

# ***Autonomous Capacity Building: Zapatista Bases of Support, Radical Commercial Corridors, and the Battle for the Horizon in the Urban U.S.***

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## **Methodology / Disclaimer**

What follows are the reflections of two US urban activists on their month-long stay in a rural “autonomous and rebellious” Zapatista political center known as a Caracol. Our paper draws from the personal relationships, journal notes, and informal analysis that resulted from our stay. Importantly, formal interviews were not conducted, we engaged in no official research activities, and certain potentially sensitive information has been omitted from the analysis. As participants on a delegation with the Mexico Solidarity Network, our month in the Caracol was full of meetings, interpersonal exchanges, and visits to surrounding indigenous Zapatista communities. Though offering no directly transferable models, our experience was rich with ethnographic insights that we feel are invaluable to our respective community-based organizing practices in Chicago and Brooklyn.

This paper is offered as a contribution to ongoing activist dialogues about the meaning of “development” and the methods of community organizing in US movement-building efforts. In the vein of post-development theory, we recognize the profound need to move beyond the post-WW2 development paradigm.<sup>1</sup> Like the Zapatistas, we view social movements and the capacity to challenge neoliberal hegemony as central components to widespread positive social change. Mainstream development – driven by the state or the market – has little or no accountability to the values or social networks of the communities it seeks to change. Due to the inescapable problems with and ambiguities of the term “development” (whether referring to the transnational, national, or local scale), we focus our attention and our language on radical capacity building. What we term ‘Autonomous Capacity Building’ views indigenous customs, identity, and community strength as resources for growth rather than targets for destruction. By capacity we mean collective human agency, and those physical spaces that both result from and enable its progression.

Growth, in this sense, can only be measured by the ability of a movement’s community bases to achieve their own vision for their future. Progress becomes a question of social solidarity, built on mutual aid, shared long-term interests, and collective strength. In the authors’ own political work, we engage regularly with the contested terrain of narratives and practices that comprise ‘community development.’ We feel the Zapatista bases of support provide an invaluable example of an alternative to development, an example that holds autonomous space, indigenous knowledge and grassroots community improvement as

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primary values. Though written primarily for those studying and organizing in Urban America, we hope this article will resonate with all those involved in the struggle to build unified communities in resistance. As we discuss below, it is often the strength of these communities that gives birth to autonomous spaces and sustained force to social movements.

### **Drawing from Cultural Resources: The Caracol and the Indigenous Cargo System**

The political, cultural, and economic centers of the Zapatista movement, known as Caracoles, embody what we will later describe as autonomous capacity building. The spiraling symbol of the Caracol (literally translated as snail shell) is central to Mayan beliefs, and is thought to mirror the shape of both the universe and the human heart. Asserting the rights of the indigenous people of Chiapas to express their cultural autonomy, the physical spaces of the Caracoles are the centers of a Zapatista movement which itself starts from the inside and spirals out. In Chiapas the indigenous peoples share a 500-year history of struggle and resistance, and this history is passed from generation to generation within the present Zapatista movement. The sharing of this history provides the foundation for the contemporary social memory of resistance, and fuels the fires of individual and collective dignity within indigenous processes of political socialization. Today, the movement's indigenous bases of support are comprised of five Caracoles and the autonomous municipalities spread across the mountains of the Mexican Southeast. Each of the autonomous municipalities is tied to a different Caracol, and there is coordination among all of these communities at the regional level.

The Caracol where we stayed is in many ways the most physically mature of the five. It is a gathering place for seven of the surrounding autonomous Zapatista municipalities and home to their corresponding Junta de Buen Gobierno (Board of Good Governance). Among this Junta's chief responsibilities are the equitable distribution of resources and the oversight of community building projects within this region. Constructed through the collective efforts of hundreds of indigenous men, women, and children in 1996, the Caracol near San Andres is an example of the mutually constitutive nature of the physical sites and the socio-political relationships that make up community. Located on a road between two military bases and under intense military surveillance since first constructed, the Caracol demonstrates the dynamic relationship between place-making and people-making in a region of Southeast Mexico where the indigenous populations continue to face systematic oppression.

In their fight against this oppression the autonomous rebel Zapatista communities are regenerating the ancient indigenous cargo system as a way to appoint duties within the movement's support bases. Consequently, for the Zapatistas personal identities are intimately connected to one's community and the way

the individual serves the movement. Within the collective practice of cargo, traditional social structures are built from community-determined and service-oriented responsibilities. In the cargo system individuals are given a role that reflects their capacity, their potential, and the necessary operations of the community as a whole. An individual's work is enacted as a service to the community, viewing service as an expression of commitment and dedication. Once a cargo is selected an individual cannot deny the responsibility, and collective survival is based on the inner-workings and abilities of each person in the community. Drawing from observable abilities and virtues, the community selects a person's role in a way that serves the greater whole.

In the case of the Zapatistas and the indigenous cargo system, individual roles are determined by people's needs, duties, and rights, rather than marketplace relationships and profit potentials. This is a system deeply embedded into indigenous culture with a history of thousands of years, and it is not realistic to think about how it can be transplanted to the US. However, it is certainly possible for communities in Urban America to develop systems of mutual support and commitment that provide the cornerstones of community building. Compared to US notions of individually determined life paths, the cargo system challenges the commodification of human relationships. As it is being deployed by the Zapatistas today, the cargo system offers a social economy based in a political movement. Working without any monetary compensation, the collective struggle mediates social ties in the lives of indigenous Zapatistas. In Chicago and Brooklyn, where mainstream development is grounded first and foremost in the market, community relations often begin to mirror market relations concerned primarily with competition and visions of economic growth. In the autonomous municipalities of Chiapas, economic progress is only meaningful if it makes a community stronger by stabilizing the lives of residents and improves their capacity to resist neoliberalism's co-opting influence. For the autonomous rebel Zapatista communities the value of resources is determined by their use for the community and the rebellion, not by their speculative value.

While the meaning and shape of "development" practices are as contested as they are global, it is undeniable that the post-WW2 development paradigm has laid the foundation for processes of neoliberalization over the past three decades. As growing numbers of resources are privatized and corporations gain increasing levels of influence over people's lives, the Zapatistas demonstrate an alternative to development that strengthens their communities' capacity to determine their own future as well as their ability to challenge neoliberal hegemony. The State of Chiapas, home to all of the Zapatistas' indigenous bases of support, has both the greatest abundance of Mexico's natural resources and the poorest of the country's indigenous populations. Today, over twelve years since the Zapatistas began their rebellion by occupying the town of San Cristobal de Las Casas, those indigenous communities still aligned with the struggle are living independent of state assistance and largely without capital investment. While they receive various forms of support from international solidarity organizations, the autonomous municipalities are driven by the capacity of the women and men who live there to care for one another. As the

community bases of support within the Zapatista movement demonstrate, alternatives to state-led development are a critical component of movement building. When claimed for strengthening communities in resistance, capacity building projects can improve the material realities of daily life while advancing people's collective ability to construct autonomy over the long-term.

As witnessed in our visits to the Zapatista communities in the mountains of the Mexican Southeast, *autonomous capacity building* (where autonomy is both a means and object of the process) is a weapon for combating the intricately intertwined hegemony of neoliberalism and coercion of the nation-state. What we refer to as autonomous capacity building, means those systems, places, and practices that build independence from this hegemony. It is an alternative to development that resists and attempts to dismantle the co-opting influence of global capital over community futures, and desires much more than a world where every corner of the earth is turned into a site for productive investment. Paving the way for the next generations of Chiapas' indigenous to continue the rebellion, autonomous capacity building for the Zapatistas means *investing the future in those who will live it*. Autonomy can thereby be viewed in terms of the social relationships that allow for the creation of alternatives to capitalist and state-dependent development. In this sense, autonomy is a project rooted in both community and rebellion, where community-based resistance redefines the terms on which relationship building occurs.

The Caracoles and indigenous autonomous municipalities are an active attempt to build independence from the community of money, the coercion of the state, and the destructive impacts of neoliberalization. Rather than capital or the state, the Zapatistas effectively put the capacity to sustain themselves and advance their struggle at the center of their agenda. Thus capacity building for the Zapatistas should not be evaluated by abstract measures of growth, but by concrete improvements in their ability to care for and govern themselves. Autonomous space are the sites in which people build this ability, and where resolutions to conflict are found within the struggle, not outside of it. Within these spaces, internal interdependence is more important than outside investments and mutual aid is more vital to survival than the market. The Caracoles and autonomous municipalities are the current manifestation of a community-based resistance that sees the construction of self-sustaining change as a long-term project. As will be discussed later, these autonomous spaces are critical to a revolutionary process that publicly emerged with an offensive army and is now working towards a decentralized and community-based form of self-guidance.

While the examples of autonomous capacity building modeled by the Zapatistas are specific to the mountains of the Mexican Southeast, their approach is full of lessons for those working to construct autonomy and build social movements in starkly different environments. Looking at the way the natural and built environments inform the organizing practices within the Caracol and surrounding communities, we explore the role of autonomous space in community capacity building. *We posit that autonomous spaces are uniquely capable of creating new generations of social actors for community-based resistance, especially*

*when the interplay between place-making and people-making is mediated by long-term struggle.* Autonomous space provides what the Zapatistas have termed an antechamber, a site for the creation of new political relationships and for seeing the next steps of struggle that lie ahead. In the US if our practices do not work towards independence from state coercion and neoliberal hegemony, then from the onset they have failed to challenge the very terrain that all too often determines the conditions of possibility for social movements. For US organizers as for the Zapatistas, autonomous space can provide us with a site for defining social relationships, community, and struggle on our own terms.

### **Reshaping Conditions of Possibility and the Practice of Autonomous Community**

This section looks at how autonomous and rebellious communities within the Zapatista movement care for and govern themselves on a day-to-day basis. Focusing on the Caracol where we stayed and nearby autonomous municipalities, we examine practices of autonomy at the community and interpersonal levels. We posit that the way Zapatista social actors develop their collective human agency is fundamental to how they are building their rebellion, and is based on generating mutual commitments in the struggle. We then explore how the human capacity for self-governance and rebellion is maximized through processes of political socialization occurring within the autonomous space of the Caracol. The construction of autonomous space is presented as a cornerstone for the Zapatista's independence from the state and for their continued struggle towards "un mundo donde quepan muchos mundos" (a world where many worlds fit). It is vital to note that the practices of self-governance and self-care within these communities rely on a grasp of interdependence within resistance, so that communities must support one another's struggle in order for any of them to move forward. In this sense, autonomous capacity building in the Zapatista bases of support confronts the pitfalls of both isolatory communitarian ideology and capitalist social relations immersed in competition.

As was made clear during one of our visits to an autonomous municipality, the objective of the people in the rebel Zapatista communities is not to take power but rather to take care of their people. At both the autonomous municipalities we visited the consejos (comprised of collections of adults in charge of key community duties) asserted their community's right to implement their own justice system, to educate themselves, to cure themselves and most principally to obey themselves. Central to the practice of autonomy in Zapatista municipalities is a community's ability to handle its own problems, and to sustain itself ethically on available resources. Building from this intention, capacity building within the Zapatista movement is focused on a three-pronged agenda of healthcare, education, and cooperative economic projects. The still unfolding health and education systems provide a means for the Zapatistas to assume responsibility for

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their own social reproduction, critical to a context of struggle that is reliant on the regeneration of leaders at multiple levels. Meanwhile, cooperative economic projects, such as traditional weavings, enable indigenous Zapatistas increased management over their own finances. Complemented by community-based militancy and indigenous justice systems, the Caracoles and autonomous municipalities are actively replacing four of the key functions of the state: the implementation of justice, economic management, defense and security, and social reproduction.

The health system in the Zapatista communities is a network of community micro-clinics, and one full-sized clinic equipped with ambulances and the capacity to perform basic surgeries. Born in 2004, the Zapatista education system was begun with primary schools in indigenous communities. Zapatista schools provide sites for children and youth to gain academic skills, to study the history of their people's struggle, and to learn about the continued threats to their communities. The Zapatista justice system reflects a culturally sensitive method of maintaining justice where there is no specific written law, where those with positions of influence do not receive a salary, and where the highest authority is the community. In those instances where there is a conflict or violation of justice between a Zapatista and non-Zapatista municipality, the autonomous municipality's consejo will involve the state affiliated municipality in the resolution process, and when necessary will involve the Junta de Buen Gobierno. It is not uncommon for all members of a community to be involved in a resolution process that at first may only seem to impact a limited number of individuals.

All of these projects are run by extensions of the indigenous cargo system, and made possible by the extremely high level of responsibility Zapatistas assume for their communities. It is this militant sense of commitment that enables the continued maturation of Zapatista communities despite the lack of outside capital investment or an abundance of formal assets. Social responsibility provides the foundations for how alternatives to development can be sustained on limited resources. For the Zapatistas militancy is only in part a matter of taking arms. Among the non-army Zapatistas, militancy is indicated by the degree of commitment to their communities and their shared struggle. For Zapatistas, revolutionary action is normalized and the practice of struggle has, in many ways, transcended individual notions of sacrifice. Militancy appears as a disciplined way of being that creates its own energy, and that invests this energy in co-constructing the collective willingness to mobilize behind anti-oppressive ideology. Militancy thereby denotes a non-negotiable political ethical dimension in how we prepare for the future given both the immensity of injustice and the scarcity of resources.

Importantly, Zapatista capacity building occurs in opposition to the state government and to capitalism, not in opposition to those indigenous people who receive government assistance. In Chiapas, Zapatistas view their efforts as part of a struggle to support all those indigenous communities living in a shared context of poverty and isolation. Meanwhile, a key separating factor between the Zapatistas and their indigenous neighbors is the autonomous municipalities' relative independence from the money economy. In our conversations with the

autonomous consejos they shared that when envisioning the future of their pueblo, money is not a significant factor. This is both because of money's relative non-existence and because of the dependence that it often implies. Rather than being mediated by money, within the Zapatistas' bases of support *social relations are mediated by shared understandings of dignity, collective responsibility, and the rebellion.*

Meanwhile, the Mexican and state governments are increasingly using mainstream "development" as a mode for the political and social control of indigenous communities in the region. State-led development projects reinforce indigenous dependence on the state, seek to weaken the attraction of the Zapatista movement to other indigenous communities, and provide a more subtly coercive force than paramilitarization for dealing with Zapatismo. The state-created artisans building near San Andres was built to draw business away from the nearby Zapatista Caracol, and is just one example of how the state uses development projects to draw support away from the material realities of Zapatismo. A more obvious example of how the state masks coercion as development is the health workshops wherein the government pays women for their sterilization to prevent the birth of future indigenous generations.

### **Autonomous Municipalities and the Use of Resources**

Notions of autonomy for the Zapatistas are fundamentally tied to the expression of indigenous customs and culture, and the indigenous right to self-governance recognized by the San Andres Accords.<sup>2</sup> As declared by the autonomous municipal consejos we visited, the autonomy of the Zapatista communities was made legal when the government signed the accords on February 16<sup>th</sup>, 1996. These Zapatista consejos view the evolution of their pueblo's autonomy as central to where the struggle is today.

Twelve years after the rebellion began and ten years after the signing of the accords, the autonomous municipalities are a key example of how the Zapatista movement is evolving in the contemporary moment. From the time when the government betrayed the promises made on the 16<sup>th</sup> of February 1996, one of the central distinguishing characteristics of autonomy for the Zapatistas has become complete independence from government resources. Moreover, Zapatista communities live without paying for water, electricity, or the use of land. They view these basics of daily living as already theirs and community members have specific technical roles for ensuring sustained access to these resources.

Since declaring themselves as autonomous municipalities in 2002, these communities have developed methods for accessing water and electricity without paying the exorbitant rates charged by the companies producing them. Electricity in particular is a field of struggle for communities with minimal resources

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across Mexico. The use and maintenance of resources not only involves a broad array of people from the Zapatista community, these resources are an issue that draws non-Zapatista indigenous people to consult with their indigenous neighbors. As one of the consejos noted during a visit, non-Zapatista neighbors are increasingly coming to them to ask how they can also access these resources without paying for them. These inquiries are received with open arms. Declaring "somos el mismo pobre" (we are all poor) the consejo sees their indigenous neighbors through a shared poor people's frame that encourages them to maintain cooperative relationships. This cooperation is vital in the face of government attempts to use state-led development as a coercive force. Yet while they recognize the critical difference of their government at the local level, the consejos of the communities we visited feel that what's needed is change at a greater level, and they posit that widespread change can't happen if they are just working at the level of the municipality.

### **The Statistical Zapatista Subject and the Co-existence of Governments**

Each of the indigenous municipalities in Chiapas experiences its own internal divisions over questions of politics and the use of government resources, and the autonomous Zapatista consejos often work side by side with official party governments. When we asked one of the autonomous consejos what percentage of the residents in their pueblo are Zapatistas, they replied with an official estimate of 40% Zapatistas and 60% non-Zapatista. However, as they indicated, it is vital to problematize the idea of the statistical Zapatista subject. Members of official political parties can be seen as brothers and sisters, and in many cases they literally are family members. Drawing from our conversations in the bases of support, there are those indigenous "non-Zapatistas" who are highly critical of the movement (to the point where some become involved in paramilitary activity) and there are those who have an admiration for the Zapatista struggle but are unable to liberate themselves from structures of control (e.g. government assistance, state-led development projects).

Tensions between the indigenous communities are most intense in areas where non-Zapatista indigenous have been recruited as paramilitaries by the Mexican army, and are violently working to destabilize the Zapatista struggle. While the influence of paramilitarization continues to grow, its intensity depends largely on what part of the Chiapas region one is examining. In one of the municipalities we visited the activity of existing paramilitaries is very low and was said to be relatively non-threatening in the town. In the case of this pueblo there is a degree of internal unity that allows for the functioning of two separate governance structures within the same space. In the case of the autonomous justice systems, this degree of cooperation within pueblos allows for conflict resolution to occur across lines of political affiliation. The operations of

autonomous municipalities are thereby regularly recognized by the state-affiliated government at the local level.

### **Human Agency as a Resource for Challenging Capitalisms, Not Extending Them**

In contrast to contemporary academic and policy discussions that view human and social capacities in terms of capital, this section examines social relationships and networks as resources for anti-capitalist practice. For the Zapatista bases of support we visited, it is the nurturing of social relationships and interpersonal bonds that provide the networks in which the movement's anti-capitalist frame is based.<sup>3</sup> It is fruitful to compare contemporary understandings of capital investment, where outside financial resources are committed to a place or project, with the Zapatistas' use of the Spanish verb "capacitar" (meaning "to capacitate" or "to build capacity"). Whereas capital investment involves resources that are purely material or monetary, "capacitar" was frequently used in the caracol where we stayed to describe the intentional shaping of human potential through education. Meanwhile, use of the term 'capital' in much of the Western world is in fact becoming looser. Concepts of human capital and social capital are often deployed to analyze the capacities of people living in areas with relatively low levels of capital investment (most notably, economically depressed urban areas). When applied to human abilities, the term 'capital' economizes the relational powers of people by prioritizing those parts of human agency which serve as signs for a safe investment in a project or place.<sup>4</sup> Any advances in the human and community capacity for collective challenges to threats of neoliberalization are largely lost by such a measure.

The approach to human development within the Zapatista spaces is interwoven with the political socialization of new generations of social actors in the struggle. As seen within one of the communities we visited, when young people are capacitated to be educators then future generations will directly benefit. In the words of one man highlighted in a video on the Zapatista education system, "if they learn, another teacher is born." In many respects the system of training educators is a particular response to the general question posed by Zapatismo: *what does our community need and how can we provide that for ourselves?* As in the case of the Junta de Buen Gobierno, the capacity for self-care is developed directly among those people and families composing the Zapatista bases of support. Each person within the Zapatista movement is seen with a role and each has a part to play in completing a struggle which advocates a multiplicity of weapons and of tactics. For example, every community member has a role in the justice system, young people greatly influence the still unfolding education system, and women continue to change how they perceive themselves and how their communities view their involvement in the movement. The fact that the autonomous rebellious schools do not have teachers, but rather

promoters, is meant to reveal that in the classroom ideas flow from all directions and there is no singular fountain of knowledge. Though various criteria for and levels of participation are certainly present within the Zapatista movement, the autonomous capacity building model is based on an active understanding of interdependence and inclusiveness within struggle.

The Zapatista struggle is largely determined by the strength of the relationships Zapatistas have to each other. It is this strength that keeps the movement progressing, and which fuels the construction of autonomous spaces. Strong social relationships allow the movement to address its internal challenges, and are the catalyst for the revolutions internal to the revolution that are necessary for the struggle's continued growth. Two examples of internal transformations are the Revolutionary Women's Law and the creation of the Juntas de Buen Gobierno. As a result of the collective organizing efforts of women within the movement, the Revolutionary Women's Law was passed in 1993 and spawned what has become widely known as "the revolution before the revolution." This law laid the ground for the transformation of both the place of women within the movement, and consequently the ways they view their own lives. Banning alcohol and challenging domestic violence, the law asserts the power of women to reshape their living environment. Projects like the women's cooperatives lining the streets of the Caracol near San Andres, mark the ways that Zapatista women are relating with the outside world, financially supporting their families, and strengthening social ties among themselves. While these cooperatives make women the owners of their means of production and their relationship to the market, they also create networks of women in the struggle between and within communities. In addition to these woman-run spaces, Zapatista women are increasingly represented in decision-making positions within the community bases of support.

The Juntas de Buen Gobierno, which have elected women representatives, are the highest civil authority within the Zapatista movement. The birth of these governing bodies in August of 2003 marked what may be considered another "revolution within the revolution." These good governance boards were developed to challenge the military-community hierarchy that had been present in the Zapatista movement up till that point. As stated in the Sixth Declaration of the Selva Lacandona:

[W]e also saw that the EZLN, with its political-military component, was involving itself in decisions which belonged to the democratic authorities, 'civilians' as they say. 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 the military being above, and the democratic below, was not good, because what is democratic should not be decided militarily, it should be the reverse: the democratic-political governing above, and the military obeying below.<sup>5</sup>

Passing actions and decisions to the civil authorities within the movement, this creation of the Juntas separated the political-military functions of the movement

from the autonomous and democratic components of the Zapatista organization. While the Sexta declares this was a very difficult transition in practice, it has allowed for a more equitable distribution of resources among the Zapatista communities. Participation in this still relatively young system of self-governance happens through rotating temporary positions, and those who do not govern well are removed. The Juntas have sought to level the authorities within the movement and to distribute incoming aid in a way that evens out the material realities of the autonomous municipalities.

These internal shifts in the movement's social relationships open up the rebellion to broader participation, and increase the number of roles available for those looking to make active contributions to the struggle. Fundamental changes in the social dynamics of these long-term revolutionary processes have widened and diversified the collective human agency available to the movement. In a context of extreme dedication among the movement's participants, social spaces allowing new forms of participation make the struggle more dynamic. As the movement develops at the community level, there is increased capacity for improving living conditions among the indigenous communities. As an effect of an anti-capitalist movement undergoing steady evolution, the increase in collective human capacities for self-care and governance means not more human capital, but stronger communities for fighting today's capitalisms.

### **Anti-Capitalist Planning and the Radical Commercial Corridor**

Formed around a radical commercial corridor of community-based experiments, the Caracol near San Andres demonstrates how active place-making is fundamental to personal and community growth within the formation of a social movement. Within the fences surrounding this Caracol, autonomous space is an arena for generating and expressing the non-capitalist values and identity that are the foundations of Zapatismo. The physical site of the Caracol provides the terrain needed to reshape the conditions of possibility for resistance, and to create the transformations in social relationships necessary for the collective realization of that resistance. Made largely from nearby wood and building materials, the construction of the site by hundreds of indigenous families in 1996 was itself a powerful act of resistance. The Caracol's presence as an international site of resistance was solidified later that year when it helped to host the Zapatista's first International Encounter.

Originally named Aguascalientes, the political and cultural centers of the Zapatistas have faced government repression from the very beginning. After the first Aguascalientes was destroyed by the Mexican military, the site near the indigenous community of San Andres became the next of five built to replace it. At the time of its construction over 32 tanks and army vehicles slowly cruised by until being driven away by the men, women, and children making up a human barricade. Having survived continued state repression, the Caracol is rich with

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organizational resources for both its corresponding communities and for allies from civil society.

Along the inclined street that lines the Caracol there is: an auditorium, a building for the Junta de Buen Gobierno, a building for the Commission of Explanations, two cafes and stores, three Women's cooperatives, a Spanish and Mayan language school, a basketball court, an internet spot, a chapel, a music building, the indigenous and modern health facilities, a volleyball net, an outdoor stage, as well as several buildings for organizations from nearby communities. Directly across the street from the Caracol gates are an autonomous primary school, more stores, and the Zapatista boot factory. Taken as unit, the Caracol is a model of an anti-capitalist alternative to development that addresses the political, economic and cultural aspects of how to organize society. It is a gathering place for all those playing a role in the continued creation of Zapatista autonomy, a site for members of indigenous communities in resistance, international solidarity workers, and those working to challenge capitalism from below and to the left. Given that autonomy for the Zapatistas is in many ways an interdependent project with others involved in struggle, place becomes a tool for not only gathering but also the coordination of resources, the distribution of products, the provision of services, and the training of future generations of movement actors. Such place-based resistances are made possible by the creative organization of the human resources of indigenous actors and, in part, by the material contributions of civil society. Place-making and autonomous capacity building can thereby be seen as interactive processes challenging the hegemony of the neoliberal order by redefining social relationships within and between communities.

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In the case of the Caracol, the construction of the autonomous geography is premised on a place-based process of collective self-determination. A clear implication of this is that a space cannot be at once imitative and autonomous any more than it can be both duplicative and self-determined. Efforts to copy the dynamics of an autonomous space can only happen at the expense of the unique possibilities offered by a community's physical and relational context. Any transplantation runs the risk of destroying the specific social and spatial conditions of resistance contained in a site. It is in many ways these socio-spatial and geo-relational dynamics that provide the basis for radical place-making in the first place. Moreover, the very notion that models are transferable seems, in part, a symptom of those place-destroying characteristics of neoliberalism that seek to homogenize space in an attempt to open and protect investment terrains. Hence the beauty of the Zapatistas call for, "a world where many worlds fit." In order to create lasting cultures of resistance it is vital that every community is built from the uniqueness of its residents, its geography, its social dynamics, and its particular history of oppression and struggle. This means an approach to autonomous place-making that nurtures the distinctness within all our struggles,

where communities learn from each other so that they are better able to guide themselves, and where we build from the unique dynamics of our own contexts so that we can transform them.

Examples of radical place-making serve as inspirational sites wherein we can advance visions for a movement without limits, without borders, and without prescribed formulas. They are spaces determined by people's needs and abilities, in which we can reevaluate the way we understand and talk about our own practices of resistance. In a US environment where the programs of social change organizations are often informed by policy climates and foundation funding categories, autonomous community spaces can help us to realize the ways in which our political agenda is itself shaped by outside forces. Places are inhabitable sites where the values of life in resistance can be reinforced by daily experience. Autonomous sites are designated areas for confronting the subtle oppressions within our own practice, for envisioning the next steps of our movement building, for solidifying our commitments to one another, for enabling our learning from one another, and for strengthening our subjectivities of struggle.

For the Zapatistas the question of movement subjectivities is intricately connected to continued engagement with 'the other,' with those outside of their immediate sphere of resistance. Among many other things, the Caracol is a designated space for those outside of Chiapas' indigenous communities to come and visit an autonomous and rebellious Zapatista space. Not content to only receive visitors, in January of 2006 the Zapatistas launched their campaign to travel and listen to the struggles of groups across Mexico. Called "La Otra Compañera," literally the Other Campaign, the national tour coincides with the presidential elections held in July 2006. Critiquing the idea that electoral democracy in Mexico offers hope for any real changes, La Otra is an alternative campaign that is building relationships with groups across Mexico who work "below and to the left." Addressing the question of "how do we open ourselves up to the other?," La Otra is centered around listening instead of speaking, grassroots democracy in place of polyarchy, and radicalized political subjects rather than citizens who view voting booths as the pillars of democracy.

Rather than presuming a shared context among Mexico's grassroots left, La Otra creates a context for sharing. In communities where La Otra has visited there are stencils on the streets and walls declaring "La Otra Compañera: No para dividir comunidades, Si para unir rebeldías," translated as "The Other Campaign: Not for dividing communities, Yes for uniting rebellions." Knowing that Mexico and the world must change in order for the situation in Chiapas to improve, La Otra is an effort to build a new civil society that is both grassroots and anti-capitalist. The campaign is a response to the Zapatista's realization that Mexico is neither politicized nor unified enough to bring about fundamental transformation, and is an attempt to create the types of political relationships necessary to dissolve rather than obtain state power. For those working to challenge the hegemony of the state and the neoliberal order, La Otra is a powerful lesson in how a

movement cannot put the question of what needs to be done ahead of the level of politicization needed to do it.

The autonomous rebel Zapatista communities and La Otra Compañía are reminders that the horizon is a highly contested terrain and that resistance is in many ways a struggle over the conditions of possibility for radical change. Both are instructive, teaching that unless our movements challenge government power and capitalism at deeper levels, our struggles are largely already framed for us. The battle for the horizon requires a shift beyond “the politics of the possible”, and calls into question the circumstances in which movement objectives are determined. In US cities today, neoliberal urban policies are actively destroying community networks and shifting resources towards social control rather than social reproduction. As the post-millennial US state invests even fewer resources into ensuring the healthy maturation of each successive generation, the state’s energy is used more on disciplining the very populations that were once the targets of liberal urban policy.<sup>6</sup> This shift marks a transfer of state resources from human development to instruments of oppression, exemplified by the substantially higher rates of construction for prisons than colleges in the US.

Urban America is increasingly marked by widespread displacement of the poor from the urban core to the periphery, immense waves of immigration amidst global economic shifts, and mass detainment and incarceration of low-income people of color. Brooklyn and Chicago are certainly no exception to these patterns, and like many other US cities, private developers and government representatives are implementing a vision for these cities that does not include working class people or poor people of color. While these issues provide a shared organizing context among impacted populations across cities, each issue is tremendously complex and could be approached in countless ways. As low-income communities and communities of color are increasingly left to develop their own resources, their own governance structures, and their own defenses, it is crucial for US activists to act on the strategic opportunities that arise from structural change. One struggle for urban activists is to create openings for “radical democratic reappropriations of city space,”<sup>7</sup> wherein we can build reflective spaces and new political relationships, similar to what the Zapatistas have termed the antechamber.

Autonomous space does not exist until it is constructed. Because no community can effectively struggle in isolation, we need to create the spaces for building a shared agenda and mutual preparedness out of our shared context. Communities must proactively create places for the conception of new strategic opportunities amidst contemporary structural change. Given the intensity of connections between urban lifestyles and grids of capital investment and social control, it is necessary to create the physical and relational spaces for enacting our radical struggles at the level of the everyday.

## Practicing Autonomy in Daily Life

As has been discussed in the case of the Zapatistas, we would argue that strong community networks and collective commitments to struggle are preconditions for constructing and maintaining autonomous spaces in low-income neighborhoods and neighborhoods of color in the US as well. It is in the practice of everyday life where these networks and commitments are formed and reinforced. Moreover, discussions of daily life highlight the vitality of social relationships at the local level. Community life is an arena for connecting regular personal investments in one's surroundings with those emerging channels that link struggles across place, thereby building dynamic networks and support structures both within and between community enclaves. In order to support such dynamic networks within communities it is imperative to confront those internal tensions among fellow residents that result largely from systematic oppression over time. In the case of women's rights and the struggle against patriarchy among the Zapatistas, this manifested as the "revolution before the revolution."

Meanwhile many US cities are full of neighborhoods where social networks are being destroyed by gentrification, crime, and high incarceration rates. The prison industrial complex, like gentrification, destabilizes urban communities targeted by race and class. Ending the cycle of crime and incarceration itself requires substantive community building processes. As second and third generation incarceration are on the rise, the stakes for rebuilding community trust and strength are immeasurable. Capacity-building efforts must look towards what activist-academic Beth Richie calls "the daily work of community building," which entails residents standing with people being released back into their community and accepting responsibility for non-biological children.<sup>8</sup> Daily community building is a space for nurturing relationships with the homeless, with single mothers, with youth, and with all those who are the most marginalized within marginalized communities.

Inclusive organizing campaigns and open community support structures can work to challenge the shame and segregation that often result from internalized oppressions within communities. At the same time, the Zapatistas must deal with prolonged internal divisions in the communities they call home and this is a central part of the colonial legacy. In the US – from immigrants moving into low-income communities to formerly incarcerated individuals returning home from prison – there are powerful stigmas at play within receiving communities that reflect larger societal processes of "alien"ation and criminalization. Moreover, the internal diversity and complexity of neighborhoods in the urban US makes it difficult to identify any singular revolution that is needed "before the revolution." Communities' internal divisions are serious obstacles to the potential dynamism made possible by the diverse lived experiences held within low-income urban neighborhoods. At the same time, the diversity of lived experiences among community members can become a source of strength rather than division.

### Autonomous Capacity Building

Given that community-based organizations frequently end up with issue-based campaigns targeting a specific subset of people within a community, it is vital to build discussions of how broader community integration can be made to fortify our struggles and our victories.

One thing that is clear among US activists is a pattern of turnover and burnout that all too often accompanies social change lifestyles. Activism in the US is often only lived within designated spaces, is interwoven with the culture of the non-profit industrial complex, and is often not transferred into other spaces like the home. Even for those US social change agents who do not map their practice onto a 9-5 schedule, the space of one's organizing and one's residency are frequently disconnected and as a result activists are separated from the support structures made available by strong community. Serious cultural transformations are needed in order to find better ways of supporting one another and sustaining our struggles amidst the inevitable stresses that movement building entails. It is fruitful to examine the level at which the Zapatista struggle is embedded into the daily lives of the movement's social actors, and to note how this integration of struggle and everyday life contributes to the movement's sustainability.

For those living in the autonomous rebel Zapatista communities the spirit of resistance is present in every aspect of life. As we observed in the Caracol, Zapatismo is there in the interpersonal exchanges of those fighting together, in the alternative economy projects, and in the school system. Radically practical ideas of democracy, autonomy, justice, anti-capitalism, and equality are discussed regularly, and are consistently reflected in the language of Zapatista social actors. The culture of resistance is present in the murals that decorate nearly all of the Caracol, in the artisanry that is made and sold, and in the revolutionary songs that are a normal sound in the homes where people live.

Another key function of autonomous political centers is connecting disparate militant practices so that they are more tightly linked in the shared struggles over contested futures. Together these are the defining characteristics of place that are generated in autonomous space and that make resistance culture inhabitable. The Caracol points to how reaching a higher political consciousness is possible by making one's resistance more fully integrated into daily routines. Thus an integral part of our capacity building goals and our strategies for making struggle more sustainable, is the integration of our various life spheres and the creation of life-affirming cultures of resistance.

### **Leadership Across Generations**

The indigenous Zapatistas view their struggle as an explicitly long-term project, with no end to the rebellion in sight. To keep the movement alive the Zapatistas are continuously preparing their people for future leadership, and are actively cultivating a politics that values the role of every generation in the rebellion. For

the young people raised in the movement, resistance is very much a naturalized part of life and today's Zapatista leaders declare that the struggle's younger generation is much stronger than they are. Preparing future generations to lead this rebellion requires securing young peoples' attachment to their pueblos and creating spaces for them to help guide their communities. This vision of politicization, rooted in long-term community building rather than isolated campaigns, aligns well with the Zapatista saying, "caminamos, no corremos, porque estamos viajando lejos" ("we walk, we do not run, because we are going far").

Like today's Zapatistas, we believe that the leadership most needed for US movements already exists within those communities on the receiving end of oppression. For us, a primary objective of community experiments in autonomy is collective self-realization, whereby communities combating oppression believe in their own potential and find daily ways of supporting one another in struggle.<sup>9</sup> Rather than focusing on bringing in leaders from outside of marginalized communities, it is vital that movement actors come from all sectors within these communities and that bridges are built between generations for sharing both the histories and the responsibilities of struggle.

In developing our community building methods, we feel it is crucial for communities in the US to intentionally re-root their youth to their struggles and movements. Youth in particular need the support of their communities in order to find ways to proactively contribute to their surroundings. Wherever possible, it is important for youth to be involved in the construction of their neighborhoods and to have spaces within their community to make substantive and meaningful contributions. For the Zapatistas resistance is largely a relational project, where the ways that community members know and support one another are reclaimed. Politicization can then be seen as a process embedded in community, one that can be tailored to the particular needs and potential of young people and the blocks they call home.

Today the systematic oppressions impacting neighborhoods in the urban US are intricately tied to social divisions between generations and within communities. Multi-generational family residences in countless US neighborhoods and housing projects are being threatened by the widespread displacement of the urban poor. As a result of the growing devastation caused by the US prison system it is increasingly common for the children of the incarcerated to themselves end up behind bars, a phenomenon known as second- and third-generation incarceration which disproportionately impacts urban neighborhoods of color. A growing number of observers are declaring that a generational apartheid exists between today's youth and their elders in many low-income urban neighborhoods of color. In the US, it is unclear what resources for struggle today's youth will inherit. We must ask how the situation would look if youth were growing up in strong communities of struggle, and their family members and neighbors were actively supporting them as they sought out ways to contribute to building a social movement. It is as important as ever for communities to create physical

spaces for de-isolating generational enclaves and for more thoroughly connecting community residents.

### **Walk Questioning: Framing Movements and Moving Frames in the Urban US**

Self-sustaining social changes are the product of struggle over long periods of time. Before the Zapatista rebellion started 12 years ago, there were 500 years of anti-colonial struggle among the indigenous people in the Chiapas area. Calling on their history of oppression and legacy of resistance, the Zapatistas demonstrate both that social memory is a major resource for movement building and that resistance must be built to last if it has any hope of effecting revolutionary changes. As expressed in the phrase “caminar preguntando” (‘to walk questioning’), one of the keys to the survival of the Zapatista movement is the value placed on self-learning. Putting self-learning into practice, the Zapatistas show us how claiming autonomous space is a critical tool for asking ourselves tough questions about the ways we hope to create lasting change.

We would like to end with some concluding questions about how US movements look at NGOs, in an effort to spur the type of radical introspection that we feel makes struggles viable in the long-term. Among the rarely named dependencies that inform movement frames in the US, are the ways in which the survival of individual NGOs can occur at the expense of social movement growth. Even non-profit organizations with substantial grassroots components have their own distinct identities and are, at best, concerned with both their own survival and the growth of grassroots resistance. While strong social movement organizations are certainly fundamental to powerful struggles, we feel US activists should continue to build on the interrogation of the non-profit industrial complex that began over two years ago with the INCITE! conference “The Revolution Will Not Be Funded.” We must look at how political commitments to strong organizations can be different from dedications to community building and radical place-making. Furthermore, we feel it is necessary to explore how non-profit infrastructures in low-income neighborhoods are partial causes for the ways our movements are not integrated into daily community life.

We feel that we need to scrutinize the reasons why communities don't fight for the right to develop themselves on their own terms. It is important to question the possibility of challenging capitalism's destructive impacts, when our movement organizations are in need of regular outside infusions of capital. One of the central lessons we took away from our time with the Zapatista communities, is that it is vital to build an anti-capitalist frame that is meaningful for those residents on the receiving end of systematic oppression. Such grassroots anti-capitalism requires that community leaders challenge mainstream understandings of social issues, arriving at definitions and proposals that make sense for the blocks where they live. In today's ongoing conflicts over urban “development,” the outcomes

of our demands (e.g. set aside housing, community benefit agreements) rarely enhance community capacity for resistance, resident power, or social solidarity. Meanwhile, from low-income mothers building a radical child care system in Brooklyn to the movement for community justice in Chicago, the US has powerful examples of autonomous projects that are still unfolding. Due to the unique dynamics and geographies of daily life across places, it is neither possible nor desirable to prescribe solutions for one another. Yet it is essential that we continue to find better ways of supporting one another, exchanging ideas, sharing resources, holding each other accountable, and building concrete expressions of autonomy in order to win the battle for the horizon.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For a brief review of post-development theory, see Siemiatycki, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> The San Andres Accords resulted from the dialogue process between the EZLN and the Mexican Federal Government, a dialogue which began in January of 1996 and focused on Indigenous Rights and Culture. These discussions centered around respect for the diversity of indigenous communities; the conservation of natural resources; the participation of indigenous communities in determining their own development plans, as well as their own judicial and administrative

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affairs; and the autonomy of the indigenous communities in relation to the state framework. When both the EZLN and the Mexican government signed these accords, a peace and dialogue process was supposed to have started. What actually occurred was the escalated infiltration of indigenous communities by military and paramilitary units. For a more complete summary, see:

<http://www.globalexchange.org/countries/americas/mexico/SanAndres.html>

<sup>3</sup> For a more thorough understanding of anti-capitalism within the Zapatista movement, refer to Section 3 of La Sexta Declaracion de La Selva Lacandona on "How We See the World.". Available in Spanish at:

<http://www.zetztainternazional.org/esp/ezln-mundo/declaraciones-de-la-selva-lacandona/sexta/sexta-mundo.html>

<sup>4</sup> A solid introduction to the critiques of the social capital discourse is provided by Mayer, 2003, 114.

<sup>5</sup> La Sexta Declaration, Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Smith, 2002.

<sup>7</sup> Brenner et al, 2005.

<sup>8</sup> Richie, 2002, 148.

<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile we feel there are crucial movement building roles for new social actors not from communities with a legacy of oppression and resistance, so long as those roles are always in support of communities actively constructing the ability to guide themselves.