Resistance to war.
- Justice and dignity.
- No impunity.

17.- The strength of Zapatista autonomy lies in that they are themselves. In being subjects. This is the permanent hope. The act of being themselves, both men and women, is a liberating act.

18. They build and they defend from the strength and determination of the communities.

“The response to the demand for Autonomy by the indigenous people of Mexico has been neo-indigenous governmental action that is also known as neoliberal multiculturalism. It is a series of calculated changes in the legal and institutional order that establish a continuity in the governmental actions, sheltered under a rhetoric of change and of acceptance of a Pluricultural Nation. However, the response to these legal modifications that disregard the possibility of recognizing indigenous autonomy, has been putting into practice “de facto autonomies”, a situation that leads us to understand this debate from the point of view of those who are its driving force: from the way they propose and put into practice their project of autonomy to what they imagine and what they hope for from indigenous autonomy that goes beyond the legal and institutional changes.” (“Imagining Zapatismo. Multiculturalism and Indigenous Autonomy in Chiapas, from one Autonomous Municipality”. Thesis. Alejandro Cerda García. 2011. Pg. 31).

The fundamental challenge is the construction of autonomy in opposition to what the government says: that we remain where we are, that we settle for the small space in which we live and for the precarious conditions in which the majority of the communities find themselves; a government that does not want us concern ourselves with our own country - the country belongs to them, to those who govern or the powerful classes.

But in reality our country belongs to all of us, men and women. We are Mexicans, in addition to being what each one of us is in particular. We are Mexicans and we have the right to participate in the construction of this Mexico in all ways. It is our responsibility.

When we talk about the defense of territory, we are talking about the defense of collective territory. Our country.

19.- There are historical roots; there are millennial aspects to this capacity to be autonomous (like considering yourself to be part of the universe and to be situated at the center of the universe, just as the true men and women consider themselves) and because of this it seems natural that the indigenous people have placed themselves within the perspective that the defense of territory is the base of autonomy.

We have to look back at history, to where we come from, to the elements that we are made of and that are at the root of who we are now; understand our bodies; understand ourselves in these spaces and in this time that is ours.

Each woman and man in his or her own small uniqueness but within the geography that shapes and defines us.

The blows and the injuries, the rebellions, the resistances, the history of domination and the emergence of awareness, the experience of freedom, tenderness, respect and love.

We need memory in order to fight openly, memory to walk the paths of freedom, memory to not fall prey to deceit and lies, memory to understand the past and to embark upon the construction of the future, memory as the base of rebellion; memory to not start over from the beginning and to be capable of giving continuity to the construction of the house where we all belong, men and women.

This is how we can better understand the dimensions of who we are and what we are looking for.

This is how our being is a collective, communal, transcendent being.

20.- Defense of territory is understood not in the sense of appropriation of resources, but instead in the sense of the defense of resources for all of humanity.

21.- That is why autonomy has to do with the transformation of relationships of exploitation and with the search for alternatives to the depletion of resources.

22.- Zapatista autonomy is related to the construction of an alternative economy to capitalism; a solidarity economy.

Solidarity Economy should be understood from a global vision of appropriation of ourselves, of territory, of knowledge, and of understanding that words are strength. This understanding has as a concrete result the practices of autonomy: alternative practices that transform reality.

The principle of Solidarity Economy is the possibility of making yourself a protagonist within a given reality and of assuming responsibility in the face of the current situation of our society, which is characterized by extreme poverty and marginalization.

For many years, problems were allowed to accumulate and now they seem impossible to resolve. For example, as far as agricultural work is concerned, it is not possible to immediately abandon agrochemicals, whose massive use has been encouraged for over 40 years; the same could be said for "improved" seeds and, more generally, for a system of agricultural production that depletes resources and leads to the complete destruction of the countryside.

To regain the countryside we need a different, sustainable kind of agriculture: an agro-ecology. This means replenishing the soil, implementing new systems for producing organic fertilizer and seeds, that allow for the defense of territory, for adequate production, for the production of a diversity of foods, to achieve food security and to have the possibility of interchanging products.

The goal is to respect nature and to rediscover the potential of the earth.

The relationship of the earth with oneself and of oneself with the earth is very important; as well as that of the community with the earth; from there emanates the symbolic element of the universe. The universe is in culture, in history and in the traditions of the indigenous communities, it is a force that determines all existence.

The Solidarity Economy is a practice of producing, of exchange, of relationships, of construction and of collective work. In the understanding that the organized communities are thinking strongly in the next generations, this Economy implies the participation of men and women, of boys and girls, of elders, with their history and their organizational capacity, with a vision of the future.

From there stems the need to reforest, to conserve water, the concern for waste and the attention given to contaminants that come from industrial production.

23.- The base of this solidarity economy is territory, with all of its resources. The strategy of the neoliberal model is the appropriation of resources, their use and exhaustion. The concentration of power implied in this strategy involves the use of weapons: weapons of information, of political pressure and of control of territory. An economic, political, cultural and social control. The social movements have already understood this and what we need now is to resist, create, construct, analyze, and act.

The process of the construction of autonomy of the indigenous people is made up of acts of resistance, of liberation, and of permanent construction.

24.- Autonomy consists of the responsibility that we assume to create spaces of freedom, in the capacity to transform relationships of submission, in establishing actions of solidarity in order to grow, in acting collectively to be strong and to not return to the past.

25.- Within the great complexity of local, regional, and international relationships, the discovery of the potential of local actions is important, liberating acts and those of new worlds, that are created by the hands of all men and women.

26.- Collective work is a fundamental element in the construction of a Solidarity Economy and, consequently, in the process of autonomy of the indigenous people.

27.- Zapatista autonomy is the space for the construction of free citizens, responsible citizens, builders, conscious of the challenges that are theirs because they are part of a community, of an ethnic group, of a state, of a region, of a country and of the world.

28.- This concept of global responsibility is very important because it is the prospect for all of the alternatives to neoliberalism; the conditions are being created so that alternative models of society that are needed by all (men and women) can emerge.

I would like to use two long quotes from the thinking of Immanuel Wallerstein to situate the perspective of social change as an alternative to capitalism as necessary to achieving a fair distribution of goods and an egalitarian society.

“Liberals have always affirmed that the liberal state – reformist, legalist, and somewhat libertarian – is the only state capable of assuring freedom. And perhaps this was true for a relatively small group whose freedom was safeguarded, but unfortunately that group has never moved from

being a perpetual minority on its way to becoming the whole. In addition, they have always affirmed that only the liberal state could guarantee non-repressive order. The critics on the right have said that the liberal state, in its renouncement of appearing repressive, has permitted or even encouraged disorder. The critics on the left, on the other hand, have always said that in reality the main concern of the liberals in power is order and that they are very capable of repressing, and only partially hiding it." ("After Liberalism". Immanuel Wallerstein. Siglo XXI; Mexico, 2003. Pg. 4).

"Now we have to see if we can create a very different global system, a system that includes everyone in its benefits, and is able to do so through the same exclusions that entail the construction of conscious groups that nevertheless recognize their interrelationship."

"The definitive formulation of a clear anti-systemic strategy for an era of disintegration will take at least two decades. All we can do now is propose elements that could make up part of that strategy; but we cannot be sure how all of the pieces will fit together, nor affirm that the list is complete." (Immanuel Wallerstein; op.cit. Pg. 246-247).

29.- That is why the experiences of one community can be a contribution to the practice of searching for others, because it is necessary to find ways to live in harmony with nature, with peace, justice and dignity.

30.- Autonomy is a necessity for everyone, not just the indigenous people or agricultural communities. Autonomy is the task of society in its entirety.

31.- In the Zapatista communities a process of construction of autonomy exists that comes from very long ago, starting from the time that the indigenous peasant farmers left the plantations where they lived in a situation of servitude. They have advanced in the practice of the construction of autonomy, in the social and political and ideological aspects; it is the construction of an enormous transformative movement that allows them to resist the strategy of annihilation that comes from the established power.

The construction of autonomy is born from an ancestral decision regarding those with power, the governments, and the mechanisms of subjugation and deceit that are used by the owners of power.

It is based in their own knowledge of these conditions, in their own history, in their own bodies, in their own experience; from there come its roots.

The other fundamental element of this construction lies in participation which also comes from a conscious decision to participate in the work, in the organization, in the formation, in the study, in the discipline, in the collective effort, in walking together, in learning step by step, in recognizing what is possible to achieve now and within your own time that you have available.

To rely on one's own time is also one's own autonomous decision.

The perspective of autonomy is global, it is the search for freedom for all men and women; for all of the people of Mexico.

This autonomy needs the participation of everyone; as long as this participation doesn't exist, then autonomy is not yet constructed.

This is a struggle of the Mexican people and for all of the people of Mexico.

From there stems the need to become a practice of the entire civil society; From there stems what is essential to Zapatista Autonomy: justice for all men and women, democracy, and liberty.

It is also an exercise of an ethic that guarantees respect for a dignified life, for people, for their intimacy and for their rights. A democracy that guarantees liberty and justice.

“We have to govern ourselves with our own strength, initiatives, thoughts and organization.”

The practice of governing ourselves brings us to self-determination and placing value in the collective rights of people.

The collective rights of people are part of human rights.

The recognition of the collective rights of people is important in regards to territory, to strategic life resources, to one's own culture, to language and identity, to lifestyles, to security, to communication, establishing Networks of Community Radios with their own strategies.

“Community Radios represent a means of self-expression and cultural reaffirmation, within as well as outside of the very communities.” (Giovanna Gasparello).

In the face of wars of domination and extermination it is important to learn to resist.

Resistance is also a path for building alternatives.

“To resist is to identify an objective for which you are going to fight, to resist is to fight for the defense of territory, it is to fight for the defense of education, for health, for housing, for work; that is what resisting is, because the moment that you are fighting you are resisting and feeling the pain of others. To resist is to not be indifferent to what is happening to another; that is to resist, because if there is something that keeps us strong, it is to be in pain. I am in pain for my daughter, I am in pain for my family, but if I see a brother that is going through a hard time, a sister that is carrying her malnourished child, that encourages me and makes me more committed, and that is to resist. I am going to resist for you because if we are able to live a dignified life it is not fair that we accept to live this life, that's how I see it.”

(María Trinidad Ramírez, member of the Peoples Front in Defense of the Land - *Frente de Pueblos en Defensa de la Tierra*, wife of Ignacio del Valle and mother of América del Valle.)

We have to learn to rise above conflicts and confrontation between people and communities; we have to learn to overcome violence, with practices of constructing collective reason, of the common paths toward liberation.

How can we think about this collective being comprised of everyone, men and women?

We are going to keep fighting, we need to have this struggle very clear in our consciousness.

We are preparing ourselves for a long struggle because the harassment, the threats, the aggressions, the repression and the confrontation directed at the EZLN support base communities are getting stronger and above all each time the interest of the neoliberal system is clearer - the accumulation of capital and of strategic resources.

The wars that are operating, especially the counter-insurgency war, are directed at territorial control and the appropriation of resources.

“The strategy that includes the forced dispossession of territory and paramilitary aggressions against Zapatista communities is advancing in Chiapas and represents a new rise in violence.” (Laura Castellanos. <http://zapateando.wordpress.com/2011/09/22>).

That is why this struggle is long-term and the central point of this struggle is the construction of autonomy.

We have to stop the war, stop the wars by building peace and the construction of autonomy is part of the construction of peace.

Justice, democracy and liberty are also processes that must run through all worlds; that is why we must join forces, join together our things, unite our hearts, unite our word, in alternative acts to those of the mechanisms of power that dispossess, humiliate, lie, deteriorate and destroy the structures where life is generated and grows.

The self-conception of the EZLN as an armed movement that fights only to win civil spaces, to create a political platform for all Mexicans and those beyond; has represented an important challenge to indigenous movements: the challenge to leave behind their local and regional isolation and the challenge to embark on a new direction toward a civil society within a global perspective.

“If the EZLN were to respond to the paramilitary violence, the State would justify the use of military force to take over Zapatista territory and thus put down the autonomous experience.”

“They thought that the Zapatista experience would succumb over time. It is true that even if its visibility has decreased, it is consolidating its autonomy and it acts as an inspiration to different ethnic groups that are moving similar processes forward.”

“The autonomous Zapatista lesson is simple: reject any support from a political party or governmental program; don't participate in elections; promote collective organization that is horizontal and inclusive; it has created programs for health, education, governance and the enforcement of justice with a unique identity; it established self-sustainable productive projects and protects its land and natural resources.

“Although it is simple, this lesson is also powerful, as it moves collective consciousness in a moment when the capitalist crisis provokes governments and initiatives to covet the expanses of territory and the natural resources in indigenous lands.”

(Laura Castellanos. Op.cit.).

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