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Autonomous struggles, political parties, recognition politics and state (re)production in Oaxaca, Mexico[1]

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Abstract

This essay engages in a discussion around political parties, recognition politics and autonomous movements in contemporary Mexico. Exploring the distinctions between forms of community self-organization in Indigenous communities in Oaxaca, and the organizational forms of political parties, recognition politics and the state, this essay seeks to explore how political parties and recognition politics serve as techniques that produce and reproduce the logic and practices of the state against community struggles for autonomy.

Keywords: Autonomy; political parties; recognition politics; state control; Oaxaca; Mexico

The turn of the 21st century was brought in by a significant restructuring of power within Mexican society and the organization of the Mexican state. The Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which had held individual control over Mexican politics since 1929, was slowly losing its dominance, as competing political parties emerged in the electoral arena in the 1980's and 1990's. In the 2000 presidential elections, the PRI would lose to the National Action Party (PAN), marking the end of an era of PRI's single party rule in post-revolutionary Mexico.

At the same time, Mexico was being inundated by neoliberal policies, which had begun some decades before, causing extensive change to the relationship between the market, state and society in Mexico. The ratification of the North American Free Trade Agreement, which officially went into effect on January 1, 1994, solidified the ideological dominance of neoliberalism in Mexico and throughout North America. The demands of neoliberalism led to widespread changes in Mexico but specifically in the Mexican countryside, where Indigenous and campesino communities were threatened by new forces of capital accumulation. Violence was the language of the market and state, as communities faced territorial dispossession, a shifting security apparatus characterized by widespread militarization, and direct threats to their forms of sustenance and community reproduction (Composto and Lorena Navarro 2014).

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To add further complexity to the restructuring of power in Mexico, the end of the 20th century was marked by a significant shift in the relationship between the Mexican state and its Indigenous populations. The neoliberalization of the country was met with stiff resistance, as Indigenous communities organized for territorial control, and respect for their self-determination and autonomy (Composto and Lorena Navarro 2014). This resistance was nowhere clearer than in the southern state of Chiapas, where Indigenous Mayans launched a rebellion on January 1, 1994, the same day in which NAFTA went into effect. The Indigenous Zapatista uprising was a direct confrontation with the neoliberal policies taking hold in the country, and would have lasting effects on the relationship between the Mexican state and Indigenous communities (Marcos 2002).

At the same time, the Mexican state was making significant institutional changes to its relationship with Indigenous communities. Moving away from the indigenist politics which characterized much of the 20th century, where assimilation of Indigenous populations into a unified national identity was the focus, the Mexican state, along with various countries throughout Latin America, began to adopt a politics of recognition and multiculturalism in relation to Indigenous communities. The southern mostly Indigenous state of Oaxaca was at the forefront of these politics of recognition, making changes to the state constitution along with state's Code of Political Institutions and Electoral Procedures, legally recognizing the rights of Indigenous peoples to elect their communal authorities according to their traditional practices (Anaya Muñoz 2004; Eisenstadt 2007; Recondo 2007; Hernández-Díaz 2010).

Thus, the end of the 20th century was marked by the diversification of political parties, and the diminishing dominance of the single party PRI rule—a transformation seen by liberals as the strengthening of the democratic regime in Mexico, and evidence of a consolidating representative democracy (Loaeza 2018; Falomir, Fernández de Lara Gaitán and Lucca 2019). At the same time, in the southern state of Oaxaca, a politics of recognition was being introduced, legally recognizing Indigenous municipalities to elect their municipal authorities without the intervention of political parties. A seemingly contradictory series of forces was put into play, the neoliberalization of the country which greatly threatened Indigenous peoples and the control of their land, the multiplication of political parties as managers of the Mexican state, and the implementation of recognition politics, which at least on the surface, seemed to signify greater respect for Indigenous autonomy and Indigenous self-organization.

In this paper, I want to work from within this complex interplay of forces, developing a critique of political party and recognition politics, and a more general critique of the state itself, in defense of an autonomous politics. I situate this discussion in the southern Mexican state of Oaxaca, where there are ongoing conflicts between community forms of self-organization and state power. An investigation into political party and recognition politics in contemporary Oaxaca will help contribute to our understanding of the ongoing

processes of state (re)production in Mexico, and deepen our thinking around the complexities of Indigenous struggles for autonomy in the 21st century.

In contrast to the acceptance and celebration of political parties in representative democracies, as fundamental institutions in bringing the organized demands of the people to the state apparatus, I argue that in the context of Oaxaca, political parties do not facilitate democracy, but rather interfere, disrupt and repress movements of self-organization and autonomy. That is, flipping the common understanding on its head, political parties do not serve the interests of the people in the political terrain of the state, but rather serve the interests of the state in the political terrain of the community. Political parties, while not always directly organized by state actors, introduce and compel a certain way of relating to one another, a certain logic of social organization, a certain ideological current, or to put it generally, a certain politics, that (re)produces the state form.

In addition to the critique of political parties, I suggest that the politics of recognition, which have been introduced in Oaxaca to counter the influence of political parties, might serve the same function, as another technique of the state to capture and manage communities that resist state control and state power. In this way, the seemingly liberatory politics of recognition, might just be reorganizing state power, restructuring state sovereignty, and ultimately reproducing the state form.

Political parties in theory

The defense of political parties is inherent to many currents of political thought and practice, a few of which I want to focus on in this section. In doing so, I want to scrutinize the theoretical insights which inform common arguments in favor of political parties—arguments which carry weight in contemporary Mexico—in order to show even the most idealized conceptions of political parties, ultimately reinforce state power and the state form against Indigenous autonomy and self-determination.

Firstly, representative democracy, by far the dominant political paradigm in the world today, has overwhelmingly accepted political parties as fundamental to democratic governance. While early democratic theorists might have critiqued political parties—we can think of John Locke's individualism, Jean Jacques Rousseau's critique of representative democracy, or the critique of factions in the Federalist Papers—with the introduction of universal suffrage and the emergence of mass democracies exercised across vast nation-states, political parties have come to be seen as crucial institutions for democratic representation. American political scientist, E. E. Schattschneider, went so far as to write in 1942, "...that the political parties created democracy and that modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of the parties" (Schattschneider 1942, 1).

If political parties are fundamental to modern representative democracy, what exactly is their function? The question of geographical scale is important. For

theorists of representative democracy, political parties become necessary institutions in linking the interests and demands of the citizenry to the political system. Democratic theorist Robert A. Dahl argues, "…unlike a small city or town, the large scale of democracy in a country makes political associations both necessary and desirable" (Dahl 2005, 196). For Dahl, political associations—to which he includes political parties—are vital for effective citizen participation in large scale democracies. As Dalton, Farrell and McAllister explain, during the early processes of democratization in Europe and North America, "…political parties emerged as the primary linkage mechanism for facilitating the representative process" (Dalton, Farrell and McAllister 2011, 5). Thus, according to this logic, political parties are a vital avenue by which the needs and demands of the citizenry can be represented at the level of the state.

Political parties serve other roles related to citizen organization and representation in large scale democracies. For some, political parties serve as an organizational apparatus, bringing together citizens in a cohesive and effective political force. For others, political parties serve a fundamental role in encouraging and instigating political participation, or helping educate and train citizens to the nuances and complexities of participation in the political system. Generally speaking, in the representative democratic tradition, political parties are often seen as necessary institutions to help improve democratic participation, competition and debate, and facilitate those characteristics in free and fair elections (Dalton, Farrell and McAllister 2011; Kölln 2015; Dahl 2005).

The question of democratic competition and debate is important. A diversity of opinion and robust debate between political positions is seen as fundamental to a thriving representative democracy. Political parties are seen as institutions that organize electoral competition and political debate (Dahl 2005). A state where there exists only one political party, is often seen as an authoritarian state, as the lack of political parties exemplifies the lack of political debate and the lack of a diversity of opinion. This is particularly the case in countries of the global south, where "…political scientists measure the march toward democracy…in terms of those countries' capacity to develop strong party organizations that are the foundation for free, democratic elections" (White 2006, 7-8). Thus, in modern representative democracies, the existence of a plurality of political parties is taken as characteristic of a healthy democracy.

In Mexico, the relatively recent diversification of political parties, and the wavering dominance of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), has been taken as evidence of democratic consolidation in the country. For many political analysts, 2018 marked a successful democratic election in Mexico, with the triumph of MORENA as a left of center alternative to the PRI and PAN, and the introduction of a third party into presidential power:

> …one of the unquestionable results of these elections has been the strengthening of Mexican democracy in its totality, since the elections have produced an ideological and partisan rotation, opening up a new frontier to politics in Mexico

> and…the transition to an entirely polyarchic system (Falomir, Fernández de Lara Gaitán and Lucca 2019, 288)[2].

For theorists of representative democracy, a diversity of political parties is essential for healthy competition and debate. A multi-party system embodies the ethos of democracy. The single party dominance of national politics, like was the case of the PRI for 71 years, represents a form of authoritarian control which lacks democratic participation, representation and competition.

Unlike ideologues of representative democracy, who take the party as fundamental to citizen representation and healthy electoral competition, certain currents of Marxist thought also see the political party as a fundamental organization, but in its capacity to organize the working masses for political revolution. Unlike democratic theory, the idea is not that a diversity of parties represents a diversity of interests in the political system, but that a specific type of party, organized and disciplined, is capable of bringing together the working masses, in order to take state power and do away with capitalism.

What is the revolutionary party for V.I. Lenin, and what does it do? Lenin held a certain skepticism toward the consciousness of the working masses and their capability to direct their own revolutionary movement. Lenin thought that because of the pervasiveness of bourgeois ideology, while the spontaneous uprising of the working masses was fundamental to the revolutionary struggle, it was only a disciplined and organized working class that could carry out the communist revolution. That disciplined and working class, must of course be educated with the theoretical foundations of scientific socialism.

Theory thus played a fundamental role in Lenin's thinking on revolution. In order to overcome the prevalence of bourgeois ideology amongst the working class, a well-developed theory of class struggle was necessary. Lenin writes, "Without revolutionary theory, there can be no revolutionary movement" (Lenin 1969, 25). For Lenin, revolutionary theory was essential in giving shape to the newly forming revolutionary party, and directing it away from other currents of revolutionary thought that might lead the working classes in the wrong direction. Furthermore, Lenin thought theoretical reflection to be fundamental, in critically analyzing the experiences of working-class movements in other countries. The revolutionary movement was an international movement, and for Lenin, theoretical analysis of other experiences was pivotal. Drawing from Engels, Lenin saw the theoretical struggle to be on par with the political and economic struggle of social-democracy.

For Lenin, to properly develop the revolutionary struggle amongst the workers, there was the necessity for disciplined, experienced revolutionaries who can lead workers in practice and theory, toward a united front. For Lenin, the leaders of the revolutionary party, the vanguard, are a group of "professional revolutionaries" led by advanced revolutionary theory. He writes, "A party is the

[2] All translated citations done by the author.

vanguard of a class, and its duty is to lead the masses, not to reflect the average state of mind of the masses" (Lenin 1975, 42). The role of trained revolutionaries is to develop a political party apparatus which helps in organizing and disciplining the workers toward the revolutionary struggle. The vanguard party, the advanced revolutionaries, were the fundamental force in educating and directing the working masses in the correct path toward revolution.

While V.I. Lenin's idea of the revolutionary party has played an overwhelmingly adverse role in historical struggles for self-determination and liberation, his theoretical formulations continue to influence those on the so-called left, both in Mexico and across the globe, who argue for the necessity of progressive political parties in organizing for social change. Argentinean-Mexican Marxist philosopher, Enrique Dussel, is one such contemporary political theorist influenced by Lenin, who posits the political party as a fundamental institution to a transformative politics. To understand Dussel's approach to political parties, it is first fundamental to understand his thinking on power and the political.

For Dussel, the base of political power is grounded in the living human being, in their instinctual desire for survival, their will-to-live. The will-to-live is fulfilled through the production of their necessities for survival, of the satisfaction of their material needs. Being collective beings by nature, the satisfaction of material needs is a collective will, carried out within human communities. For Dussel, to produce and make use of the material necessities of life is the foundation of power. This power is collective, grounded in human communities, bringing us to politics. The joining together of objectives and purposes, the common will to achieve collective ends, produces a higher degree of political power amongst the human community.

This leads us to a fundamental distinction in Dussel's thought on power and politics, which has immediate effects on his interpretation of political parties. Dussel makes a distinction between power as *potentia*, the potential of power, and power as *potestas*, delegated, institutionalized political power. For Dussel, power as *potentia*, the original power of the political community, must be enacted through its institution in order to become real. Otherwise, the power of the political community in its original state, as *potentia*, remains solely potential. Dussel writes,

> There is a scission between *potentia* and *potestas*, in other words, between the power of the political community as central, original, and fundamental (the hidden ontological level) and the heterogenous differentiation of functions through institutions that allow power to become real, empirical, and feasible, which allow it to appear (as a phenomenon) in the political field (Dussel 2008, 20).

For Dussel, power as potential always belongs to the people, but only through institutionalization can that power become real. The institution of the people's original power, for Dussel, is the state. Thus, power must be institutionalized in the institutions of the state, in order to be practiced, or in order to exercised.

Dussel lays out two more manifestations of political power, power as obedience and power as domination. Assuming the necessity of the delegation of power—the delegation of power as essential for the exercise of power—Dussel argues that the idea of political power is for delegates to obey the general will of the people, the original political power for Dussel. Drawing from Zapatista practice, yet manipulating it to his own ends, Dussel speaks of "command by obeying." For Dussel, this is the true vocation of politics.

On the other hand, Dussel speaks of the fetishization of power, power as domination, which has become the predominant manifestation of political power practiced in contemporary politics. Dussel writes, "Once power has become fetishized, the action of the representative, of the governor…must inevitably be a coercive action and thus cannot fulfill the delegated exercise of the power of the community" (Dussel 2008, 32). For Dussel, the fetishization of *potestas*, that is, institutionalized power, directly saps power from *potentia*, that is the foundational political power of the community. When power becomes a self-referential act, when power becomes fetishized, it diminishes the political power of the people. There, in between these two different forms of power, *potentia* and *potestas*, Dussel argues for a state structure that maintains the representation of *potentia*, through delegation, as *potestas*.

This brings us to the heart of this discussion. What role does the political party play? For Dussel, much of contemporary party politics in Mexico take the form of electoral machines, animated by the fetishization of power, focused solely on elections and the reproduction of their institutionalized political power. The connection with the power of the people, with the *potentia*, has disappeared. In contrast, Dussel argues, "A modern party is not an electoral mechanism but rather a body of public servants with a thoughtful, studied, well-crafted ideology carried out always through public political actions" (Dussel 2008, 35). The party should be a school of politics, Dussel often says, which helps produce a unified ideology and a unified political program. That political party ideology must then be institutionalized in order to become power, in order to come into being.

In looking at the defense of political parties from both Lenin and Dussel, their shared assumptions are evident. Both thinkers stress the necessity of the political party to organize what they see as the otherwise disorganized and politically ineffective masses, to solidify a cohesive political ideology, and to mobilize that political ideology through the institutional mechanisms of the state. Alternative forms of community and social organization, along with the different spaces of political and social struggle outside the state, are ignored or critiqued in favor of the unified, disciplined, hierarchical and institutionalized politics of the political party. With this, the revolutionary or progressive party plays the same role as the party of representative democracy, in reinforcing state logic and the state form.

Political parties and *usos y custumbres* in Oaxaca

The emergence of political parties in Mexico can be traced to the formation of the National Revolutionary Party (PNR) in 1929. As part of the post-revolutionary project of state formation and consolidation, the PNR was organized to unite the various local and regional powers in the country, to produce a government based in institutions and laws, and not in local strong men or caudillos. As Roy González Padilla tells us,

> It is not by chance that this project for a country had as one of its principal axes of support the formation of a national political party that would bring together under its ideology and discipline the main political forces on which the revolutionary regime was based… (González Padilla 2014, 67).

Nor was it by chance that the National Revolutionary Party was formed by then president Plutarco Elías Calles, along with other well-established political, military and economic leaders in the country. The first significant political party in Mexico was thus a project derivate of state power, part of the quest to construct a post-revolutionary government institutional apparatus, as a means to stabilize and consolidate the post-revolutionary state.

In 1938, the PNR changed its name to the Party of the Mexican Revolution (PRM), only to change its name again shortly afterwards to the now well-known, Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) in 1946. The PRI would become the dominant force in Mexican politics, the head of a single party state, that managed the Mexican state apparatus until losing the presidential election in the year 2000. PRI's control of state power throughout the middle of the 20th century was not only at the level of the presidency, but reached throughout regional and local governments, such as the case of the state of Oaxaca, where I want to focus on.

Throughout much of the 20th century, in the southern state of Oaxaca, the Institutional Revolutionary Party was synonymous with the state, holding monolithic power in state and municipal government (Recondo 2007). In rural, mostly Indigenous municipalities, the PRI relied on a clientelist structure in which to maintain political control. The state used local political bosses, or caciques, to uphold their interests in even the most remote of rural municipalities. These local political bosses acted as intermediaries between local communities and municipalities, and the centralizing power of the post-revolutionary state. Political scientist David Recondo tells us that the PRI relied on a structure of indirect rule in many Indigenous and campesino communities in the state of Oaxaca, which guaranteed the reproduction of its dominance. He writes,

> In reality, the post-revolutionary regime reproduced a kind of indirect rule according to the term used in the study of contemporary colonial regimes. A form

> of domination in which the central power establishes indirect control over local societies through authorities from those same societies. This guarantees the reproduction of the mode of domination but preserves at the same time a certain margin of political autonomy at the local level. As such, the PRI-State, far from destroying the traditional local form of community organization, incorporates it, by noticeably modifying it and making it one of the fundamental units of the reproduction of the system of domination (Recondo 2007, 22).

Through the use of caciques, the managers of the centralizing state were able to maintain a certain level of political influence and dominance, both locally and across the state of Oaxaca. Local community institutions were infiltrated and incorporated to serve the larger project of state production and reproduction.

During this period, the relationship between Indigenous and campesino municipalities was a highly clientelist one, which according to Recondo, left some space for Indigenous communities to continue organizing themselves according to their traditional forms of structuring and reproducing community life. It was common that the PRI state respected local elections. However, once municipal authorities were chosen, the municipal authorities would then have to register with the official party, which in Oaxaca, was the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). In this way, PRI was able to maintain local political influence, as well as control at the state level, in exchange for a degree of autonomy which was granted to Indigenous communities and municipalities.

A combination of forces toward the end of the 20th century led to the transformation of state power in Mexico and in Oaxaca. The emergence of competing political parties, the rise of civil society organizations and new social movements, and the strengthening of Indigenous resistance seeking self-determination and autonomy, changed the political landscape in Mexico, along with the techniques of governing of the Mexican state. Fundamental to the transformation of state power was the adoption of a politics of recognition and multiculturalism in relation to Indigenous communities, in contrast to the assimilationist politics that had characterized much of the 20th century (Anaya Muñoz 2004; Eisenstadt 2007; Hernández-Díaz 2010).

A series of movements from below in the second half of the 1980's and early 1990's served as a fundamental force producing the constitutional and institutional reforms that ushered in the politics of Indigenous recognition in Mexico. Extensive organization around the centennial anniversary of the Spanish conquest of the Americas emboldened Indigenous organizations and communities in movements of resistance, upending their subdued status in Mexican society. The Zapatista uprising in Chiapas on January 1, 1994, forced the Mexican federal and state governments to engage more seriously in conversation and action around their relationship to Indigenous peoples. This uprising sent shock waves of fear across the state governments of particularly the southern mostly-indigenous states, including of course, Oaxaca. Thinking the Indigenous uprising in Chiapas might take root into an already well-organized Indigenous population, the state government of Oaxaca began to take

steps that year to heed the growing fear and potential for rebellion (Anaya Muñoz 2004).

On March 21, 1994, the governor of Oaxaca proposed a new agreement with the Indigenous communities of the state in order to develop a new relationship between them and the state government (Recondo 2007). This new accord was presented symbolically, in the Sierra Norte of Oaxaca, on the birthday of Benito Juárez, the Indigenous ex-president nationally known for his projects of modernization and Indigenous assimilation.

On May 13, 1995, article 25 of the state constitution was reformed, in which, in the last paragraph, the following text was included, "The law will protect the traditional and democratic practices of Indigenous communities, those which until now have been utilized for the election of their local governments" (Decreto núm. 278, 1995). Following this constitutional reform, and to fulfill its demands, the State Code of Political Institutions and Electoral Procedures was modified with the addition of a chapter four that dealt directly with Indigenous communities and their electoral *usos y costumbres*, or their historically grounded ways of electing community authorities. This modification legally recognized Indigenous municipalities previously organizing under *usos y costumbres*, permitting the designation of municipal authorities via community assemblies without the direct intervention of political parties.

Following elections in 1995, the first elections held with the new state constitutional reforms, another series of reforms were enacted to clarify legal ambiguity from the prior reforms. In March of 1997, legislators reformed articles 25, 29, and 98 of the Oaxacan state constitution with the intention of: "...making more clear, explicit and operable the electoral rights of the Indigenous peoples of Oaxaca" (Gobierno del estado de Oaxaca 1998). Then at the end of September, an adjustment was made to chapter four of the Oaxaca Code of Political Institutions and Electoral Procedures, "...to give better functionality and clarity to the order of the electoral process by *usos y costumbres*" (Gobierno del estado de Oaxaca 1998).

These series of reforms in 1997 made a few specific legal changes that are worth mentioning. Firstly, municipalities organized around *usos y costumbres* were defined in a more detailed manner, clarifying the ambiguity in what constitutes such a municipality in the original legislation. The legal term used to describe such communities was changed from *usos y costumbres* to *normas de derecho consuetudinario*, or customary laws. The reforms centered the community assembly as the principal authority of decision-making in such municipalities. Furthermore, an institutional process was defined for municipalities that hadn't registered their elections as *usos y costumbres* in 1995, but that might want to register as such in the future. In addition, the entire electoral process, whether by *usos y costumbres* or by the political party model, was captured in a system of regulation and oversight, to be reported and officialized by the State Electoral Institute.

Perhaps the most important change in the reforms of 1997, and most relevant to this discussion was the one regarding political parties. With the new reform, political parties were not allowed to register authorities elected according to the model of *usos y costumbres*. Remember, prior to these series of reforms, the PRI dominated politics in Oaxaca by registering authorities elected within community elections within their party. Thus, fulfilling the clientelist relationship with Indigenous and campesino municipalities, maintaining electoral control over the state, while not fully dominating local structures of the election of authorities. Through these changes, two distinct electoral pathways were instituted in the municipalities of Oaxaca—that of political parties and that of *usos y costumbres* (Anaya Muñoz 2004; Eisenstadt 2007; Recondo 2007; Hernández-Díaz 2010).

While the constitutional and electoral changes in Oaxaca were the result of expansive Indigenous resistance, the constitutional reforms were at the same time led by the desire of political elites of the PRI party in Oaxaca to maintain their domineering position in the state's politics (Anaya-Muñoz 2004; Recondo 2007). As a result of national political reforms, beginning specifically in 1978, opposition parties began to have more influence in municipal politics, threatening the stranglehold maintained by PRI for so many years. At the same time, independent Indigenous organizations began to take more interest in municipal elections, and began to organize against PRI's dominance.

The threat of participation from other parties in the political process in Oaxaca in the 1990's was one force that led to the change in the constitution initiated by PRI. By legally recognizing the election by *usos y costumbres*, yet continuing with the classical clientelist relationship, registering municipal authorities in their ranks in the aftermath of the municipal elections, PRI would be able to maintain its dominance in the political scene in Oaxaca, in the face of the threat from other emerging and consolidating political parties (Anaya-Muñoz 2004; Recondo 2007). However, as David Recondo argues, based upon empirical research of election results, the PRI lost its stranglehold on political power in Oaxaca following the constitutional reform allowing the election of municipal authorities according to *usos y costumbres* (Recondo 2007). The multiplication of parties, seeking to fulfill their interests within Indigenous and campesino municipalities in Oaxaca, became the new norm.

The legal recognition of municipal elections according to *usos y costumbres* was nonetheless significant. *Usos y costumbres* was the legal concept inscribed in the original legislation recognizing local elections based in community assemblies and service to community rather than the political party model of campaigns, ballot boxes and private voting. The legislation allowed municipalities to register themselves as organized according to their *usos y costumbres*, and thus to carry out their municipal elections without the presence of political parties. For many in the movement for Indigenous rights, the recognition of electoral *usos y costumbres* meant a step forward in visibilizing and recognizing Indigenous forms of community organization in Oaxaca.

What was articulated and recognized in the law as *usos y costumbres*—the right of Indigenous communities in Oaxaca to elect their authorities in community assemblies without the influence of political parties—meant the legal recognition of one aspect of a more integral form of communal life organized and practiced in Indigenous communities in Oaxaca and throughout Mesoamerica (Maldonado 2020). In the 1970's Mixe scholar, Floriberto Díaz Gómez, and Zapotec scholar, Jaime Martínez Luna, began to conceptualize this mode of communal life with the term *comunalidad,* or communality (Rendón Monzón 2003). By *comunalidad*, they refer to an ensemble of self-organized practices and relations, a certain collective logic, through which community life is organized and reproduced.

Comunalidad is a mode of community organization derived from the collectivity, and directed toward collective well-being. It is often articulated around four axes: communal territory, communal work, communal power and communal festivities. Communal territory is territory organized and used in a collective manner; communal work is non-renumerated work in the spirit of mutual aid, known in Oaxaca as *tequio* or *faena*; the communal administration of power is embodied in the community assembly and the system of political, religious and civil positions which organize authority as service to the community; and the communal festivities are religious and local festivities that embody the spirit of reciprocity, strengthening the collective identity of the community (Rendón Monzón 2003; Martínez Luna 2013; Maldonado 2015; Martínez Luna 2016).

The recognition of electoral *usos y costumbres* thus legally acknowledged one aspect of this larger set of relations, practices, and logics that organize and animate community life in Oaxaca. It was implemented in response to the growing movement of Indigenous communities organizing for territorial defense and self-organization against state control and capital accumulation often represented by the political party. It was thus institutionalized as an alternative to the model of the political party, in defense of the cultural particularities of Indigenous communities.

Political parties, recognition politics and state (re)production

The simultaneous multiplication of political parties in Mexico and Oaxaca, alongside the implementation of recognition politics which diminish the influence of political parties in Indigenous municipalities, has set up a complex and seemingly contradictory political scenario in Oaxaca. On one hand, there is a diversity of political parties, which in theory, represents the strengthening of political democracy. On the other, there is the politics of recognition, which institutionalizes Indigenous municipal elections without political parties, and in theory, represents a nod to Indigenous self-determination.

Here, I want to break down that seeming contradiction arguing that political parties and recognition politics both work against the self-determination of Indigenous communities, by reproducing the state as the form, method and

arena of politics and political power. I want to argue that it is not communities that are empowered by political party or recognition politics, but rather the state itself.

The consolidation of political party competition in Mexico, with the rise of oppositional parties which challenged the single party state of the PRI throughout much of the 20th century, brought interesting changes to Oaxaca. Instead of one political party ruling Oaxaca through a clientelist relationship, there now exists multiple political parties competing for political power and political influence in the different municipalities and communities. The clientelist practices orchestrated originally by the PRI, are now common amongst all political parties active in Oaxaca (Audelo Cruz 2007).

A common critique of political parties made by communities and municipalities who are committed to self-organization outside the political party model is the role political parties play in dividing communities (Camacho 2015a; Lucha comunitaria y represión política 2016). Political parties might choose a local leader, or a local person of influence, and fund that person's political campaign within the community. That local political leader, funded by the party, will often seek to diminish the power of the community assembly, or at least manipulate the community assembly to serve the interests of the party. Similarly, a local leader might seek out support from a political party to achieve the same ends, diminish the collective power of the community assembly and serve individual and party interests against the interests of the community as a whole. Funding of one political faction in a community or municipality, which serves the interest of the party foreign to the community, inevitably produces all sorts of conflict in the community between different peoples and different groups, which in looking at the history of Oaxaca, has continually led to violent municipal conflict (Camacho 2015b; Camacho 2018; CODEDI 2020).

In many ways, just like the caciques which represented state interests in local communities throughout the 20th century of PRI domination, political parties now work hand in hand with, or have taken the role of, the cacique, representing the interests of the state at the community and municipal level. Political parties often serve as intermediaries between the state and community leaders, with the role of either outright repressing community movements, or coopting extra-parliamentary political action, into the channels approved by the state and its bureaucracies. Political parties will often seek to buy off local leaders, to incorporate them into their larger political project, or they might fund alternative local leaders, who violently repress other leaders or movements within the community that threaten the interests of the party (Maldonado 2002; Gasparello and Quintana Guerrero 2009; Navarro F. 2014; Camacho 2015b; Camacho 2018).

In the context of Oaxaca, political parties are an integral part of a larger ensemble of institutions and bureaucracies that serve as tools in the arts of governing of the Mexican state. While many of these political party practices might seem distinct—the use of caciques and local strongmen to divide communities, the clientelist use of social programs, money and material goods

to produce political party cohesion and support, the violent intervention against community assemblies and community decisions which counter the power of political party influence—all reinforce a certain ethic, and a certain idea of the political, that I am arguing is characteristic of the state.

Theoretical interventions into the necessity and value of political parties, while diverging from the tactics of political parties in practice, equally uphold and reinforce forms of social organization and forms of political practice characteristic of the state. In representative democracy, at least in theory, the role of the political party is to bring the interests of the citizens into the political apparatus. Parties, led by specific candidates, compete for roles of authority in the institutions of the state. From there, the idea is that the representative of the party—the representative of the people that make up the party—will fulfill the will of the people within the apparatus of the state. Thus, the power of the political party is only articulated through the mechanisms of the state.

V.I. Lenin, for his part, saw a direct link between the revolutionary party and the taking of state power. The party was not just meant to organize and direct the working masses, but most importantly, the revolutionary party was to serve as the leader of the organized masses in the taking over of state power, fulfilling the proletarian conquest of political power originally theorized by Marx and Engels. V.I. Lenin puts it bluntly,

> I continue to maintain that any political party generally, and the party of the advanced class in particular, would forfeit its right to exist, would be unworthy of being regarded as a party, would be a wretched cipher in all respects, were it to refuse to assume power when it has the opportunity to do so (Lenin 1975, 18)

For Lenin, the principal goal of the revolutionary party is to take state power; what Lenin called the dictatorship of the proletariat. The revolutionary party, which is made up of the rank and file workers, along with their highly disciplined and trained revolutionary leaders, led by advanced revolutionary theory, should seek to take state power in order to overthrow the capitalist system and fight off any reactionary counterattacks that might otherwise come from those wielding state power.

Marxist theorist Enrique Dussel also sees a direct relationship between the political party and the state apparatus. For Dussel, the political party should serve as a school of politics where people meet, discuss and develop political consciousness and solidify political ideology. The political party should be the space where citizens cultivate the tools to act in the political terrain, where they learn the organizational forms and practices to be represented at the level of the state (Dussel 2014).

For Dussel, the party thus serves as the organizational structure connecting the people to the political apparatus, by educating and organizing the citizenry to exercise their political power. As we discussed above, Dussel argues that for power to be exercised, it must move from its original state, as *potentia*, to

institutionalization, *potestas*. What is that institution for Dussel? The institution is the state, organized around specific political postulates which orient the actions of said state.

The constitutional changes enacted throughout the 1990's to legally recognize Indigenous *usos y costumbres* in Oaxaca, while formulated as a check on political party influence in Indigenous communities in favor of Indigenous self-determination, have in many ways only reinforced state control over Indigenous communities and Indigenous territories. As I mentioned above, the most significant changes in legislation related to Indigenous *usos y costumbres* in Oaxaca were implemented following the Indigenous Zapatista rebellion in Chiapas, along with the waning power of the PRI party in municipal elections in Oaxaca (Anaya Muñoz 2004; Eisenstadt 2007; Recondo 2007; Hernández-Díaz 2010). The constitutional changes in Oaxaca were not necessarily seeking to enhance Indigenous self-determination but rather serve as a political maneuver to address the growing ungovernability of the state, and the potential of widespread Indigenous rebellion. Thus, the politics of recognition implemented in Oaxaca were pivotal to stabilizing the state and its power during a period of political instability.

Indigenous scholars in Turtle Island have advanced a critical approach to the politics of multiculturalism and recognition within the context of Canada which is useful to this discussion (Simpson 2017; Coulthard 2014; Corntassel 2012). Dene scholar Glen Coulthard has shown the way in which the Canadian government has turned from the politics of exclusion and/or assimilation towards Indigenous communities, to institutional practices which favor recognition and accommodation of Indigenous diversity and Indigenous rights. Coulthard argues that this shift in state strategy has been instituted with the same colonial ends in mind:

> …instead of ushering in an era of peaceful coexistence grounded on the ideal of reciprocity or mutual recognition, the politics of recognition in its contemporary liberal form promises to reproduce the very configurations of colonialist, racist, patriarchal state power that Indigenous peoples demands for recognition have historically sought to transcend (Coulthard, 2014: 3).

For Coulthard, the liberal politics of recognition only guarantees to reinforce the colonial relationship between Indigenous communities and the nation-state, by reproducing state power and undermining the territorial control and self-determination of Indigenous communities.

A similar outcome can be seen in the context of Oaxaca. The demand for state recognition of Indigenous rights has in many respects only directed social struggle, like political parties, back to the institutions of the state. State authority is taken as the ultimate authority. The institutions of the state are seen as where the struggle for recognition must take place. The state, including its

forms of relation and organization, are reproduced, while the contradictions between state power and community self-organization remain in place.

The role played by the state in municipal elections is just one example. The State Electoral Institute in Oaxaca is tasked with overseeing the entirety of the electoral process carried out under the *usos y costumbres* model. This includes authorizing election dates, sometimes having a physical presence at municipal elections to verify their processes and procedures, verifying elections results, and other tasks of oversight and management. The State Electoral Institute thus structures the rules and regulations of community elections organized by *usos y costumbres*, as well as maintains the official authority to verify the procedures and results. This has only meant a more controlled and institutionalized process in general (Ramírez Barrios 2013; IEEPCO 2016).

In addition, the managerial power of the state inherent to recognition politics in Oaxaca, has sought to organize certain institutional processes which require certain forms of action, certain relations and certain subjects necessary to fulfill what the state requires for elections by *usos y costumbres*. This has meant that local figures, including caciques or individuals affiliated with political parties, have in some instances mobilized the rules and regulations instituted by the legislation to their own ends against those of the community (Recondo 2007). Furthermore, the self-determined organizational forms of Indigenous peoples are circumscribed and shaped by the institutional framework, organizing behavior that is compatible with continued state rule.

To fully understand state influence on, and management of, elections by *usos y costumbres* in Oaxaca, we also have to take into consideration federal and state funds managed by municipal governments, the relationship between municipal seats and municipal agencies—agencies having less representation in electoral processes because of the structure of the municipal elections—and the way social programs are leveraged through local elections (Recondo 2007; Hernández-Díaz and Juan Martínez 2007; Hernández-Díaz 2013). We also have to explore the organization of the municipality itself, as an inheritance of Spanish colonial government, and an ongoing technology of state control.

In summary, while political parties have diversified, and the state has adopted a politics of recognition of Indigenous *usos y costumbres*, territorial control and the self-determination of Indigenous communities in Oaxaca remains under threat. Political parties and recognition politics might just be two different techniques of the Mexican state, to repress or suppress Indigenous self-determination. Meanwhile, theorists of representative democracy as well as party communists, continue to develop ideas of the party, which serve nothing more than to reproduce the state and the state form against the self-organized forms of Indigenous communities.

Autonomous struggles beyond the state

In the last thirty years, led most prominently by the Zapatista struggle in the southern Mexican state of Chiapas, Indigenous communities in various parts of the country have taken up autonomy as foundational to their politics. While originally demanding that the Mexican state recognize Indigenous autonomy through the San Andres Accords, when the government failed to fulfill these accords, the Zapatistas took a different route of political struggle, focusing more on organizing and building autonomy in practice.

In this final section, I want to follow the shift made by the Zapatistas, moving from a politics organized around or within the state, to a politics of self-organization beyond the state. While I call these alternative forms of social and political organization autonomous politics, I understand the dangers in doing so. In Mexico, the demand for state recognition of Indigenous autonomy has become integral to the demands of many Indigenous struggles (Hernández-Díaz 2010). In that way, autonomy has been captured in the politics of recognition, articulated as a demand to the state, rather than a practice of liberation. Nonetheless, here I want to conceive of autonomous politics as a practice of self-organization beyond the state.

Thinking autonomous politics requires that we recognize alternative forms of organization and resistance, ones different from political parties and the state. Drawing from the widespread uprisings that shook Bolivia in the first five years of the 21st century, Uruguayan writer, Raul Zibechi, offers us a critique of the popular conception of what constitutes political organization and political resistance. He writes,

> The problem is that we are unwilling to consider that in everyday life the relationships between neighbors, between friends, between comrades, or between family, are as important as those of the union, the party, or even the state itself. In the dominant imagination, organization is understood to mean the institutionalized and also, therefore, hierarchical—visible and clearly identifiable (Zibechi 2010, 13-14).

Mobilizing Zibechi's point to complement our analysis here, there is an overwhelming consensus among political party scholars that politics signifies a certain form of organization, and that politics takes place in certain institutional spaces. Alternative forms of organization—like practices of mutual aid and solidarity fundamental to the reproduction of life—are ignored by party Marxists or repressed by the contemporary practices of political parties and the state.

Attention to the self-organized reproduction of community life, helps us deepen our understanding of autonomous politics. Forms of community and popular organization, grounded in the defense of territories, the production of use value instead of exchange value, and the ethics of solidarity and mutual aid, continue to exist, and can be found specifically in Indigenous and campesino

communities throughout much of Latin America. These forms of organization are fundamental to thinking of alternative political and social possibilities—to thinking of a politics of autonomy—beyond the state, capitalist and political party forms. Raquel Gutiérrez et al. write,

> …throughout Latin America, from rural communities to mega cities, it is also possible to trace a multiplicity of almost imperceptible experiences of popular self-organization and production of the commons, during which daily life reproduces itself according to logics of collaboration and social self-regulation… (Gutiérrez, et al. 2016, 401).

For Raquel Gutiérrez and others, the self-organized practices of community and social reproduction—of the reproduction of the commons—embody the possibilities for social transformation. These forms of community organization, necessary for community and social reproduction, are antithetical to the logics of capitalism and the state, and are antithetical to the politics of political parties.

We can return to our discussion of *comunalidad* to further strengthen our understanding of alternative forms of organization and social reproduction integral to autonomous politics. Benjamin Maldonado makes clear the connection between *comunalidad* and autonomy as such:

> It is precisely *comunalidad* that is part of the necessary conditions for autonomy: reciprocity based on the principle of mutual aid, power in the hands of the collective constituted in the assembly, the will to freely serve the community for years in different positions despite being onerous, the defense of a territory which is historically and culturally one's own, are elements sufficient for an autonomous system in favorable conditions, and these conditions are those confiscated by the state…(Maldonado 2003, 20-21)

For Maldonado, the self-organization and self-reproduction of community life, embedded in the traditional forms of organization of Indigenous communities in Oaxaca—what he calls *comunalidad*—is necessary for the development of autonomy. Having the capacity to organize and reproduce social life without the interference of the state or capitalism, is a fundamental practice which gives life to the politics of autonomy. It is exactly these forms of organization and social reproduction which the state, through political parties, seeks to control or destroy.

Various Indigenous scholars and activists in Turtle Island have turned to a politics of Indigenous resurgence to counter the legacy of colonialism against Indigenous communities, and to counter the liberal politics of recognition which they argue continues that legacy (Coulthard 2014; Simpson 2017; Corntassel 2012). Indigenous resurgence is the turn away from the institutions of colonialism and the politics of recognition, to recover and regenerate the

traditional cultural practices and forms of political and social organization of Indigenous communities. In this way, rather than looking for recognition from without, it is a politics of cultural/political resurgence from within.

In contrast to the politics of political parties or recognition politics, which navigate the bureaucratic or institutional apparatus of the state to achieve their political goals, Indigenous resurgence is a practice, enacted outside the spheres conventionally designated "the political." Dene scholar Glen Coulthard writes,

> By contrast, the resurgent approach to recognition advocated here explicitly eschews the instrumental rationality central to the liberal politics of recognition and instead demands that we enact or practice our political commitments to Indigenous national and women's liberation in the cultural form and content of our struggle itself. Indigenous resurgence is at its core a prefigurative politics—the methods of decolonization prefigure its aims (Coulthard 2014, 159)

Rather than seeking mediation from the state to fulfill their political goals, Indigenous resurgence prefigures the cultural and political practices sought in the struggle. Unlike political party and recognition politics, resurgence is an embodied practice, carried out in the practices of the everyday (Corntassel 2012).

Other political theorists and organizers have developed the theoretical and practical connection between Indigenous autonomous struggles in Oaxaca, and the politics and practices of anarchism. In Oaxaca, this connection is often referenced in the history of the Flores Magón brothers, who made subtle but significant contributions in linking the anarchist principles of mutual aid, self-organization and autonomy, to the forms of community self-organization practiced by Indigenous communities in Mexico. Benjamín Maldonado articulates this connection well:

> From Oaxaca, anarchism has a perspective that is necessary to consider because it is a vision based in a historical practice of communal life in Mesoamerican communities, linked to international anarchist approaches…" (Maldonado 2020, 19)

For Maldonado, there is an organic affiliation between the politics of anarchism and the politics of *comunalidad* in Indigenous communities in Oaxaca. Self-organization and mutual aid animate both conceptions of social organization, in contrast to the politics of hierarchy and domination characteristic of the state.

Insights from anarchist politics are useful in the context of contemporary Oaxaca, in helping us further conceptualize autonomous politics. With a stiff rejection of political parties and the state, anarchists often seek to embody alternative conceptions of political power, organized in practices of solidarity and mutual aid. Like the politics of resurgence, anarchist politics are often

grounded an ethic of direct action and prefiguration, organizing the social relations sought in the struggle, in the immediate here and now (Graeber 2009, Milstein 2010). In this way, anarchist politics complement the politics of resurgence, *comunalidad,* and autonomy, against the politics of recognition, political parties, and the state in general.

The recent work by Mixe linguist and political thinker, Yásnaya Aguilar Gil, has perhaps best articulated an autonomous politics in Indigenous communities in Oaxaca, outside of the organizational forms and logics of political parties, recognition politics and the state form. Flipping the maxim of the National Indigenous Congress, "Never more a Mexico without us" on its head, Aguilar Gil writes of a "*Nosotrxs sin Estado"* or an "us without the state." She writes,

> We need to imagine other possible forms of political and social organization, a post-nation-state world, a world that is not divided into countries. Us without Mexico means us without the state, without the Mexican state, but without creating other states. Unlike the integrationist model, the us without Mexico doesn't seek to integrate Indigenous peoples and Indigenous individuals into the mechanisms of the state but to confront them and dispense with them as much as possible (Aguilar Gil 2020, 45).

Following Aguilar Gil, the autonomous politics I seek to articulate here is a politics without the state. It is a politics that does not seek representation within the state apparatus nor recognition from the state. It is not a politics that seeks multiculturalism or a pluri-national state, but rather forms of community and regional organization where the state doesn't exist. That is the embodiment of practices of *comunalidad*, Indigenous resurgence, anarchism, etc. beyond the constant trappings of the party, the politics of recognition and the state form.

Conclusion

The wave of political and social transformation that brought in the turn of the 21st century in Mexico, has changed things considerably, only to keep much the same. The fortification of a multi-party system in Oaxaca, alongside the politics of recognition brought by state constitutional reforms throughout the 1990s, has not meant liberation for Indigenous communities, nor respect for their self-determined ways of living. These changes have embodied a transformation of state power and forms of state governing, from the single party clientelist rule of the PRI, to a complex interplay of recognition and party politics.

We do not have to look any further than the contemporary MORENA regime, led by the president Andrés Manuel López Obrador. The ex-PRI member who founded the MORENA party, and won the 2018 presidential elections by a landslide on an anti-PRI platform, has continued the conventional pursuit of capital accumulation and state (re)production characteristic of previous administrations regardless of their party affiliation. In Oaxaca, a state still led

officially by the PRI party, a new group of MORENA politicians has joined congress, many of whom have been recruited from the ranks of the PRI. Thus, they have changed their political banner, to represent a politics that remains much the same.

The argument put forth in this essay has been that political parties, whatever their discourse or politics, represent interests that favor the concentration of state power and state control. Contrary to those who defend the political party as a democratic and/or revolutionary force—a sentiment still widely held amongst many of the so-called left in Mexico and across the world—I have tried to show how political parties are inherently in opposition to the autonomous self-organization of the people, and are thus an obstacle not an avenue to liberation.

As I have argued, the means and ends of a political party are directly linked to the means and ends of the political state. Like democratic and Marxist political theorists who argue in favor of the political party, the organizational forms inherent to the political party render imperceptible, unimportant, or ineffective other forms of organization that do not reproduce the particular relationships and organizational structures characteristic of the party. I have pushed that argument further to contend that the relationships and organizational structures characteristic of the party, are the relationships and organizational structures of the state and its bureaucracies. Thus, the party, and its defenders, produce and reproduce the ideology of the state, an ideology that is embodied in practice and organizational forms.

In a similar way, the politics of recognition in Oaxaca has continued the subordinate relationship between the Mexican state and Indigenous communities. The demand for Indigenous rights and the recognition of Indigenous *usos y costumbres*, has strengthened the paternalistic relationship between the state and Indigenous communities. The fundamental issues of territorial control and self-determination remain unchanged. The politics of recognition have more than anything channeled the organizational energy of many communities into strengthening state sovereignty and the state form.

With all this, I have offered some thoughts on an autonomous politics beyond the state. While it has become common in Mexico that communities and movements articulate autonomy as a demand to the state—that is, calling for the state to legally recognize Indigenous autonomy—I have tried to show how that approach inherently works against Indigenous autonomy, by strengthening state administrative power and state control over community organization. It is my contention that the potential of autonomous struggle lies in strengthening the forms of community organization and political resistance animated by solidarity, mutual aid and self-organization. That is, autonomous politics understood as something already being practiced—being constructed and reconstructed, constantly evolving, constantly under threat, constantly resisting—in many Indigenous communities in Oaxaca, and in many communities throughout the world.

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