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Creating New Spaces: Autonomous Practice in Zapatista Communities

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Abstract

The rise of Indigenous social movements advocating for autonomy in Latin America has garnered significant scholarly attention, particularly with the emergence of autonomous social movements rejecting normative political frameworks. Among these, the Zapatista movement in Chiapas, Mexico stands out as a prominent example. Founded in 1994, the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN) initiated a rebellion challenging state sovereignty, leading to the establishment of the Municipios Autónomos Rebeldes E Zapatistas or Zapatista Rebel Autonomous Municipalities (MAREZ). However, a recent communiqué from the group announced the dissolution of these autonomous municipalities and rebuilding of their communities into local autonomous governments. This project thus has dual aims to explore the mechanisms through which the Zapatistas have employed autonomy and how, post-structural change, autonomy in practices continues through new spatial articulations. My study thus investigates how the intentional construction and reconstruction of spaces within Zapatista communities reinforces autonomy reclamation, challenges state sovereignty and neoliberalism, and reaffirms varied spatial practices.

Introduction

In 2023, following nearly a year of silence regarding their operations, Zapatista spokesperson Subcomandante Moisés began with a story about a young Indigenous girl named Dení (Moisés 2023a). While living in a Zapatista community, Dení has a daughter, who has another daughter, and so on until 120 years in the future. Here Moisés intervenes, explaining that the Zapatistas have to look forward to the generations beyond Dení so that those descendants can learn that “ser libre es también ser responsable de esa libertad,” (Moisés 2023a). The Zapatistas, an insurgent group located in the Lacandón Jungle of Chiapas comprised mostly of Indigenous farmers who have seized their own territory and created autonomous zones, often release a plethora of stories at the beginning of their new political, economic, or social initiatives. This story, and many others written previously by the Zapatistas, reinforces how the Zapatistas conceptualize autonomy; the right to make their own decisions, take responsibility for those decisions, and change when needed (Subcomandante Marcos 2018).

The Zapatistas have consistently been linked to other social movements for autonomy, wherein “self-construction and self-determination take the place of demands and representation,” (Zibeche 2012: 1). Such groups differ from other social movements in their rejection of normative frameworks of politics, focusing instead on providing resources to their communities while demanding the right to self-governance and autonomy. As a result, these movements often run in direct contention the states within which they operate, as they challenge the legitimacy of state-governed territory by arguing for their own right to sovereignty, agency, and autonomy. Autonomy according to the Zapatistas includes not just decentralization from the state but rather, an establishment of their own collective control and decision-making without the purview of the Mexican government (Stahler-Sholk 2010: 279). Moisés’ recent story reinforces this ideal, while

also explaining their forward-looking gaze which demands the Zapatistas continue to practice autonomy in order for the generations to come to also practice it.

What follows Moisés' story, in multiple parts, is the Zapatistas' announcement of the end of the *Municipios Autónomos Rebeldes Zapatistas*, or Zapatista Rebel Autonomous Municipalities (MAREZ) along with their governing bodies, the *Juntas de Buen Gobierno* or good government councils. This decision, they noted, came after three years of reassessment and discussion among their communities (Moisés 2023b). Autonomous zones such as the MAREZ have existed across various geographies and contexts, with varying names and localized ideals. The Zapatistas' autonomous zones existed from 2003 until 2023, and their existence created the conditions through which the Zapatistas put into practice autonomy and self-governance in their daily lives. However, the question remains: how do the Zapatistas exercise autonomy in their autonomous spaces and does the new structural organization of autonomy continue their practice?

With the announcement of further decentralization of their autonomous communities, The Zapatistas now institute a new form of autonomous organizing which aligns with Pickerill and Chatterton's (2006) notion of autonomous geographies (730). Autonomous geographies are spaces through which individuals and groups seek autonomy through four areas: political ownership and control, cultural and media literacy, self-determination of organizational forms, and economic self-reliance (Pickerill and Chatterton 2006: 734). Autonomy in this sense is a spatial strategy because it seeks to subvert the hierarchy of power relations from hegemonic powers that shape community and individual life, namely capitalism and the government. In this way, a movement for autonomy such as the Zapatista movement, must strategically reorganize space in order to change the daily life of the community.

“To change life... we must first change space,” (Lefebvre 1974: 190). This maxim from spatial theorist Henri Lefebvre encapsulates the connection between the quest for autonomy and space; in order to live autonomously, space must be altered in such a way that autonomy can be practiced in daily life. The four pillars of autonomy rest on the spatial practices that communities and individuals engage in, including in employment, media and cultural habits, political life, and organizational structure. The Zapatistas, in their autonomous communities, alter space and their practices in space on an economic, cultural, and political level, in order to actively live out autonomous ideals. The bounded space of the autonomous zone for the Zapatistas subsequently becomes the prerequisite for autonomy. The Zapatistas are only able to alter space according to their vision insofar as they have the adequate space to do so (Gambetti 2009).

By examining ethnographic, historical, and communiqués from and regarding the Zapatistas, I argue that it is precisely through the intentional construction and reconstruction of space that the Zapatista movement reinforces autonomy and maintains a longstanding social movement. In doing so, the Zapatistas demonstrate that it is possible to create a “world in which many worlds fit,” (Gahman 2017). This study has important implications in the creation of autonomous geographies across the world, demonstrating how changing daily life through space is a viable strategy for the creation of differential space and resistance to hegemony on a global scale. While the Zapatistas have become increasingly isolated and localized, their continuous alteration of space according to their ideal of autonomy exemplifies “el mensaje para las geografías de todo el mundo: no juegues con las reglas de tu enemigo, crea tus propias reglas,” (Marcos 2023).

To examine how the Zapatistas utilize spatial formation to implement their own forms of autonomy, I problematize the use of space in Chiapas, arguing that conflicts over space ranging

from colonization to land reform sanctioned by the state, have created a unique environment which enabled the Zapatistas to reclaim territory, a necessary precursor to the implementation of new spatial practices. The conflict over space is complicated by the presence of Indigenous groups in Chiapas, who have existed in between the tensions of the governments' tying of Indigeneity to the state since the modern formation of the nation following the Revolution (1910-1920). Neoliberalism, however, has altered the relationship between groups in Mexico due its influence on the restructuring of the government, economy, and citizens. The Zapatistas ultimately exploit these contentions, as evidenced by their rebellion and the creation of autonomous zones that directly challenge the government, elites, and the neoliberal order through the use of space. In three examples, I analyze how new spaces of governance, economic, and domestic life allow the Zapatistas to actively practice autonomy in their daily lives in ways that challenge hegemonic frameworks of power. These initiatives are not perfect in nature, and in fact have highlighted tensions among the group. This, combined with a changing sociopolitical economic landscape, have led to the critical self-reflection that the Zapatistas mention, ultimately resulting in the creation of new autonomous spaces which are further decentralized and not bound in ways that the previous MAREZ were. The new form of Zapatista autonomy, therefore, has risen out of a tradition of critical self-reflection which both makes use of and disregards previous spatial practices in tandem with recent developments in Chiapas and larger Mexico.

Historical Context

The Zapatistas did not always encompass a social movement for autonomy and self-governance in their autonomous zones. Rather, the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN) first began with a group of guerilla insurgents that formerly comprised a revolutionary Marxist group called the Las Fuerzas de Liberación Nacional, or National Liberation Forces

(FLN) in 1983. With the Mexico-city based FLN decimated by Mexican government counterinsurgency tactics during the 1970s, a few from the group sought refuge in the Lacandón Jungle in the eastern area of Chiapas and began dialogue with the Indigenous *campesinos* that farmed the countryside.¹ Following years of recruitment and organizing, on January 1st, 1994, the (EZLN) began a short-lived rebellion that resulted in the seizure of government buildings and land in the surrounding Lacandón jungle and multiple cities across the state. Following the rebellion, the EZLN's retreated from urban areas of Chiapas and divided the reclaimed rural territories from the Lacandón jungle into Municipios Autónomos Rebeldes-Zapatistas or Zapatista Rebel Autonomous Municipalities (MAREZ). In the years after the rebellion, the maintenance of the MAREZ has been one of the central objectives of the Zapatista movement, with their communities organizing, often with the aid of non-governmental organizations, to provide governance, economic opportunities, healthcare, education, and other social services.

The Zapatista rebellion came as a shock to the world, despite the fact that the EZLN had communicated their intentions a month before the conflict with the “First Declaration from the Lacandón Jungle.” Published in December 1993, the EZLN positioned themselves as inheritors of the original Zapatista army from the Mexican revolution in 1910, proclaimed the Mexican government as illegitimate, and issued a declaration of war against the state (EZLN 1993). The Zapatistas’ posturing as the inheritors of the original Zapatista army from 1910 to 1920 invoked the failure of the Mexican government to provide agrarian reform across the country. The original Zapatista army however, formed in Morelos during the beginning of the Mexican revolution and fought against landowners in the country who had pushed rural farming

¹ For a map of Chiapas see Appendix I: Aaron Bobrow-Strain, *Intimate Enemies: Landowners, Power, and Violence in Chiapas* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2007): 140.

communities off their land (Van Der Haar 2005: 486). By 1992 with the constitutional reform that formally ended land reform, historically limited input supports dwindled, and privatization of land became pervasive.

The original Zapatista army, along with other groups, advanced agrarian reform as one of the main reasons for the revolution.² The postrevolutionary Mexican government promulgated agrarian reform in following years, creating a modern *ejido* system that provided access to communally held land for organized *campesinos* who worked it. *Campesinos*, peasant farmers, became a political identity through the revolution as *agraristas* who had organized during the revolution became a political constituency in the postrevolutionary years (Boyer 2003: 20). The *ejido* system, or communal property held under the auspices of the state, as part of agrarian reform allowed for the redistribution of land to organized communities and the breakup of large agricultural estates by the Mexican government, in turn connecting the state and agrarian reform to one another (Van Der Haar 2005: 485). The state as the arbiter of land reform through legal institutions subsequently allowed for the state to penetrate previously guarded communities, though this inherently came with its own limits.

Ultimately, the Mexican government lacked the ability to enforce regulations regarding the *ejidos* which in turn allowed for *ejiditarios* to keep their internal affairs hidden, leading to relative autonomy in the day-to-day actions of the community. In the space of the *ejido*, the establishment by the government of *ejido* authorities and the *ejido* assembly (*asamblea*) became a de facto governing force, addressing issues of law and order, resource allocation, provision of public services, and “how to make social life function generally,” (Van der Haar 2005: 496). The *ejido* therefore constituted a novel spatial form because it at once became a site for autonomous

² For further reading regarding the original Zapatistas see: John Womack Jr. *Zapata and the Mexican Revolution* (New York City, New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc, 1968).

action for *campesinos* and the main space through which *campesinos* felt the governments' presence (Soto and Banister 2016: 115). Despite agrarian reform however, many *campesinos* faced challenges in petitioning the government for land and often found limited help from the government in resolving disputes (Van Der Haar 2005: 499). The Zapatistas gained a following in this context, due to communities' discontent in Chiapas regarding the changing landscape of land reform, economic development, and political hegemony to be discussed later on.

Methodology

My findings build on existing literature about Latin American autonomous social movements during and after the Zapatista rebellion. Through the use of spatial theory to identify common themes present in the study of both Chiapas and the Zapatista communities, I analyze existing literature on the Zapatista movement, including historical and ethnographic texts, to demonstrate how autonomous spaces that develop differing vision of power, governance, social relations, and economic production occurs. I combine this critical analysis of the scholarly debates surrounding the Zapatistas with a framework of spatial theory to highlight the role of space as a critical point of contention in studies of the Zapatistas and Chiapas more broadly. Furthermore, previous ethnographic work provides me with interviews, observations, and critiques on the formation of Zapatista communities following the rebellion and the actual lived realities and complicated relationships with the state, Zapatista supporters, and other outside entities such as non-governmental organizations and solidarity networks as well. (Barmeyer 2009; Bobrow-Strain 2007; Eldredge Fitzwater 2019; Harvey, 2005; Krøvel, 2010; Melenotte 2015; Mora 2017; Nash 2001).

However, much of the existing fieldwork neglects the last few years of development in Zapatista communities. With the Zapatistas recently isolated, closing themselves from academic

study, and lacking media attention, I turn to a discursive critique of the Zapatista communiqués published last year which announced the dissolution of their autonomous zones and *juntas de buen gobierno*. The twenty-part statement released from October to December of 2023 provides hints towards the problems facing the group, an explanation of the new form of Zapatista autonomous governance, and an invitation to their thirty-year celebration to supporters. This rhetorical analysis is supplemented with a comparative review of contemporary news, government initiatives, and NGO reports in Chiapas to extrapolate on what might have motivated decentralization of Zapatista communities. The present analysis will also reason on, as stated previously, whether this development is reflective of the Zapatista ideological project for autonomy, self-determination, and collective rights.

Literature Review

Extant literature regarding the Zapatistas proliferated following their 1994 uprising and subsequent development of autonomous municipalities in the years following the rebellion. Studies engaging with the Zapatistas often utilize analytical frameworks to articulate the novelty of the movement however, common themes found throughout the literature discuss the role of the government (Van der Haar 2005; Rus 1994; Washbrook 2005), neoliberalism (Brass 2005; Harvey 2005; Morton 2003), Indigeneity (Forbis 2016; Nash 2001; Speed 2008), and Zapatista discourse versus actual practice (Barmeyer 2009; Melenotte 2015; Mora 2017). A mainstay across literature highlights the Zapatistas' positioning as a majority Indigenous group, their discursive adoption of Indigenous identity in their media communications, and the history of government involvement with Indigenous groups in Chiapas, to analyze how the Zapatistas align themselves with other Indigenous rights movements, the innovations of the movement, and their

impact on movements for autonomy and Indigenous politics (Eldridge-Fitzwater 2019; Jung 2003; Stahler Sholk 2010).

Historical analyses of the origins of the Zapatistas provide relevant context in Mexico, and specifically Chiapas, to explain the issues facing the Indigenous *campesino* population in the country that ultimately led to the uprising in 1994 (Bobrow-Strain 2007; Brass 2005; Rus 1994; Van Der Haar 2005; Washbrook 2005). Within the historiography of the late twentieth-century Zapatismo, many authors underscore the contentious relationship between the state and landowning elite during the early to mid-twentieth century as land reform was instituted across the country. In this way, the state attempted to create governable spaces through its interjection into Indigenous *campesino* communities through both the connection to land reform and implementation of government offices and figures into community life that tied the state to the community (Rus 1994). At the same time, elite *ladino* landowners reinforced hierarchies of power through systems of debt peonage to Indigenous communities (Bobrow-Strain 2005). Other historical scholars emphasize the role of neoliberalism in changing socioeconomic and political relationships in Chiapas starting in the 1980s (Brass 2005; Harvey 2005; A. D. Morton 2017). These authors describe how neoliberalism impacted the process of territorialization as new economic frontiers for profit were sought in Chiapas during Mexico's default on debt. This search for new productive lands led to the amendment of agrarian reform in Mexico which allowed for privatization of communal lands to be used for production and export (Harvey 2005).

Another body of scholarship analyzes the Zapatista movement and how it has developed through ethnographic fieldwork, which highlights the lived experiences of the Zapatistas and their support bases (Barmeyer 2009; Eldredge Fitzwater 2019; Melenotte 2015; Mora 2017; Nash 2001; Speed 2008). These scholars primarily focus on how autonomous organizing separate from

the Mexican government occurs on the ground in the daily practices, governing, and political projects of the group. Authors also encourage a nuanced assessment of the on-the-ground practices in Zapatista and surrounding Indigenous campesino communities (Barmeyer 2009; Melenotte 2015). Another group of scholars examine the Zapatistas through a political and cultural lens, emphasizing the role of Indigenous politics in shaping Zapatista discourse as well as the political, social, and economic innovations of the movement which have promoted participatory democracy, autonomy, and self-determination (Eldredge Fitzwater 2019; Forbis 2016; Speed 2008; Stahler-Sholk 2010; 2019). Each group of scholars foreground a common theme of how the Zapatistas have tied cultural and spatial practices to the demands of their movement through a rejection of the Mexican government and elites in the region.

Scholars have also combined the study of spatial theory with critical analysis of Chiapas to discuss the contentious role of territory, land, and space throughout the region (Bobrow-Strain 2007; Gambetti 2009; Hesketh, Coleman, and Doshi 2017; Wilson 2011; 2012). Spatial theorists analyzing Zapatista communities most often focus on the role of the state and local elites against the former, notably centering government programs that have altered infrastructure and development in the region (Hesketh 2017; Wilson 2011; Wilson 2012). Few sources outright analyze how the Zapatistas reform space in their communities through new forms of government, economic, and political spheres that reinforce their goal for autonomy and self-governance. Factors such as Indigenous identity and rural life are often overlooked. However, the Zapatistas have created new spaces for governing, economic, and cultural practices in their autonomous zones thereby meriting an analysis of how space has actually been reconfigured according to those objectives. As a result, the analysis of spatial practices, through examples such as land reclamation, assemblies of governance, and domestic activities, combined with an analysis of

spatial formation in Chiapas, Mexico, and the global economy is necessary to demonstrate how the Zapatistas have both discursively and practically attempted to institute new formulations of autonomy and self-determination in their communities.

Among spatial studies, several scholars identify how space is both socially produced and can therefore be altered according to a specific vision of autonomy through spatial reformation (Chatterton 2010; Newman 2011; Pickerill and Chatterton 2006; Woodward, Jones III, and Marston 2012; Zibechi 2012). These scholars wed the formation of space with autonomous projects to demonstrate how space can be intentionally constructed in such a way that autonomy is built into the daily life of its inhabitants. Through reclamation of land, new forms of governance predicated on participatory democracy, and control over economic activity, communities can institute autonomy through the realm of space (Newman 2011; Pickerill and Chatterton 2006). Space consequently is a key arena through which the Zapatistas have asserted their right to practice self-determination and autonomy. While scholars often address the link between material outcomes and the ways in which the Zapatistas form their spaces, research on how the Zapatistas reform their autonomous zones to buttress their own version of autonomy is ambiguous at best. Furthermore, the groups' diminishing position in the public eye as well as the lack of more contemporary academic sources that follow recent developments in the Zapatista movement suggest new research that highlights current projects and innovations of the movement are needed. Given previous scholarly interest on the innovations of the Zapatistas as a social movement, their previous and new reformations of space are important in building on academic analyses regarding how autonomy can be built into communities through the creation of new spaces for new spatial practices such as self-governance, varied economies, and cultural critique.

Theory of Space

Marxist French philosopher Henri Lefebvre spurred an academic interested in space with his seminal work (1974) *The Production of Space* which introduces space not just as a physical object that all people interact with and shape but also as a product of social and historical processes which are influenced by current power structures (110). Lefebvre problematizes space through his use of a “spatial triad” in order to trace the history of space from what he describes as its natural state to a state of abstraction in which its meaning becomes obscured (Lefebvre 1974: 33-45). This triad consists of three aspects which act on and constitute one another: spatial practice, representations of space, and representational space. Spatial practice, or perceived space, are the set of social, economic, and political norms that materially produce space and that which people shape on a daily level. Representations of space, or conceived space is space which is planned or created by the government, corporations, or communities (as in a chain of restaurants, urban planning projects, or community garden). Representational space, or lived space, is space as it is experienced through associated symbols and imagery, how it is interpreted by the individual and how we act accordingly. Lefebvre’s spatial triad is useful in understanding how space can implement and reproduce historical and contemporary hierarchies of power through how it is planned, developed, interpreted, and interacted with.

Lefebvre did not intend to say that all space is intentionally built in a certain way but that the three ways in which space is produced and constituted in the spatial triad can reinforce power and capitalist hierarchy within the nation-state. Capitalist and state development of space alienates people and their communities from their historical, social, political, and economic spatial practices because it dominates how space is used. On an economic level, capitalism

separates the producers from the means of production; on a political level, power becomes consolidated in the hands of the state; on a cultural level, everyday life is homogenized against the varied practices of communities and cultures (Wilson 2011: 995). However, this domination of space is necessarily incomplete because hegemony develops unevenly, and individuals and communities continue to exercise their historically preexisting spatial practices (Wilson 2011: 996). Ultimately, spaces have never existed isolated from larger processes on local, regional, and global scales but their total domination by hegemonic power is not a complete or fixed process without pushback from the embodied practices of individuals and their communities. Acknowledgement of this resistance pushes scholars to pay attention to the production of spatial differences in varying contexts where hegemonic power is contested (Hesketh, Coleman, and Doshi 2017).

For the purposes of this research, we will stop short of an in-depth analysis of Lefebvre's incursions regarding how capitalism creates abstract space and instead focus on how the incomplete domination of space by hegemonic power relations due to the aforementioned processes opens up terrains of struggle against hegemony. Since space is partially produced through historical and contemporary processes of hegemonic power it, by extension, has the potential to be formed and reformed according to the particular goals of those who inhabit space. In this sense, the appropriation of space by a group, community, or nation has the potential to produce and reinforce a vision of space which aligns with the goals of that group. Just as everyday life is impacted by the domination of space by economic, historical, social, and political processes, people equally have the capacity to resist those forms of domination and collectively transform our "material and representational reality,"(Wilson 2013).

This means that autonomy and self-determination can be built into space through the way the individual and community interact with and form space. If capitalism, the government, and cultural homogenization lead to the domination of space, the search for autonomy also occurs in the realm of spatial practice. Autonomous geographies therefore resist domination in the four areas mentioned previously (political ownership, cultural literacy, self-determination of organizational forms, and economic self-reliance). The Zapatistas' autonomous zones, which operate according to their own model of political, economic, and social norms, are accordingly spaces of resistance to spatial domination from the state, economy, and cultural homogenization. Both Zapatista communities and autonomous zones, therefore, can be understood as "a project for the collective management and social appropriation of the space of production and the space of everyday life," (Wilson 2011: 1005). The struggle for autonomy for the Zapatistas, then, occurs through the restructuring of space and alteration of spatial practice in their daily lives.

Since the Zapatistas have taken over and occupied land in the Lacandón jungle of Chiapas, Yuko Miki's concept of "insurgent geographies" is useful in understanding how the struggle over the organization, occupancy and administration of space occurs through the Zapatista autonomous zones. Miki posits "insurgent geographies" as a framework to analyze territories claimed by *quilombos* (maroons) and how they use space to create a specific vision of citizenship and antislavery politics in the absence of legal avenues for freedom in Brazil (Miki 2018: 26). This concept aligns with Lefebvre's work on the production of space as certain groups are able to implicate their own visions of space according to their goals. Miki's concept clarifies how autonomous geographies can be achieved through space as she explains that space can be utilized to shape the daily life of its inhabitants through the actual lived acts of practicing autonomy. Therefore, Miki's assertions regarding space emphasize how Zapatista communities

in Chiapas assert their own visions of space following the creation of their autonomous zones and rejection of state interference. In this context, I contend that the Zapatistas utilize territorial claims and spatial reconstruction to assert a specific vision of autonomy and self-determination in the absence, or rejection of state interference.

Space in Chiapas

The 1994 Zapatista uprising highlighted a series of historical and, at the time, contemporary issues facing the Indigenous *campesino* population in the Lacandón Jungle of Chiapas. Author Bob-row Strain (2007) introduces in his ethnographic research of Chiapas, the idea of competing territorialities or “diverse constellations of social-spatial practices that produce bounded spaces,” between the Mexican government, local *ladino* landowners, Indigenous *campesinos*, and the country’s integration into the global capitalist economy (7). In this context, the ordering of space in Chiapas is contested through multiple actors struggling over bounded spaces. The first site of contestation of note for this study is through the *ejido*. In Chiapas and the rest of the country, the Mexican government used agrarian reform as a primary means to connect *campesinos* to the state following the Mexican revolution, converting over half of the land in Chiapas into *ejidos* in the twentieth century (Van der Haar 2005: 486). As previously stated, *ejidos* were not subject to privatization, allowed for communities of organized farmers to own their land (as long as they worked on the land), and receive government aid. Despite this, dispute among *ejiditarios* and with landowners was common and the Mexican government often resolved conflicts slowly, inadequately, with minor benefits. (Van der Haar, 2005: 500).

Agrarian reform in the region also led to many Indigenous groups adopting the *campesino* identity in order to demand state resources, *ejido* land, and collective rights (Boyer 2003: 15) This in turn gave relative autonomy in local authority structures to those communities

but reinforced reliance on the state for material resources.(Yashar 1998: 32) The Mexican state further solidified its presence in Indigenous communities in Chiapas through the establishment of offices for agrarian and labor matters, the rearranging of Indigenous governance in closed communities, and the implementation of government officials called *scribe principales*.(Rus 1994) Consequently, Indigenous *campesino* communities were tied directly to the government through a *clientelist* political system where government aid rested on the communities' allegiance to the ruling party (the Partido Revolucionario Institucional). The reformation of space through agrarian reform allowed for the Mexican government to extend its reach in Chiapas and create governable spaces.

This, however, did not mean that local elites relinquished their power, but rather *ladino* landowners grappled with ways to circumvent agrarian reform to maintain their economic dominance. Many *ladinos* retained the most productive parcels of land and used aid from the government to participate in more lucrative activities such as cattle ranching (Bobrow-Strain 2007: 21) *Ejidors*, being comprised of mainly poor peasant farmers on land with oftentimes little productive capacity, led many Indigenous Chiapans to continue working on agricultural estates. This extended a tradition of paternalistic politics characterizing the *ladino* landowner as the paternal boss in tandem with the government. Agricultural estates were subsequently spaces of marginalization for Indigenous *campesinos*. The domination of space through both the state and landowning elites in the *ejido* and agricultural estate, however, was limited, fractured, and fragile as the state could not feasibly control the everyday regulation of land tenure and many concerns regarding the *ejidos* were ultimately dealt with by the community (Van der Haar 2005: 494-495). For landowning elites, conflicts over the bounded space of agricultural estates, combined with the wave of radical leftist movements in the country, led to increased peasant mobilizations that

seized land from estates across Chiapas and appropriated the land for themselves (Washbrook 2005: 441). As Lefebvre explained, hegemonic domination over space is not a complete process and in Chiapas Indigenous *campesinos* continued to contest bounded space through land seizures and autonomous governance in the *ejidos*.

Chiapas underwent further spatial reorganization due to the governments' project to colonize the Lacandón Jungle during the middle of the twentieth century with the passage of the *Ley Federal de Colonización* in 1946 (Trench 2008: 612). Colonization of the jungle was meant initially to alleviate the discontent among Indigenous communities in need of land for agriculture and as a means to entrench the government into the peripheral state. After the law's passage, many groups from both within and outside of Chiapas began to move to the Lacandón Jungle searching for land. Tzeltal and Tzotzil Mayan Indigenous groups from the highlands of Chiapas migrated into the Lacandón and were granted ownership with little recognition of the existence of other groups in the region. The resulting swell in population in the jungle encouraged many to work as debt peons on agricultural estates. These groups were often in contention with those native to the jungle such as the Lacandonés, who found themselves in dispute over lands resettled by other Indigenous *campesinos*. The creation of the Zona Lacandona, a reserve established to mitigate deforestation, was intended as a remedy to this dispute, but subsequently displaced almost 6,000 Tzeltal and Chol Maya who had immigrated to the region. Major tension continued with the Lacandonés as they were granted over 600,000 hectares of land on the reserve, causing resentment among other groups (McGee 2002: 25).

The colonization of the Lacandón reached its' height in the 1970s with a population increase from 5,000 in 1940 to over 150,00 (McGee 2002: 73). As various Indigenous groups moved from highland Chiapas to the Selva Lacandona, many had no longstanding relationship

with the government, elites, and agrarian reform. While often these communities operated to a certain degree with recognition from the state and developed a *clientelist* relationship with it, their recent establishment had little historical connection to the spaces they occupied. The new communities were thus largely freed from government control and often came into conflict with *ladino* landowners and other groups who sought the land they now occupied (Benjamin 2000: 436). Conflicts over space in the Selva Lacandona were compounded by the end of agrarian reform in 1992. When agrarian reform ended, groups seeking recourse to land conflicts saw the end of formal legal measures through which they could receive government recognition.

As a result, the members previously from the Fuerzas de Liberación Nacional who had fled to the jungle found supporters eager for new avenues to resolve their discontent with the government and empowered by radical political traditions in Chiapas. To this day, most of the autonomous territory held by the Zapatistas is within the jungle. How space is used in Chiapas through agricultural estates, colonization, and the *ejido* system has historically been contested by a multiplicity of actors across scales. The Mexican government, *ladino* landowners, and Indigenous *campesinos* have competed to alter space according to their own goals in ways that intersect with the consolidation of the nation during the post-revolutionary period, the development of the global economy, and the interests of local actors. The Zapatistas intervened in this context and, in the creation of their autonomous zones, created new bounded spaces where spatial practices that reinforce autonomy are exercised in their daily lives.

Indigeneity and Space

The Zapatistas interceded in Chiapas against a landscape of conflicting spatialities, further compounded by the creation of Indigenous alterity since Spanish colonization. Indigeneity as an

‘other’ identity developed when Spanish colonization and the subsequent formation of nation-states during decolonial and revolutionary periods necessitated a solution to the supposed “Indian problem.” Saldaña-Portillo’s (2016) use of the analytical category of “racial geography” helps to explain how Indigenous alterity was coproduced by historical, economic, and political developments (21). Racial geography for Portillo focuses attention on how power has situated Indigenous peoples in spatially specific ways that are informed by ideological projects for hegemonic power of a particular era. While Saldaña-Portillo explains that pre-European colonization, groups native to the Americas were not associated with a set series of spatial and cultural practices. However, Spanish colonization created Indigenous alterity and Indigeneity became a “territorial articulation of autonomous political and economic practices that enabled cultural reproduction” which were intercalated with “Spanish and mestizo geography,” (Saldaña-Portillo 2016: 124). In essence, the position and spatial practices of Indigenous groups in Mexico have been created along and in contention with the Spanish colonial empire and later the formation of the Mexican nation following independence and its eventual revolution.

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to fully historicize the relationship between Indigeneity and space from colonialism until the modern day, it is necessary to understand that Indigenous populations have not existed within a cultural, political, or economic vacuum and contemporary spatialities are not defined by a predisposition towards a particular formation nor are they inherently subversive to the state (Prout and Howitt 2009: 397). Although being Indigenous does not presuppose any form of economic or political organization that is inherently counter to capitalism, neoliberalism, or the nation-state, the formation of Indigenous identity in post-revolutionary Mexico connected Indigeneity to an anti-modern, anti-nation, underdeveloped, and inherently rural identity. Mexican intellectual elites and institutions such as

Instituto Nacional Indigenista (INI, National Indigenist Institute) proffered this ideal to delineate what exactly being “Indigenous” meant as a means to address the question of the state’s treatment of Indigenous peoples (Caballero 2018: 201).

This informed the actions and interactions regarding Indigenous people from the Mexican government and elites which, while not an even process amongst Indigenous communities whatsoever, development and assimilation into the nation became the dominant rhetoric which simultaneously folkloricized Indigenous people and placed them in the past (Vazquez-Cordoba 2023). By placing Indigeneity in the past, Mexico predicated the formation of the nation on their Indigenous groups but refused to accommodate Indigenous spatial practices such as autonomous governing bodies, varying economies, and land ownership which challenged the representation of the nation (Saldaña-Portillo 2016: 128). The spatiality of Indigenous people in Mexico then, is represented by an association with primitivity and rurality. Practices which conflicted with the development of Mexico into a modern capitalist nation-state became a problem to be dealt with through a modernizing project (Roseblatt 2014: 108).

The Zapatistas did not initially position themselves as arbiters of Indigenous rights. It was not until 1995 that they began discursively situating themselves as a majority Indigenous group during the negotiations of the San Andres Accords with the Mexican government which included the demand for the right to self-determination and autonomy (Lynn 1997: 24). In doing so, the Zapatistas linked specific spatial practices of autonomous, collective governance and economic activity to Indigeneity and demanded the right to autonomy and self-governance. The Zapatistas have more recently utilized a rhetoric of Indigeneity to challenge Mexican nationalist and multicultural rhetoric which continues to bind Indigenous groups to a particular relationship to the land, the economy, and politics that presupposes a lack of ability for self-governance. When

discussing the role of the government in its treatment of Indigenous people throughout history, Zapatista ex-spokesperson Subcomandante Marcos explains that Indigenous people continue to be a vanishing point for those in power who say, “I am going to destroy your life, that is, your territory (Marcos 2023).

This rhetoric reinforces the Zapatistas discursive rejection of the government and highlights the link between spatial practice and Indigeneity. While the Mexican government and intellectual elites have divested Indigenous spatial practices with culture, the Zapatistas seek to amplify those ties and attempt to create new spaces for Indigenous groups where varied forms of governance and economic activity can respond to the community’s needs. The Zapatista movement has therefore helped to shape the political discourse of Indigeneity in Chiapas—and Mexico more broadly—to become synonymous with autonomy, dignity, and the right to spatial practices for Indigenous groups (Matute 2021: 5). Fundamentally, the input of Indigenous groups and discursive positioning of the Zapatistas as Indigenous sparked a revival in the practice of diverse territorial and cultural customs within the autonomously governed zones of the Zapatistas. The emphasis on self-determination challenges state sovereignty, while the demand for collective rights opposes neoliberal principles of individualism and privatization, discussed in the next section.

Neoliberalism and Space

Despite the historical precedent in Chiapas, the promulgation of neoliberalism in the latter half of the twentieth century fundamentally altered the relationship between the state, elites, and Indigenous *campesinos*, destabilizing established and competing spatial practices. In its most basic terms, neoliberalism refers to a political ideology in which free market capitalism

is the primary model to enable individual freedom (Martin 2005: 204). In this way, the state's role is reformed to uphold a free market, leading to reduced government regulations and a minimization of social services in favor of privatization (Laurell 2015: 253). This process has become a global paradigm, most acutely beginning in the 1970s and 80s as Keynesian economics fell out of favor and political leaders sought new avenues for advanced capital accumulation (Cahill and Konings 2017: 88). While the state's role is minimized in the provision of social welfare and the unfettered development of new markets, the process is still heavily mediated by the state and in fact, relies on the state to open up new spaces for markets of production. As a result, neoliberalism, just as all political and economic systems, has been unevenly implemented into different regions of the world and produces locally specific spatial expressions while new markets and productive spaces are advanced to increase production and accumulation of resources (Perreault and Martin 2005: 197).

In the case of Mexico, the modern formation of the nation following the revolution led to the country's further integration into the global economy as the government consolidated power and sought to industrialize its market.³ Mexico's promulgation of neoliberalism has had its own local expressions and outcomes. In particular, previously bounded spaces such as the agricultural estate and *ejidos* have undergone vast restructuring due to a process Raul Zibechi (2012) describes as deterritorialization, in which the relationships to territory are mutated and often rural areas are transformed into sites of production (15). The effective end of land reform in Mexico guaranteed fully with the reformation of Article 27 of the Mexican constitution and implementation of the North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement followed this process as *ejidos* were

³ For further reading on neoliberalism in Mexico see: Andrew Morton, "Structural Change and Neoliberalism in Mexico: 'Passive Revolution' in the Global Political Economy," *Third World Quarterly* 24, no. 4 (2003): 631-653; Juan Pablo Arroyo Ortiz, "The Establishment of Neoliberalism in Mexico," *PSL Quarterly Review* 72, no. 289 (2019): 167-184.

allowed to privatize to make way for agricultural production, fundamentally upending longstanding legacies of how communal land was governed. Without agrarian reform, Indigenous *campesinos* no longer had legal recourse for land disputes, access to state subsidization, or credit. The privatization of *ejidos* also meant that communities no longer had to live on and work the land but rather, could migrate when needed. Accordingly, privatization increased migration throughout the country as people sought new avenues for subsistence, leading to a reliance on wage labor over agriculture (Laurell 2015: 253). This is a fundamental restructuring of space throughout Mexico as the *ejido* no longer provided a bounded space for communities to govern autonomously or practice subsistence economies (Nash 2001: 7).

Scholars argue that in terms of neoliberalism's political and cultural implications, both neoliberalism and the subsequent limited capacity of the Mexican government to provide for social rights has in turn led to the suspension of material resources and collective rights for communities (Forbis 2016; Hale 2002; Martin 2005; Mora 2007). While neoliberalism affects the role of the state as an arbiter of social, cultural, and human rights, the necessity of market supremacy according to the doctrine creates a paradox of divestment of the state from social rights and an increased rule of law to equalize the market (Speed 2008: 28). This process emphasizes the role of the individual rather than the collective as a political subject and places responsibility on the individual to "do the work of subject-formation that would otherwise fall to the state," (Hale 2002: 496). The importance of the individual over collective rights to social welfare has required a new means through which the individual could be tied to the national project. Multiculturalism, or the recognition of the varying cultures in the nation, allows for the government to tie groups to the state because they are formally recognized, while at the same time legitimating the government's sovereignty and political power (Speed 2008: 30).

Mexico formally proffered multiculturalism in the 1992 revision of the constitution, which recognized the plural character of the country and the right for groups to varied cultural practices. Multicultural recognition, however, affirms cultural difference while articulating limits to those rights, creating acceptable forms of cultural practice that does not interfere with neoliberal hegemony (Hale 2002: 490). Cultural rights can be guaranteed so long as they do not incur any damage to spaces of production or challenge the primacy of the state. Therefore, multiculturalism divests communities and individuals from their varied spatial practices while emphasizing deterritorialized cultural practices. Subsequently, one of the limitations of multicultural recognition rests in its separation of the cultural and spatial. When spatial practices such as autonomous governance or varied economies threaten the market or state hegemony, they are deemed radical (Kymlicka 2013: 112).

The Zapatistas, having begun their rebellion on the day of the implementation of NAFTA, have recurrently rejected neoliberalism in their rhetoric (Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional 2016). As a movement, they have consistently attempted to reject neoliberal logics of profit maximization, market expansion, and individual rights, instead emphasizing need for collective rights, self-determination, and autonomy for their communities and communities around the world (Krøvel 2010: 25). In this sense, the Zapatistas advocate for the right to varied spatial practices in the economic, cultural, and political realm. By extension, they also reject neoliberal multiculturalism, which places limits on acceptable forms of resistance and divests communities from their spatial practices in favor of market development. Their rebellion is particularly significant in the context of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which symbolized the broader neoliberal agenda of market integration and deregulation. Through the subsequent development of their autonomous governance structures and communal land

practices, the Zapatistas exemplify an alternative model that prioritizes autonomy, communal well-being, and cultural preservation over market-driven imperatives. This persistent opposition demonstrates the critical intersection of economic policies and spatial practice revealing that genuine autonomy and resistance to market hegemony requires a fundamental rethinking of the relationship between the state, the economy, space, and community.

Zapatista Incursions on Space

The Zapatistas were borne from the longstanding tradition of contestation over space already occurring in the southernmost region of Mexico. Their takeover of space have been bold and outright, with their first major act as a group challenging traditional norms of state sovereignty, *ladino* dominance, and neoliberal power relations during the uprising through the takeover of several cities in Chiapas, seizure of government buildings, and reclamation of land from large agricultural estates. These acts constituted “spatial transgressions...[which] are forms of resistance in themselves,”(Gambetti 2009: 44). The invasion of sites of governance and urban centers which were typically inaccessible to Indigenous *campesinos* breached the hierarchy of power in Chiapas that places them outside of spaces of governance and production. These spatial transgressions continued in the years following the rebellion when, after seizing nearly 250,000 hectares of land, the Zapatistas consolidated their territory and began forming autonomous zones and instituting an autonomous government which operated in direct opposition to the Mexican state (Eldredge Fitzwater 2019: 3). The reformation of space was not necessarily the intention of the movement from the beginning: following the negotiations of the San Andrés Accords with the Mexican government in which the state ultimately decided that the Zapatista demands for the right to self-governance threatened state sovereignty and pulled out of the negotiations, the

Zapatistas retreated into their territories. Without legal recourse then, as Miki discusses in her analysis of *quilombos* in Brazil, the Zapatistas turning inwards to the development of their own spaces to assert a specific vision of autonomy and self-governance (Miki 2018). The creation of the *Municipios Autónomos Rebeldes Zapatistas* created a bounded space through which their own vision of autonomy, predicated on the ability to make their own decisions and take ownership of the consequences, was put into practice in their daily lives.

Autonomous Governance

When the Zapatistas ceased government negotiations, rejected relations with the state, and began the development of their autonomous zones, they took on the role of creating new spaces for autonomous governance, varied economies, and social life. These new ways of living were part of the daily formation of autonomy in the creation of new spaces which Lefebvre posits as the only means through which a breakdown of the hegemonic power of the state can occur (Lefebvre 1974). Since the announcement of the creation of the *caracoles*, the organization of Zapatista communities constituted a network of villages which were linked to one another through larger assemblies of communities from the municipality to the region, all linked through the *caracol*.⁴ *Caracoles* are a clear and direct spatial reorganization as the primary meeting place for communities and their autonomous governments. They are spaces created between the communities to facilitate governance, education, healthcare, and other management of issues of daily life. While they are not the same as a seat of government such as a capital city, each *caracol* functions as a place of central gathering through which social services, governance, and economic activity can be coordinated. In contrast to a restricted building where governance

⁴ See Appendix II: ⁴ Neils Barmeyer, “Taking on the State: Resistance, Education, and Other Challenges Facing the Zapatista Autonomy Project,” *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 15, no. 5 (2008): 509.

occurs, such as a congressional building or police station, the *caracoles* are meant as a space for assembly wherein governance is administered at the community level, from the collective upwards (Gambetti 2009: 67).

In Caracol Oventik, Sabrina Melenotte (2015) describes how every *junta de buen gobierno*, or good government council, operating in the region is composed of various autonomous municipal representatives who gather in the caracol to discuss proposals and issues, but these representatives change each week (60). This rotation is meant to remove possibilities for power concentration and clientelism. Beyond the physical space of the *caracol*, however the *juntas de buen gobierno* function according to the doctrine of *mandar obedeciendo* or governing by obeying. *Mandar obedeciendo* is a multidirectional relationship between those who are in rotation as a representative and those who are in the community. To govern by obeying, the representatives must have a direct tie to the people they represent and confer with them in local assemblies. This sort of participatory democracy is required in order to participate and live in Zapatista autonomous zones. In this way, governing becomes a collective learning process where those who are governing are taught how to do so by the community, and the community asserts their needs through political participation in assemblies (Mora 2017: 199). For example, in Caracol I La Realidad, they hold assemblies of the local, municipal, and zone authorities to create proposals for new agreements and projects and once they have developed a proposal, each representative returns to their communities to discuss, alter, or approve of the proposal with other *caracoles* reporting similar processes of consensus (Eldredge Fitzwater 2019: 75).

The Zapatista movement's creation and organization of autonomous zones exemplify an innovative model of self-governance, rooted in spatial reorganization and radical participatory democracy. The assertion of alternative democratic practices challenges the power of the state

which posits acceptable forms of political participation, especially through the supremacy of the law over collective organizing (Speed 2008: 171). Through the establishment of *caracoles*, the Zapatistas have attempted to decentralize power, fostering community-based decision-making and collective governance. By adhering to the principle of *mandar obedeciendo*, the Zapatistas ensure that governance is a reciprocal process, responsive to the needs and inputs of the community. As seen in the practices within Caracol Oventik and Caracol I La Realidad, this approach not only empowers communities but also serves as a living example of how autonomy and self-determination can be actualized through innovative socio-spatial practices.

Autonomous Economies

Beyond the enactment of an alternative political model through spatial practice, the Zapatistas also reorganize productive space in their model of collective labor. Lefebvre's (1974) Marxist interpretation argues that space is altered according to the lines of production through the creation of productive spaces such as factories and agricultural estates. By drawing upon Indigenous traditional practices of collective work called the *cargo*, the Zapatistas work to implement autonomy in their economic practices through the reformation of productive space for the community. The Zapatista economic system as a whole relies on a mixture of non-governmental aid along with collective responsibilities for the management of the community's needs. First, the rejection of any government aid is prerequisite for participation in the autonomous zones which functions to negate possibilities for government co-optation or dominance of the movement. At the same time, the Zapatistas have consistently received non-governmental aid from NGOs which operate in the region. In this way, the Zapatistas function as the intermediary for aid, rather than the government. They attempt to implement strict measures

that ensure the needs of the community are being met and no preference is given to one community over the other (Stahler-Sholk 2010: 273).

Neils Barmeyer, in his (2009) study of the movement's relationship with non-governmental organizations, argues that the Zapatistas are inherently dependent on such aid due to the lack of government resources. The question remains if the use of aid from NGOs is antithetical to the movements' quest for autonomy and self-determination, and to what degree NGO involvement shapes the material outcomes for each Zapatista community. However, I contend that their replacement of the government as intermediaries for material resources functions as a form of autonomy for their communities because the Zapatistas are supplanting the role of the government to regulate space through economic production. This is not to say that the development of communities allowed through NGO aid is always beneficial in nature, or not affected by neoliberal capitalism, but to argue that attempts to supplant the government and capital's role in the space of production represent autonomous decision-making and self-governance.

Other than the external aid they receive, the Zapatista economy primarily relies on taxes and a commitment to collective labor to sustain their communities, as informed by Indigenous traditions of collective work from groups in the Selva Lacandona. The land reclamation following the 1994 rebellion terminated debt peonage on agricultural estates for many supporters and facilitated the redistribution of land to communities in a manner more conducive to agricultural productivity. This control of land then, is the first step in allowing for the institution of collective labor which operates at the community and regional level (Eldredge Fitzwater 2019: 106). In Eldridge-Clearwater's (2019) fieldwork with Tsotsil community members in Caracol I La Realidad, the establishment of economic cooperatives, wherein profits and management are

shared among community members, and collective labor fosters opportunities for investment in community infrastructural projects (107). Collective labor in La Realidad has been pooled to build small stores, plant a cornfield, and maintain a herd of cattle all of which are owned by the community and profits generated are used for other community projects. The adoption of collective labor and the rejection of government aid continue their commitment to autonomy, enabling the community to self-determine its means of sustenance. In this context, spaces of production are, to a significant extent, determined by the communities themselves in ways not possible without the control over space offered by land reclamation.

Moreover, collective labor is integrated into the Zapatista governing structure, not only in the decision-making process but also within their juridical system, serving as a form of punishment to address legal violations. In La Realidad, taxation on any infrastructural projects undertaken by external companies on reclaimed land allows for these revenues to be reinvested into the community (Fitzwater 2019: 91). The Zapatistas' endeavor to create an alternative economic system by developing distinct spaces for economic activities all occurs through land reclamation which allows for the institution of collective labor based on community needs. The use of collective labor, taxes, and NGO aid not only disrupts traditional state control over productive spaces but also fosters economic practices that prioritize community welfare and collective responsibility. Although the Zapatistas operate within the global capitalist economy, their reconfiguration of productive spaces serves to regulate their participation in the world economy, striving to ensure that these spaces are dedicated to community development against capitalist accumulation.

Domestic Sphere

Spatial reformation for autonomy and self-governance extends to all spheres of life in the Zapatista project, and beyond the economic and political realm, Zapatista women have played a major part in creating autonomous spaces. When the EZLN began organizing, Indigenous women in Chiapas experienced, and continue to experience, violence and discrimination from both the militarized state and within their own communities. Women have, in many communities, been relegated to the home and expected to take care of children, maintain the home, and work when needed. However, increased female involvement led to the introduction of new statutes such as The Revolutionary Women's Law that demanded the right to participate in community affairs, education, and decision making (Bellamy 2021: 91). Another such law, which significantly impacted the domestic sphere, was the prohibition of alcohol. Previously, alcohol had been used by the landowning elite to impose debts on peasant families; its prohibition eliminates this debt incentive and provides women with more disposable income to purchase food and other essential resources (Bobrow-Strain 2007: 61). This law and the Revolutionary Women's Law were implemented at the request of women in the communities who have created their own spaces to organize and put forth their own concerns which previously had gone ignored.

As Mariana Mora highlights in her fieldwork in Caracol IV, women in Zapatista communities are politicizing everyday life through collective and individual reflective processes (Mora 2017: 152) In the communities of Caracol IV, women have established their own collectives and assemblies, creating spaces for discussion, training, and employment. While seemingly innocuous, the women's only collectives raise small amounts of revenue to support female political participation and enable them to critique power relations within their communities and destabilize traditional patriarchal ideals (Mora 2017: 155) Consequently,

women have created spaces through which they can introduce new ideals that reject traditional practices while empowering themselves through independence and the reclamation of autonomy. In this way, “Las mujeres zapatistas demuestran aquí, que la cultura no es monolítica ni estática,” as women actively create spaces for reflection.(Sylvia Marcos 2014). Women are also transgressing traditional patriarchal spatial practices that physically place women at the home when they assemble, discuss their lives, and gain some degree of economic independence. The domestic sphere as a space of reproduction and production is actively challenged by Zapatista women who have confronted an intersection of Indigeneity, class, and gender enabling resistance to hierarchical norms, both within and outside of Zapatista communities.

Challenges in Zapatista Spaces

The Zapatistas alter space not just through a rejection of state interference and the reorganization of territories for communal land holdings, but at the level of everyday life. Education, healthcare, work, domestic life, and governance all impact how Zapatista supporters interact with one another and their communities. This does not mean that Zapatista communities have rid themselves of all issues facing their communities. Poverty, a lack of access to resources, and gendered violence, among other conflicts all continue within the autonomous communities despite efforts to build schools, clinics, and new spaces of economic activity. Although little in the way of concrete figures exist regarding improvements in the communities, the levels of poverty remain similar to those from thirty years ago (Clemente 2024). Many supporters have also made the decision to leave the group due to their lack of economic opportunities (Harvey 2005; Mora 2017).

Assembly governance is also a complicated process. From 2013 to 2017, for example, the *junta de buen gobierno* of Oventik was not able to convene an assembly for representatives in their zone due to the sheer geographic size and dispersed population in the region (Eldredge Fitzwater 2019: 78). Shannon Speed (2007) corroborates the difficulties of meeting in Oventik; autonomous governance requiring assembly style democracy complicates decision-making while their model of rotating leadership creates inconsistencies and confusion among representatives (170). Neil Barmeyer's (2008) fieldwork in Zapatista communities San Emiliano and Las Gardenias also demonstrates the internal conflict among communities when rejection of state resources has meant an increase in hardship and poverty, leading to factional splits in which part of the community returns to support of the government (513). The Zapatistas also still operate in opposition to the government and *ladino* landowners, both of whom increasingly rely on paramilitary groups and poverty alleviation programs as a form of "low intensity warfare" in the region aimed at encouraging communities to divest from the group (Mazzei 2023). In the face of these difficulties, the Zapatistas have instituted new spatial practices which encourage autonomous decision-making for their communities through their political, economic, and domestic organizing. In practice, these new spatial forms are not always consistent or without conflict. However, as evidenced in the new "phase of autonomy" discussed in the next section, the Zapatistas continue their quest for autonomy through critical self and community reflection which has led to the invention of new spatial forms.

Varias Muertes Necesarios

The use of public media by the Zapatistas has been a point of study since their inception when they released the "First Declaration from the Lacandón Jungle" (1993) which included a

list of demands from the Mexican government related to the improvement of material conditions, recognition of self-determination to Indigenous communities, and declaration of the illegitimacy of the Mexican government due to its failure to achieve the goals of the revolution (Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional, 1993) Since 1994, the Zapatistas have created their own archive of literature with a large body written by then spokesperson Subcomandante Marcos. This use of publicity could also be described as a form of resistance through spatial transgression as it disrupts the epistemological formation of space in education, history, and storytelling (Gambetti 2009: 52). Consistently the Zapatistas have gone through periods of silence and periods of intense writing and publishing which are often followed by announcements of new developments for the group, their political projects, or invitations to celebrations. In Fall 2023, a period of activity began one again through their website starting with a “Statement from the National Indigenous Congress and the EZLN Regarding the Violent Eviction of the ‘Land and Freedom’ Camp,” (EZLN 2023). Following this, the EZLN published a twenty-part document which began with various prose and poems in a style similar to those of previous writings.

In the fourth part of this document, “*Varias Muertes Necesarios*” (translated to several or various necessary deaths) now-spokesperson Subcomandante Insurgente Moisés announced the decision to end the Zapatista Rebel Autonomous Municipalities (MAREZ) and good government councils (2023b). The fourth part includes a list of other actions such as the termination of all agreements with NGOs and other organizations following their expiration and the closing of the *caracoles* to outsiders for the foreseeable future. They explicitly state that this decision began through a lengthy process of reflection and evaluation which began approximately three years ago. The fourth part also includes an invitation to groups to travel for the thirtieth anniversary celebration though they highlight the danger of travelling through Chiapas due to “disorganized

crime” from the municipal, state, and national government as well as corporations and cartels along with a list of cities that are supposedly controlled by “disorganized crime cartels,” (Moisés 2023b). Lastly, Moisés explains that the rural areas in Chiapas have a more serious issues with crime, particularly along the border with Guatemala because the “North American [US] government” has “turned migration into a business” harkening to the deterritorialization occurring in Chiapas (Moisés 2023b).

The sixth and seventh part include a story from literary figure Don Durito of the Lacandón Jungle and an Indigenous history regarding a goddess named Ixmucané. It is not until the ninth part titled “La Nueva Estructura de la Autonomía Zapatista,” or the “New Structure of Zapatista Autonomy” that Moisés explains how the Zapatistas are reforming their communities (Moisés 2023c). He relates that the main base is the “Local Autonomous Government” (GAL) which is the core of all autonomy and is subject to the assembly of each community that controls its own resources and coordinates its relationship with non-Zapatista organizations, towns, and communities (Moisés 2023c). Moisés states explicitly that instead of the dozens of MAREZ that existed, now there are thousands of local autonomous governments which convene into Collectives of Zapatista Autonomous Government (CGAZ) that discuss matters related to the assemblies of the GALs. These assemblies can be called upon by the coordinators of each local autonomous government who are notably not authorities but are more-so advocates to identify when the local autonomous governments’ need to coordinate to discuss issues, plans, and proposals. This appears to be the replacement of the *juntas de buen gobierno*, of which Moisés states that rather than 12 *juntas de buen gobierno* now there will be hundreds (Moisés 2023c).

The final step in this new form of organization is the Assemblies of Collectives of Zapatista Autonomous Governments (ACGAZ) which ultimately hold no authority because they

depend on the CGAZ, which in turn depend on the GALs. The former preside over autonomous zone assemblies and are based in the *caracoles* but are able to move between the GALs that need attention (Moisés 2023c). This means that, in comparison to the previous structure of autonomy, the coordination of autonomous governance has been removed from the *juntas de buen gobierno* and MAREZ and reallocated to the Local Autonomous Government that make up the Collectives and the Assemblies of Collectives.⁵ The ninth part ends with a statement of intention, that Zapatista autonomy continues, that this has been a collective decision created by the criticisms and self-reflection of their support bases, and that this new stage of autonomy is made to confront the worst of the “capitalist hydra,” (Moisés 2023c).

In the final part of the released writings, titled “El Común y la No Propiedad” Moisés proposes a final concept in the new form of Zapatista autonomy which is based on land held without ownership (Moisés 2023e). These lands are not private, communal, or federally owned but instead are theoretically held by no one based on an agreement between the residents of the region regardless of their affiliation with the Zapatistas. Moisés then details a historical analysis of space in Chiapas which examines property as an institution itself, explaining that the creation of women’s spaces for reflection was the starting point for autonomous practice in their communities. He goes on to explain how the *ejido* system itself was a fundamental separation of space, necessitating the exclusion of some and pitting *campesinos* against one another based on ownership. Although Moisés alludes to the practice of non-ownership of land having already occurred in areas around the Lacandón, this is a new concept developed between those surrounding the land (2023e).

⁵ See Appendix II: Lola Sepúlveda, “Los Cambios En La Autonomía Zapatista,” *El Salto*, June 2024, <https://www.elsaltodiario.com/ezln/cambios-autonomia-zapatista>.

Privately held land and communal land still exist; however, the *tierra común* has no owner and can be worked on by those who want to and the fruits of that labor go to those who work the land (Moisés 2023e). Anyone can work the land because it belongs to no one so long as those in the region agree and comply with the rules for common use of the land, to be determined by those surrounding the land. This allows space for Zapatista communities to negotiate land use with surrounding communities regardless of their affiliation with the Zapatistas. As a new political project, the Zapatistas also offer some of the land to those from other areas of the world to work, be taught how to work it, or teach others how to work it. As the last part in the twenty-part series, there is no explanation (at this point) for who will be invited to work the land or how it will be operated. However, it appears that following the Zapatista world tour in 2021, they decided as a group to offer space for others to learn how to practice autonomy through working on the land.

Moisés explains that through the creation and organization of their autonomous municipalities, the Zapatistas were able to learn how to govern themselves (2023d). This, however, was not a complete and uniform process and brought its own complications, conflicts, and issues to the forefront. Now, having learned from older forms of organization, the Zapatistas are creating new spaces of autonomy which build upon, or discard traditions created nearly thirty years ago. A willingness to self-reform has been a consistent theme throughout Zapatista rhetoric, in which self-governance and autonomy involve the right to make mistakes, learn from and rectify those mistakes (Subcomandante Marcos 2018). This new formulation of autonomy is, then, a radical decentering of the state and capitalism as an experiment in response to the deepening social inequalities, criminal activity, and deterritorialization in Chiapas. The Zapatistas, through the implementation of the GALs, are instituting a new spatial construction of

autonomy to address issues caused by the *juntas de buen gobierno* which had taken over the role of the state but still functioned as a hierarchical power. The creation of *tierra común* based on non-ownership is a novel spatial organization which, although practiced in some areas, is an attempt to mitigate conflicts with surrounding non-Zapatista communities and works as a means through which other groups can be engaged in autonomous organizing without having to outright be involved in their autonomous zones.

Space in Chiapas Contemporarily

These new forms of organizing for the Zapatistas represent the conflicts over space and spatial domination occurring in Chiapas, and more specifically the Lacandón Jungle, in the present moment. Despite common challenges such as a lack of economic resources, generational turnover, and internal conflict, the Zapatista reorganization also reflects larger socioeconomic and political issues in the region that have changed since the creation of their autonomous zones in 2003. Although violence has been a mainstay in the region, since and before the Zapatista rebellion, the Zapatistas continuously refer to heightened levels of violence throughout the twenty-part communiqués released in Fall 2023, highlighting the role of “disorganized crime,” paramilitary groups, and the Mexican military (Moisés 2023b). These communiqués come just over a year after the release of the Chiapas 94 Campaign Plan in 2022 from the Chiapas Secretary of Defense which planned to end the military structure of the Zapatistas (the EZLN), isolate their support bases, and disconnect them from solidarity activists and sympathetic communities (“Plan de Campaña Chiapas 94” 2022).

This plan included the use of opposition civilian communities to form armed groups to incite direct conflict with the EZLN while any sympathizing communities were meant to be dealt

with through their ties to the government and local leaders. Moisés briefly explains in the communiques that the EZLN has been reorganized to increase defense and security of towns against aggression from companies, military invasions, pandemics, and catastrophes to ensure that all Zapatista communities survive even if they are isolated from one another (2023c). The decentralization of their autonomous zones into local autonomous governments subsequently also allows for communities to organize without having to gather into assemblies in the *caracoles*. With the government actively attempting to divide communities, the reorganization of the EZLN and decentralization leaves the community in charge of creating the conditions of autonomy necessary to their particular situations. Communities are also not beholden to other communities especially in times when local conflict prevents them from meeting. This is a flexibility unprecedented in Zapatista organizing wherein intracommunity conflict has led to a lack of decision making (Speed 2007: 170).

Displacement, violence, and conflict remain a common theme in the state that encourages deterritorialization and disconnect from spatial practice. Most recently, 4,000 citizens of the town Tila have been displaced due to conflicts among peasant farmers, paramilitaries, and cartels (Verza, 2024). Zapatista communities themselves also face expulsion, such as the 2019 dispossession of families in the Zapatista town Nuevo San Gregorio (Fray Bartolome de Las Casas 2022). Attacks on communities in pueblo Emiliano Zapata, Moisés y Gandhi, and La Resistencia have all led to displacement and destruction of community schools, stores, and housing (Fray Bartolome de Las Casas 2023: 52). These attacks have been perpetrated by both paramilitaries and members of other communities which have been connected to local bosses in the region (Fray Bartolome de Las Casas 2023: 53). The Mexican military also maintains its largest presence in Chiapas, with 12,000 military personnel and over 13,000 other security

elements stationed in the region (Oropeza 2024). This has been attributed to both the large influx in migrants from Central America passing through the border of Chiapas and Mexico as well territorial fragmentation caused by large infrastructural projects which have incited conflict when communities oppose those projects (Fray Bartolome de Las Casas 2023: 29).

The largest infrastructural project is new *Tren Maya* which crosses through Zapatista and other Indigenous territories and has been the site of protest across the country. The *Tren Maya* is a government initiative to connect tourist destinations to historic Mayan sites as a means of redistributing the flow of tourist traffic and was created without input from the communities in which it traverses. Many protests even beyond the Zapatistas have broken out since the beginning of its construction (Linares, León, and Montiel 2022). The influx of migration and poverty in the region have also contributed to an increase in cartel activity, with the Sinaloa Cartel and Jalisco Nueva Generación battling for narcotics trade routes and human trafficking of migrants which the Zapatistas directly conflict with as they have held a ban on narcotics in their communities since the inception of the MAREZ (Fray Bartolome de Las Casa 2022: 32).

Overall, contemporary spatial disputes in Chiapas underscore the intricate and volatile interplay between government forces, paramilitary groups, organized crime, local communities, and the Zapatista autonomous zones. These dynamics necessitate adaptation within Zapatista autonomous spaces to safeguard their communities against escalating violence and external threats as well as a recommitment to building autonomy in the face of mounting repression. The reorganization efforts, as described by Moisés, aim to enhance the defense and resilience of Zapatista towns amidst aggression from various entities while also reinforcing the varied spatial practices amongst Zapatista support bases. The displacement and destruction of Zapatista communities and the broader regional instability reflect the persistent struggle for control over

space and autonomy in Chiapas. This confluence of challenges highlights the need for continued vigilance, adaptation, and solidarity among Zapatista communities and other marginalized groups in Chiapas.

Conclusion

When reflecting on the past years of Zapatista organizing, Subcomandante Moisés (2023d) describes:

“Digamos que los primeros 10 años de autonomía, es decir, del alzamiento al nacimiento de las Juntas de Buen Gobierno, en 2003, fue de aprendizaje. Los siguientes 10 años, hasta el 2013 fueron de aprender la importancia del relevo generacional. Del 2013 a la fecha fue de constatar, criticar y autocriticar errores de funcionamiento, de administración y de ética. En lo que sigue ahora, tendremos una etapa de aprendizaje y reajuste. O sea que tendremos muchos errores y problemas, porque no hay manual o libro que te diga cómo hacer. Tendremos muchas caídas, sí, pero nos levantaremos una y otra vez para seguir caminando. Somos zapatistas, pues.”

His comment demonstrates how the last 30 years since the rebellion has been an ongoing collective learning process that encouraged new resolutions to the conflicting landscapes of spatialization in Chiapas. The Zapatistas in the creation of their autonomous spaces align with Lefebvre’s argument that the daily embodied practices of communities and individuals can resist spatial domination (Lefebvre 1974: 190). Moisés’ explanation also harkens to Saul Newman’s (2011) assertion that “we cannot understand autonomy as a fully achieved, consistent, or fixed identity;” rather, it will always be shaped by and in relation to existing social structures (355). In this sense, autonomy is a relationship between individuals, communities, and space, and is constantly in flux. The implementation of autonomy cannot be instituted through one act but rather necessitates constant change and active practice. The new version of Zapatista autonomy through further decentralization, the creation of *tierra común*, and new organizing structures then reflects

how adaptation, flexibility, reflection, and intentional spatial construction are necessary to bolster autonomy within Zapatista communities.

While Mexico and the global economy change, so too must the Zapatistas and the organization of their communities. The previous structures in place, the MAREZ, *juntas de buen gobierno*, and collective work were all pedagogical practices of teaching and learning autonomous living and self-governance. These spaces were not enough to address the changing conditions and conflicts against and amongst the Zapatistas. While the dynamism found in this new structure of autonomy does not necessarily mean that they are able to resolve all conflicts, it is a part of the ongoing praxis of autonomy. They demonstrate that the assertion of new visions for the production of space, or insurgent geographies, are possible; that spatial domination is not an all-consuming process; and that through the daily practice of autonomy, self-governance, and reflection, new spaces of resistance can be opened.

Zapatista methods and practices ultimately serve as a powerful model for the creation of autonomous zones around the world, demonstrating that sustained resistance and self-determination are possible through collective action, adaptability, and daily practices of autonomy on the ground. Moreover, the Zapatistas' experiences underscore the importance of research into how spatial practice is implicated in longstanding movements for autonomy and self-governance. Future studies could explore other aspects in the spatial organization of the movement, such as their use of art, cultural symbols, and the planning of their spaces through ethnographic fieldwork if they open their communities in the future. Additionally, comparative analyses with other longstanding autonomous movements globally could provide deeper insights to how the production of space can enhance or challenge ideals of autonomy, self-governance, and collective rights in the face of external pressures. By examining these aspects, researchers can contribute to

a broader understanding of how localized autonomous practices can influence and reshape other geographies of resistance.

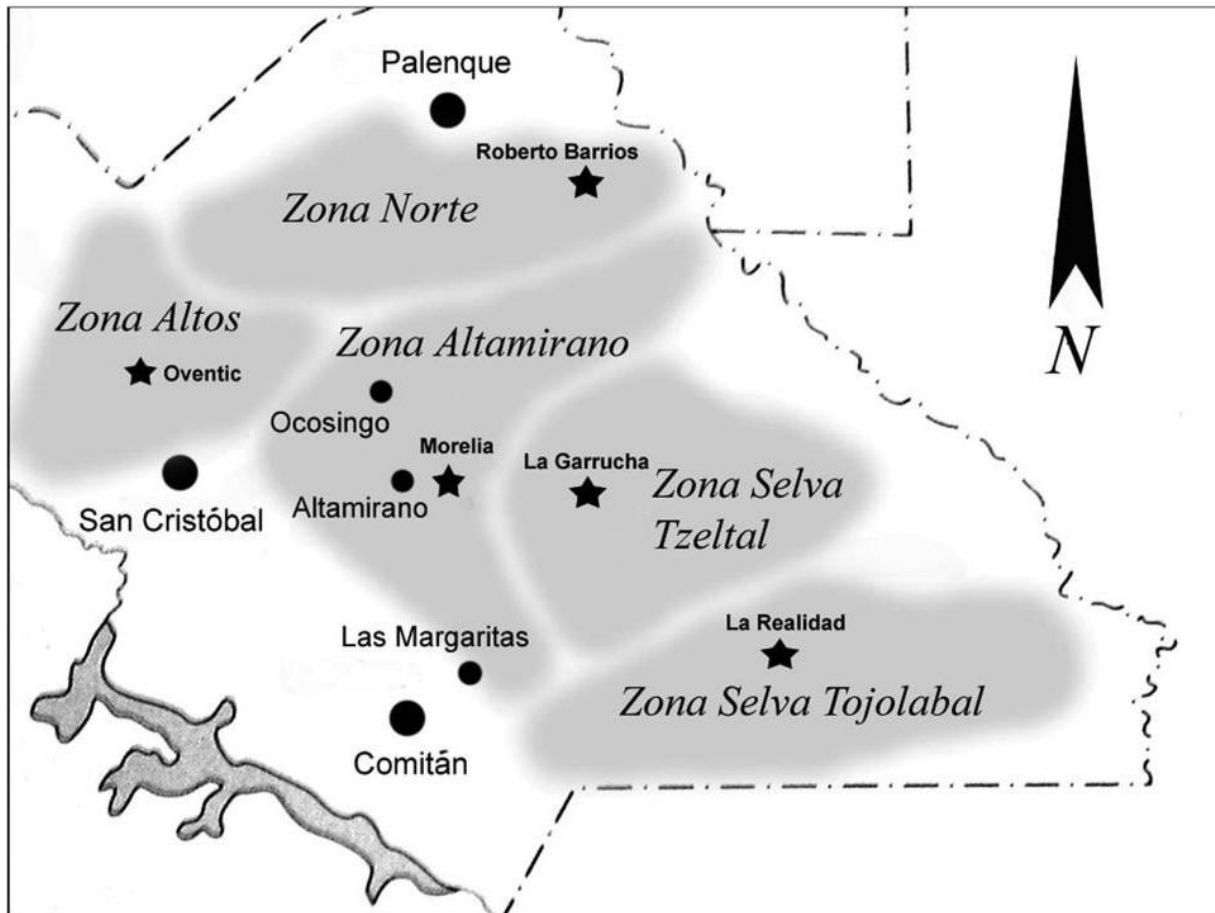
Appendix I.

Regions of Chiapas (Bobrow-Strain 2007: 140).



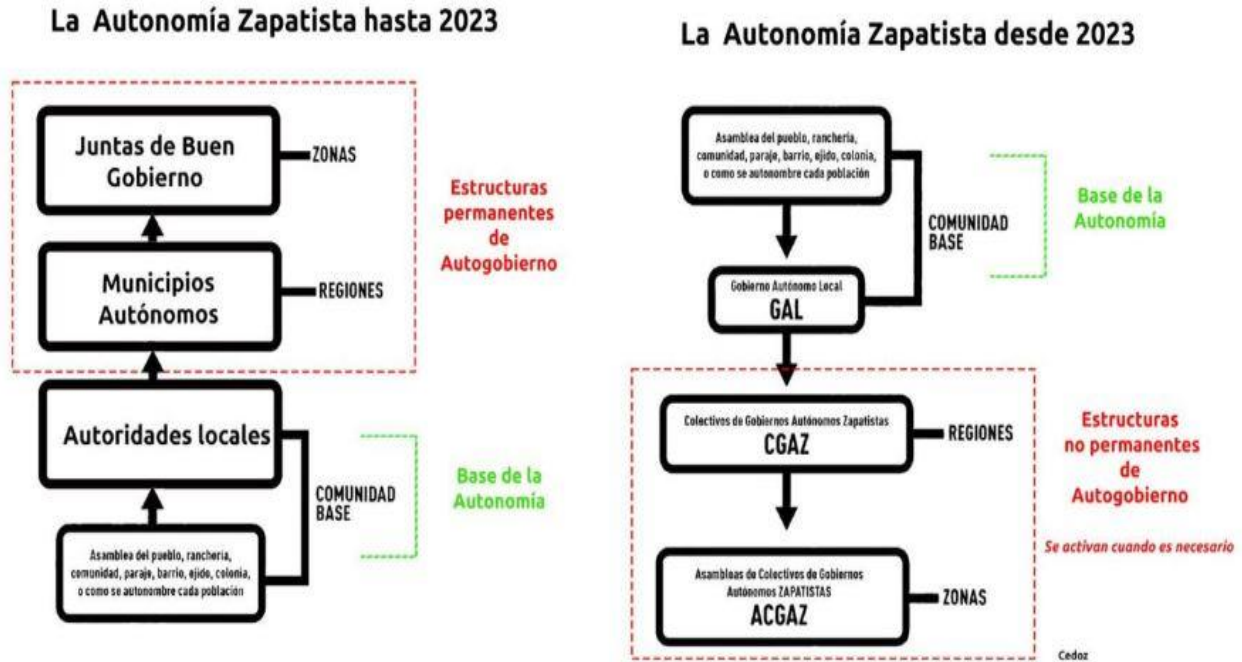
Appendix II.

Eastern Chiapas with major towns and the five Zapatista zones as well as their respective centers (Barmeyer 2008: 209).



Appendix III.

Graph comparing the old and new structure of Zapatista community organizing (Sepúlveda 2023).



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