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# Zapatista autonomy and the making of alter-native politics

## Views from its day-to-day praxis

*Sabrina Melenotte*

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*Abstract:* Since 1994, the Zapatista political autonomy project has been claiming that “another world is possible”. This experience has influenced many intellectuals of contemporary radical social movements who see in the indigenous organization a new political alter-native. I will first explore some of the current theories on Zapatism and the crossing of some of authors into anarchist thought. The second part of the article draws on an ethnography conducted in the municipality of Chenalhó, in the highlands of Chiapas, to emphasize some of the everyday practices inside the self-proclaimed “autonomous municipality” of Polhó. As opposed to irenic theories on Zapatism, this article describes a peculiar process of autonomy and brings out some contradictions between the political discourse and the day-to-day practices of the autonomous power, focusing on three specific points linked to economic and political constraints in a context of political violence: the economic dependency on humanitarian aid and the “bureaucratic habitus”; the new “autonomous” leadership it involved, between “good government” and “good management”; and the internal divisions due to the return of some displaced members and the exit of international aid.

*Keywords:* alter-native, autonomy, Chiapas, ethnography, Polhó, Zapatista

Building another world and making it possible: this is the challenge the Zapatistas launched at the end of the millennium. Since its uprising in 1994, by making visible the “other” Mexico—“deep” (Bonfil Batalla 1987), indigenous, and rebellious—the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) immediately supported the Mexican indigenous peoples’ claim for social justice and ethno-political recognition inside the Mexican state. The Zapatista uprising was supported by thousands of indigenous people in several towns of Chiapas, and promoted the

debate around this intimate constitutive otherness of the Mexican “us”. Nevertheless, as it is widely known, the uprising was not only about Mexican issues. Actually, it symbolically took place the day of the beginning of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) between Mexico and its northern neighbors—that is, five years before the first “no global” World Trade Organization (WTO) countersummit in Seattle. The symbolic use of the balaclava and the strategic diffusion of the movement’s messages through the Internet enabled the “voice-



less” around the world—such as sexual, ethnic, racial, and class minorities—to identify with the indigenous rebels and their “common” problems. Leftist movements also found in the Zapatista movement the political innovation they needed to fill the vacuum left by the collapse of the Soviet Union and, in Latin America, to react to the difficulties faced by socialism in Cuba. The Zapatista organization found an echo and engaged in heterodox Marxist, anarchist, and libertarian debates, so that leftist youths from around the world eagerly identified themselves with this new strategy of realizing a utopian alternative. Actually, the rebels called for a “different” way of doing politics. This clear claim for alterpolitics was translated both inward, in the internal organization of the movement, insisting on self-government and autonomy, and outward, with a more general call for a politics of inclusion and emancipation of minorities: “a world in which many worlds fit”. After twenty years of struggle, some commentators note a slowdown of the movement in recent years. Nonetheless, the Zapatistas still proved their strength on 21 December 2012, during the thirteenth baktun (the end of the world in the Mayan calendar), by bringing together over 40,000 Zapatistas in a silent march through the streets of San Cristóbal de Las Casas. In August and December 2013, they also invited national and international civil society to participate in their *escuelitas* (“little schools”, pedagogic camps to learn indigenous daily life and “go native”) to celebrate their twentieth anniversary.

This article stems from a paradox. Despite the national and international attention and interest for the Zapatista experience and struggle, it is striking to see that, twenty years after the uprising, we still know very little about the practices and the daily life of the Zapatistas. Our knowledge of the movement, of its internal organization and its impacts on the lifeworlds of local populations, is difficult to grasp mainly because of the strong “discursive curtain” held by the EZLN and the intellectuals interested in this political movement. Thus, in this article, I will first tackle this issue of discourses around

the Zapatista movement as a form of alterpolitics and how indigenous populations have been turned into alter-natives. I will re-examine the major interest the Zapatistas aroused among political anthropologists and philosophers relying on both the anthropological imaginary attached to indigenous peoples and the leftist—and especially anarchist—theories, debates, and political engagements to see in the Zapatista movement a political alternative. Second, I will put these theories to the test by confronting them with the evidence I collected during the extended fieldwork I have conducted in the highlands of Chiapas since 2003. Thus, I will scrutinize these theories on the basis of the history of the EZLN and the everyday practices of indigenous peasants affiliated with the EZLN. I will emphasize the analysis of a specific experience of autonomy by bringing out three specific points linked to economic and political constraints in a context of political violence: the contradiction between the freed-from-the-state ambition of autonomy and the economic dependency on nongovernmental organizations (NGOs); the new “autonomous” leadership between “good government” and “good management”; and the internal tensions due to the return of some displaced members and the exit of international aid.

## **The Zapatista experience as a source of alterpolitics**

### *Resistance to the neoliberal empire*

The Zapatista experience had a broad resonance in the international antiglobalization “movement of the movements” and was a source of inspiration for radical theories first of all in affirming political autonomy as a way to resist the neoliberal empire. It is worth remembering that the insurgency took place as a reaction to the 1980s economic crisis and structural adjustment policies and the NAFTA agreement, with the adoption of free trade and privatization policies contributing to the dismantling of a developmental state model for economic regulation and redistribution.

The antineoliberal and antiempire perspective gave the Zapatista insurgency a catalyzing role for revolutionary social theorists. From a post-Marxist perspective, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000) defined the crisis and transformation of capitalist states around the world as the transition from imperialism to empire. Imperialism referred to a system where the dominant nation-states competed for control of territory or resources in order to increase their own national, sovereign power. In contrast, empire is a network of power relations that reproduces capitalism through constant reorganization of social life and natural resources use. Control is no longer confined to one nation, although some nations remain more influential than others.

For Hardt and Negri, the Zapatista insurgency is both an example and a point of departure for the new wave of insurgencies around the world, pitting the multitude against the empire. The Zapatista experience became an emblematic case of actors resisting empire with their own localized projects, and with little need or desire to have a centralized organization. Zapatista discourses insisted on difference and heterogeneity in civil society and on the idea of a plurality of subjects—rather than a universal subject—struggling against the empire, which clearly resonated with these new radical theories of the antiglobalization movement. Its encompassing slogan, “A world in which many worlds fit”, marked the beginning of international support, which allowed various “minorities” from all over the world to identify with the movement.

In a similar vein, and directly influenced by the Zapatista experience, political theorist and activist John Holloway has developed the Zapatista idea that, instead of taking state power—the old idea of revolution, with its subsequent proletarian dictatorship<sup>1</sup>—what has to be democratized are power relations in everyday life and in all areas of society, as shown by the evocative title of his book: *Change the World without Taking Power* (2002). Holloway talks of the movement as an “uncertain revolution,”

a movement not aimed at a definite goal, but instead deliberately devoid of clear definitions or programs. This perspective was further developed in *Crack Capitalism* (2010), where Holloway consolidates his critique of Leninism by rejecting political party activism and a conception of social change confined to transforming the dominant mode of production within the state. As the Zapatista show again, emancipation is possible in the state’s “cracks”, since they allow movements to form an alternative space to state power. Zapatista discourses of alternative politics has informed Holloway’s idea that the alternative to capitalism does not consist of a struggle of labor “against” capital, but in a specific “doing” of everyday practices that counter abstract, fetishized, and alienating work.

### ***Autonomy as practice and as anthropological imagination***

More broadly, Zapatista autonomy refers to political procedures of direct democracy and participation that clearly resonate with the ideas of libertarian and antiauthoritarian philosophers of the 1970s who suddenly became, twenty to thirty years later, topical figures in post-Marxist revolutionary strategies. In particular, autonomy as a process is clear in the works of Cornelius Castoriadis, with his insistence on the transformative potential of the praxis of everyday life (Castoriadis [1975] 1999: 130). By issuing its own laws (*auto-nomos*), an autonomous society differs from a heteronomous society, based on absolute power and rigid and sacred institutions (such as ancestors, God, nature, reason, laws of history, competition). The autonomy project is both individual and collective, in the sense that it precludes the constitutive heteronomy of religious and traditional societies, but also of capitalist and Soviet regimes. The autonomization of society involves the political practice of direct democracy and the economic practice of self-production. By celebrating autonomy as society’s self-institution both as source and origin, and by refusing any standard or extrasocial imposed law (Castoriadis 1999a: 479), Castori-

adis suggests breaking with the “closing” of the instituted imaginary, that of heteronomous society, which warranted the truth and fairness of a definite set of social norms. In this sense, the project of society’s autonomy would be a project of radical democracy, where neither moral rules nor formal laws are imposed on society from without but emerge from within. This way of enforcing political power from individuals enables effective participation in the decisions that affect the group. In this sense, Castoriadis advocates a direct democracy in which citizens are equal in a public sphere, avoiding the opposition between the state sphere and the collective sphere.

Castoriadis’s theory is connected to the way in which the anthropological imaginary has affected radical theories and practices on the Zapatista experience. The idea of autonomy resonates with the anarchist and primitivist interpretation of indigenous people according to their degrees of autonomy from the state. This has to do with the re-emergence, in activists’ and radical intellectuals’ circles, of the work of Pierre Clastres (1974)—a companion of Castoriadis in the antiauthoritarian French movement—and his theory on the possibility of a “primitive” society that can refuse the state. Clastres opposes the ineluctable emergence of the hierarchical and coercive form in modern societies with the small political units formed by the Amazonian chiefdoms, where the whole social body prevents the chief from transforming the position of social prestige into a political coercive power. According to Clastres, their institutions are weaker because they refuse, actively or passively, the political centralization of the state, thereby ensuring more horizontal and egalitarian practices and avoiding hierarchical obedience relationships and exploitation. More recently and from a similar anarchist and post-Marxist perspective, James Scott has stressed the capacity of indigenous or nonstate society to produce alternative forms of politics. Notably, in *The Art of Not Being Governed* (2009), Scott elaborated on an “anarchist history” of the world region he calls Zomia, covering five countries of Southeast

Asia and four regions of China, of which it is told that people voluntarily fled the imposition of the state. From a fragment of history, Scott makes a comprehensive history of populations avoiding the state or that have been expelled from it, like the Miao or Kachin of the Southeast Asian hills, as well as the Tziganes and Berbers. This “art of not being governed” put these populations on the peripheries of power centers, the place par excellence for alternatives to the state. This choice to not live “at the heart” of the state generated “ungoverned” regions, where people survived through pastoralism or gathering.

This anarchist libertarian thought has notably influenced some other recent research on political or economic alternatives that generate a revival of horizontality as democratic politics, such as that analyzed by David Graeber (2004, 2011) or Marianne Maeckelbergh (2009). These works on contemporary social movements such as Occupy Wall Street and the alterglobalization movement do consider and quote Zapatism as the first global revolt and the origin of many contemporary social movements. These political anthropologists consider the Zapatista organization as a space of autonomy for creating alternatives of societies anchored in time and space along with the state, while maintaining necessary political externality. Their works always start from the political discourse of the organization and from the postulate that consensus and horizontality are a fairer way to make politics.

### *Alternative knowledge in Chiapas*

We have seen that the discourses of the Zapatista movement resonated with or had a direct influence on the production of radical theories of intellectuals in the context of a post-Marxist and libertarian turn and often with references to the anthropological imaginary. Similar theories have developed also more in contact with direct Zapatista experience and the social reality of Chiapas, thanks to the work of researchers and intellectuals not only taking Zapatism as a paradigm, but also practically working closely

with the Zapatista peasants and indigenous groups. Not without a strong ethical dimension attributed to Zapatista autonomy, a new generation of researchers often claims to practice social science in a “fairer” way. This claim of “academic justice” is a way to break with other works that have made severe critiques of the Zapatista organization in the name of science, for instance, the work of Marcos Estrada Saavedra, who worked in the *Caracol* La Realidad and analyzed the Zapatistas’ regional power as “unfair” and authoritarian (2007). At the opposite end, other authors attribute to the Zapatista organization many virtues of emancipation, but without mentioning the day-to-day practices of the indigenous peoples involved in Zapatism. For example, the medievalist historian Jérôme Baschet, who works and lives half of the year in San Cristóbal de Las Casas, formulates the idea of autonomy as a new capacity of common and ordinary people to handle their stories and their future. In his book *Haciendo otros mundos* (2013), he developed the idea that “to govern by itself” is both the starting point for reappropriating political power and an expression of self-organization as emancipation from the state form. Self-government claims to be emancipated from the capitalist state and to contribute to the making of an alternative world free from established political norms. In his words, the ethical-political dimension of the Zapatista organization creates shared norms around a “good” way of life that refuses any kind of domination from a capitalistic, state-centered, productivist, European-centered, and patriarchal logic.

In this polarized academic context, since 2004 an annual Immanuel Wallerstein Seminar has been organized by the University of the Earth-CIDECI on the outskirts of San Cristóbal de Las Casas. The aim is to think about the critical function of social sciences in society and, by the same token, the role of intellectuals engaged in projects of social change promoted by social movements. These meetings also pay tribute to the pioneering work of André Aubry (1988), a former priest trained in anthropology

who died unexpectedly in September 2007. The first International Colloquium in Memoriam of André Aubry, convened by the EZLN in December 2007, gathered committed intellectuals from many parts of the world. A year later, the World Festival of Dignified Rage gathered other intellectuals (Baschet 2009), and the first International Seminars for Reflection and Analysis, “Planet Earth: Anti-Systemic Movements,” were set up regularly at the University of the Earth. These seminars are designed to reflect the role of the scientific world in the transformation of society. As Chiapas is one of the main laboratories of Mexican indigenous policies of assimilation and acculturation, many social scientists have felt the need to tell a story “against the current” and examine the relationship between science and reality in-depth, in order to move away from the legacy of these public policies.

Drawing on the last writings of André Aubry on action research, on Paulo Freire and Ivan Illich’s popular education experiences, and on intercultural education, this alternative research aspires to reach out to social actors and support processes fueled by the Zapatistas. It attempts to decolonize knowledge through collaborative research that helps to reinvigorate collective action (Baronnet et al. 2011). Solidarity and organicity allow researchers to keep in touch with social issues and thus to examine relations of domination, starting with the production of knowledge intimately linked to political projects in Mexico. This view posits that throughout the twentieth century, indigenous policies, closely related to the Mexican anthropological tradition, itself influenced by North American cultural anthropology (including the Harvard School), reproduced a neocolonial tradition of data and local knowledge extraction.

### **What ethnography can tell us about the Zapatista alterpolitical project**

All the philosophical and anthropological theories discussed so far converge on the same conclusion: the need to identify a space free from

domination. I will now confront these theories with the ethnography of a concrete experience and space of political autonomy, in order to discuss the gap between Zapatism as a philosophical and political project and its appropriation by the inhabitants of the municipality of Polhó, the actual subjects and creators of this autonomous space.

### ***Historicizing the space of the Zapatista autonomy***

In order to understand the Zapatista initiative, it is important to understand the historical trajectory of politics and the social groups of the region of the municipality of Polhó that I am referring to. The ethnographic research I conducted between 2003 and 2010 took place in the highlands region, near the colonial town of San Cristóbal de Las Casas in Chiapas. From the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, this region was considered a “region of refuge” (Aguirre Beltrán 1967) for the Tzotzil and Tzeltal indigenous groups settled in the mountains to escape the colonial system. The rural communities were like satellites of the colonial city, and the relations of peripheral indigenous groups with the center and especially the mestizos relied on asymmetries of power. Colonial policies regrouped highland populations to facilitate tax levies, but the region remained marginalized because of geographical adversities (difficult access to villages, harsh climatic conditions, and demographic pressure combined with low soil fertility). Under the colonial regime, the “Indigenous Republic” granted indigenous peasants relative autonomy and differentiated legal rights that allowed them to maintain political and economic advantages despite their position of vassalage vis-à-vis the Spanish crown. In the nineteenth century, the evangelization by the Catholic Church has been difficult, making the indigenous of the region the custodians of “indigenous tradition”. However, after independence, with Porfirio Díaz, the ongoing dispossession of the indigenous population from their land increasingly pushed them to seek work out-

side their community of origin (Rus et al. 2003). For much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, members of the indigenous communities migrated to the central valleys and Soconusco to work on large farms as agricultural workers (*peones asalariados* or *acasillados*). The highlands became a region of dormitory communities with great political autonomy in contrast to the control inside the farms.

In the 1950s, the state gradually penetrated the region, incorporating communities through indigenous policies. The new indigenous institutions allowed for the formation of an indigenous elite, thanks to education and development projects implemented in rural areas. The members of this elite were the first agents of modernization of the local communities and became the intermediaries between these communities and the state, especially the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). They were often teachers of bilingual schools, becoming municipal presidents via a corporatist and patronage pact with the official party. The “ladino way of life” (Dehouve 1974) of this elite and the political use of “tradition” by its members within the PRI created an “intimate culture” (Lomnitz-Adler 1992) between the state and the new “cultural caciques” (Rus 1995; Pineda 1993). In the second half of the twentieth century, bilingual teachers monopolized political positions. This progressive concentration of power in their hands encouraged arbitrary and authoritarian practices. The 1970s witnessed the emergence of independent peasants’ organizations and the first ethnic claims, along with renewed diocesan action around the *Palabra de Dios*. Many of these organizations converged in the 1990s and joined the Zapatista uprising of 1994 in several municipalities of the state of Chiapas.

At the end of 1994, the EZLN declared 38 “rebel” municipalities within the federated state of Chiapas. Different political autonomy processes emerged in different spaces, according to geographic and historical specificities: in the Lacandona Forest, in the highlands, in the north, and at the border with Guatemala. The whole area under Zapatista control constituted a sort

of differentiated *chiapaneca* Zomia. This geographical heterogeneity and the specificity of Zapatista organizing according to the different regions and social groups convinced thousands of indigenous peasants to join the rebellion. They deliberately affirmed their aim of extracting themselves from “bad government” (*mal gobierno*), avoiding involvement in any partisan and electoral processes considered corrupt.

### ***Contextualizing the autonomy inside local struggles***

In the highlands region I am talking about, the Zapatista rebellion emerged later than in the Lacandon Forest, which is considered the sanctuary of the EZLN and the center of the uprising of 1994. In the highlands, the power of the cultural caciques of the PRI had excluded several sectors of the population from local politics, so that the Zapatista rebellion converged with a local history of attempts to subvert local asymmetries of power. In the municipality of Chenalhó that I focus on, the dissidents of the PRI have tried to counteract the power of caciques, first by embracing religious movements (notably Presbyterian movements), and later, in the 1970s, by joining the theological-liberationist movement of the Diocese of San Cristóbal. In the early 1990s, other dissidents rallied with independent peasant organizations, such as the Alianza Nacional Campesina Independiente Emiliano Zapata (ANCIEZ), not affiliated with the official peasant union (Confederación Nacional Campesina). By the mid-1990s, all dissidents rallied around a common goal against the caciques of the PRI.

Another specificity of the region and more particularly of Chenalhó lies in the fact that the first aim of the Zapatista rebellion leaders here was not the political autonomy of the region. For the municipal elections of 1995, the “popular” candidate opposing that of the PRI was affiliated with the Partido Revolucionario Democrático (PRD) but also the Zapatista organization. He won the first round of the elections in the assembly, but for the second round the EZLN

called for a boycott of the elections; as a result, the PRI candidate won and seized municipal power. In reaction to that, the “popular” candidate decided to forcibly occupy the municipal palace as a symbol of his legitimate power. The state police intervened and expelled the leader and his group from the occupied municipality buildings. The “popular” candidate then set up his headquarters in his locality of origin, Polhó, and proclaimed it an “autonomous municipality”. This local Zapatista leader rapidly adapted his action and discourse to that of the EZLN, as expressed during the national negotiations some weeks earlier of the San Andrés Agreements, that is, self-determination for indigenous people. The rebels from Polhó formed a *Consejo autónomo* (autonomous council) to break with the figure of “municipal president” of Chenalhó, which was associated with the power of cultural caciques. They put at the head of the *Consejo autónomo* an old farmer elected publicly in assembly, according to traditional and indigenous *usos y costumbres*—that is, overtly and by consensus—and not by secret ballot.

This case raises a first contradiction with the philosophical theory on Zapatism: the proclamation of an “autonomous municipality” is certainly based on an idea of self-determination and of the autonomy of a space, but this also implies the seizing of power, at least at a local level, and the production of an alternative, but almost symmetrical, municipal authority. The parallel government of Polhó is in fact the outgrowth of the earlier failed attempt of substituting the constitutional municipal power, rooted in an old repertory of action in Mexico (Collier and Quaratiello 2005; Dehouve 2003; Combes 2011). Political autonomy was not only an active revolutionary and ideological choice, but also a practical strategy following from local history and the changing configurations of power.

The work of David Recondo (2007) on Oaxaca has shown that the institutionalization of traditional voting, in accordance to *usos y costumbres*, did not produce an alternative model, but rather a hybrid mode of deliberation, integrating both the ballot and the “traditional”



voting and both the principle of majority and of consensus. Recondo has also shown that the mechanisms of delegation and control of power of the communal assembly were not necessarily a guarantee of “greater” democracy. These public political arenas could become the scene of interest struggles, where individual choices, publicly visible in the assembly, may proceed under strong community pressure. The assembly as a more democratic space and the “traditional” vote as a more democratic procedure can end up providing the context for a corporate vote that would upset the romantic picture of an egalitarian community.

Moreover, in Chenalhó, the Zapatista initiative certainly broke with local caciques and created self-government, but also produced new divisions and reinforced old ones. The upheaval awakened latent tensions in several neighboring localities and reactivated old religious, political, and land-related conflicts, until this turned into overt political violence in 1997 between different groups of the same Tzotzil ethnicity. Neighboring groups were politically affiliated with different organizations and parties, especially the Cardenistas. And with one of the first actions of the newly proclaimed Zapatista leaders in Polhó being to expropriate a sandpit from their direct neighbors, such political divides among the Tzotzil were further reinforced. Clashes with neighboring communities were also intertwined with religious affiliations, divided between *traditionalistas*, or Presbyterian groups linked to the PRI, and the liberationist Catholics, to which a part of the Zapatistas was affiliated.

In 1997, with the explosion of these oppositions, the municipality was militarized by the army, and paramilitary groups took form in the neighboring localities. The escalation of violence brought a series of assassinations and the displacement of thousands of families. Its paroxysm was reached on 22 December 1997, when members of the Civil Society of the Bees, a political and religious group close to the claims of their Zapatista neighbors but adhering to nonviolent action and nonmilitary organization, were attacked in the village of Acteal. Non-Zapatista paramilitary groups caused 45 fatalities among

the pacific organization, especially women and children. In this context of violence, all Zapatista sympathizers and some members of the Civil Society of the Bees had progressively taken refuge in Polhó, where they could be protected by rebel authorities. With all the displaced supporters hence gathered in one space, the new Zapatista municipal authorities saw an opportunity to strengthen their regional power. The political violence led the Zapatista leaders to define their territory more clearly for safety reasons. They installed a metal gate at the edge of the paved road, re-creating a kind of new “region of refuge” spatially inside the constitutional municipality of San Pedro Chenalhó, while affirming politically and jurisdictionally their autonomy from it. The whole population of Polhó was then affiliated with the Zapatista initiative, and the territorial border of the autonomous municipality also established a visible border between Zapatistas and non-Zapatistas.

By 1998, Polhó constituted a closed space, freed from the state but completely and integrally submitted to Zapatista authority, to the point that militias controlled the entrances to the autonomous municipality in order to defend the community and to control the transit of the soldiers and the inhabitants of the region. After 1998, it became a demographic and political stronghold of the Zapatista organization in Chiapas, but also a delimited territory unique in the whole Zapatista experience. Generally speaking, the territorialization of the EZLN’s project in Chiapas did not consist of a strict delimitation and appropriation of space, the Zapatistas being often mixed with non-Zapatistas within the same administrative boundaries. Polhó is an exception with regard to its spatial organization.

### **“NGO-ization” of autonomy and new “autonomous leaderships”**

#### ***Economic dependence on external humanitarian aid***

Autonomy first meant a voluntary economic break with patronage networks traditionally con-

necting local politics to the national and regional state. This implied the disempowerment of local caciques and the refusal—as well as the non-remuneration—of different state “promoters,” “committees,” “commissions,” and “representatives”. The expropriation of the sandpit and a “communal contribution”—a sort of tax—was supposed to compensate for the absence of state resources. But the self-administrated economy rapidly proved unable to feed the thousands of landless people. To resolve this economic lack, the Zapatista authorities allowed humanitarian aid inside the new “enclosed” space of Polhó, as long as they considered the autonomous municipality as a “freed-from-the-state” space. Quickly, this spatial and political autonomy became economically dependent on exterior resources: the autonomy from the state was only possible with the integration of a larger political landscape of international solidarity.

So, another paradox of the Zapatista experience in Polhó is that one of the most successful experiences of political autonomy in Chiapas—geographically *inside* a constitutional municipality but politically *outside* state sovereignty—was possible only by resorting to an economic dependence on external humanitarian aid. The municipal and regional budget mainly relied on donations from international civil society and the aid machine. For example, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the civil association Enlace Civil took responsibility for supplying food and proposed projects for cooperative production (of coffee, vegetables, chickens, crafts, tortillas). But these operations targeted all the internally displaced persons in Chiapas, without distinguishing according to political or religious affiliation. Médecins du Monde-France and the Mexican Red Cross were in charge of the health of the new “internally displaced” people inside the Zapatista space. The Zapatistas also rejected all teachers that were not affiliated with their movement and created their own educational program with the help of the Mexican civil association Ta Spol Be. They also promulgated their own “good” laws, such as the prohibition of alcohol inside the autonomous territory.

They created an autonomous civil register and carried out civil disobedience actions, such as not paying for electricity. All these elements created incoherence between the self-government of Polhó’s political project of autonomy and the economic dependence of local Zapatista supporters, who were at the same time “rebels” under EZLN instruction and “internally displaced” people under humanitarian government.

### ***Autonomous leadership: Between “good government” and “good management”***

This dependence on international aid became the structural basis of this autonomous experience, as shown by the fact that it also brought a change in the leadership of the autonomous municipality in 1998. The power of the local municipality of Polhó was then related to its capacity to attract the resources coming from international aid. But these resources, rather than serving a revolutionary political practice, were integrated in the same processes and practices of patronage that the Zapatistas were trying to resist. We can understand this by referring to the notion of “bureaucratic *habitus*” (Auyero et al. 2010): a patronage link that can bridge political spaces that were a priori separated, such as social movements on one side and partisan parties on the other. With this bureaucratic *habitus*, the autonomous space of Polhó becomes a more ambivalent space, between international aid and autonomy, rebel and bureaucratic at the same time. The autonomous council after 1998 is composed of those who hold some amount of economic and cultural capital and have the *savoir-faire* to deal with NGO experts. This was the case of one of the autonomous council members I was familiar with in Polhó. He led the autonomous municipality for two mandates while simultaneously running a pharmacy and a vehicle used for collective transportation, which allowed him to perform his public function while at the same time earning his living. Moreover, he exhibited a special talent in raising humanitarian funds for the displaced Zapatistas. Thus, “good government” meant that the new *Consejo* also needed to be a “good manager” who could

administrate the projects and distribute the goods and money coming from donations. This “good government” then raises the question of the reproduction of the old patron-client relations between the rebel leaders and the NGOs established in Polhó.

The autonomous regional network was consolidated after the failure of the second negotiations between the EZLN and the government in 2001. In August 2003, five regional autonomous regions called *Caracoles* were formed, each with its own authority, called the Good Government Council (Junta de Buen Gobierno, or JBG). This setup was meant to ensure a weaker control of the EZLN army on the civil municipalities, but also more democratic, inclusive, and participative decision-making processes and practices of political representation. I will take the example of the *Caracol* of the Oventic region, which is known as the “Central Heart of the Zapatistas Facing the World” because of its proximity to the colonial city of San Cristóbal de Las Casas—and which is also the region of the Polhó municipality. Here, the JBG is composed of various autonomous municipal representatives who gather each week in the *Caracol*, but every week the representative of a municipality is different. This rotation on a weekly basis is presented as a strategy for avoiding power concentration in the hands of a few people and, therefore, for avoiding the return of caciquism. In addition, the desire to actively involve all members of the organization, especially across gender and generations, reinforces the sense of belonging to a common movement willing to break with patronage relations, corruption, and caciquism, while exalting the sharing of virtuous values such as mutual aid and solidarity.

This reconfiguration of power in a federal form of bottom-up political representation was also aimed at managing the relationship between NGOs and the Zapatistas. The JBGs responded to the need to directly manage and better allocate funds from national and international solidarity agencies and to reduce the role of NGOs in some autonomous spaces. Polhó was the first municipality to be affected by these adjustments.

This movement certainly marked a step toward greater self-government and self-administration. But it also meant a greater concentration of power in the *Caracoles*. Actually, it forced all its members to acquire skills that were previously concentrated in one person or group. Indigenous peasants were politically trained by the organization. Their “professionalization” led them to improve the quality of their work: they learned “bureaucratic” skills, using computers, taking a census of their population, making regional registers, writing public communiqués, speaking *castellano*, and presenting their organization and its history in front of national and international civil society, NGOs, and youth solidarity groups of many countries. Participating in endless meetings, they also learned how to solve social and political problems involving Zapatista and non-Zapatista indigenous peasants, sometimes from different ethnic groups, in one *Caracol*.

The authorities take pains to provide fast and efficient service in order to emphasize the difference with the government bureaucracy, presented as slow and inefficient. They insisted, for example, on the accessibility of political representatives: the Zapatista representatives were always available; anyone interested could meet them during the day. Their strategies and procedures resonated with some features of the libertarian theories I have previously discussed. The JBGs, as their name suggests, had no coercive function, being “chiefs”, as Clastres would put it, without power. The JBGs were flexible in their organization according to the needs of each municipality and the *Caracol* itself, bringing to mind Castoriadis’s idea of self-creating, instituting but never exhausting the capacity of the autonomous society to regenerate itself. For example, at the beginning, the weekly rotation of representatives created problems, as it was difficult for incoming people to follow up on files and issues. The JBGs therefore decided to establish a day of transition where outgoing and incoming representatives could commonly deliberate on current cases and transmit the issues.

Nevertheless, some questions were raised about the difficulty of knowing the backstage

issues of the organization. The Zapatistas are very careful not to talk about the administration of money and donations. Is it possible that the patronage networks implied by the presence of the NGOs have a negative consequence on the “good governments” and reproduce elements of dishonorable “bad governments”? What are the consequences of the actual withdrawal of NGOs from Chiapas? Rebecca Galemba’s work (2013) on informal and illicit entrepreneurs suggests that this opacity makes “autonomous spaces” more vulnerable to smuggling and illegal activities, especially at the Mexico-Guatemala border. There are certainly many questions that cannot be answered because of the well-preserved secrets of the Zapatistas about their internal organization. However, I propose here to analyze the evidence about internal contradictions of the organization that I was able to collect during my fieldwork in Polhó, by listening to the mutterings on these issues during my exchanges with the families I lived with.

### ***Internal divisions in the autonomous municipality of Polhó***

We have already seen that in Polhó there is a religious and nonviolent movement that is politically close to the Zapatistas but was never integrated into the organization. In 2001, a faction of the Civil Society of the Bees decided to compromise with the government for the return of the displaced people of their organization. As a result, the faction could buy some land located near their community of origin. The Zapatistas from Polhó refused to participate in the negotiations. Until 2003, the municipality remained a bastion of the organization. Nevertheless, other internal conflicts later emerged. The first reason for conflict was in relation to the issue of the internally displaced Zapatistas and their presence in the territory. Conflicts exploded between displaced people and residents, as well as between political representatives and constituencies of the EZLN. The region was experiencing an impoverishment of the common lands and deforestation as a consequence of the demo-

graphic explosion of Polhó after the arrival of the displaced people in 1998. At the beginning of the 2000s, the “residents” were beginning to complain about this pressure on the land. The autonomous council wanted to preserve the social integration of displaced Zapatistas and residents to preserve its prestige as a revolutionary bastion and because it was a condition for keeping the support of the NGOs. Some Zapatista families decided to disobey and go back to their lands without the agreement of their representatives. The Civil Society of the Bees’ return to their land in 2001 was then considered a precedent for people wanting to recover their plots.

Moreover, in 2003, the capacity of the municipality to preserve its preferential link with NGOs was diminishing, finally weakening the Zapatista movement. The ICRC decided to progressively leave Chiapas because of a “lack of urgency”; the educative project Ta Spol Be also quit the autonomous municipality. As a consequence, by 2006, the Zapatista movement’s power was fragmented, and the sympathizers of the “autonomous municipality” searched for new alternatives. Some of them returned to the PRI, while others migrated to the cities to find seasonal jobs. Most of the people maintained a radical rejection of the social programs of the government, but they nonetheless had to cope with the government in order to apply for some development projects, for example, by registering their civil identity with the census and becoming *legible*, as Scott (1999) would put it, to the administration.

### **Conclusion**

Twenty years after the insurrection of 1994, it is necessary to go beyond the image of the Zapatista experience as a perfect political “alter-native”, a virtuous indigenous peasant movement integrated into a revolutionary project with a world message against the empire. By looking into the history of a particular Zapatista experience of “autonomy”, the stereotype of the Zapatistas as the ideal alter-native of indigenous

struggle against neoliberalism is confronted with actual practice. The Zapatista experience in Polhó clearly raises the question of the historical possibility of political autonomy refusing power hierarchies. It illustrates a progressive formation of spatial and political autonomy and an institutionalization of power at the local level that nonetheless remains far from “changing the world without taking the power”. Similarly, the contradictions that emerged in Polhó since 2003 call into question the idea that the subordination of the local populations affiliated to the Zapatistas was real, active, and explicitly political in the sense of the movement’s discourses. What I witnessed rather suggests that the rebellion, from the point of view of the local populations, was more endured than chosen. Since 2010, the Polhó autonomy project has undergone such massive disengagement that there hardly remain any supporters of the Zapatistas. The armed conflict, the displacement of the population, and the Acteal massacre explain to a large extent such a process of atrophy within this experience of autonomy. They created a split between the political project and the economic constraints of an autonomy that was only possible in relation to a prolonged armed conflict.

We should regret the rareness of studies about concrete experiences of the Zapatista “autonomy” that would possibly give a more precise picture of the movement, often hidden by the strong “discursive curtain” of this emancipatory project both influencing and being influenced by the search by libertarian and post-Marxists theorists for a consistent political “alter-native”. The influence of this movement in political and academic thought raises questions about the quest for twenty-first-century utopias and the role of the humanities and the social sciences in this search, which, to paraphrase Hellman (2009), seems to teach us more about scholars’ representations than about the world itself.

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## Note

1. See also Baschet (2005) and Corcuff and Löwy (2003).

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