

Peasant autonomy: the necessary debate in Latin America

Peter M Rosset and Lia Pinheiro Barbosa

Abstract

In this essay we argue for the relevance and urgency of the debate on peasant and indigenous autonomy for rural social movements in Latin America. The pandemic of the new coronavirus—Covid-19—has revealed a series of weaknesses and strengths of peasant, indigenous and Afro-descendant organizations, weaknesses that could be addressed, and strengths that could be capitalized on, through an autonomous turn in political strategies and in the collective construction of alternatives. In this essay we analyze: the ontological and epistemic roots of autonomy, both among indigenous peoples and in currents of thought of European origin; certain reluctances, within movements, to enter into the autonomy debate; autonomy as a category of analysis, and the facets through which it is expressed both explicitly and implicitly in the practice of organizations; and, finally, autonomy as a proposal and strategy of struggle for the larger Latin American peasant movement.

Key words: Autonomy; Social movements; Latin America; Peasants; Indigenous people; Zapatistas; La Via Campesina; CLOC; Landless Workers Movement

Introduction to the autonomy debate

A specter is haunting Latin America, the specter of autonomy.¹ Among the continent's rural organizations and social movements, the question of autonomy is proposed by many—especially the indigenous movement—yet is sidestepped by others—especially by segments of peasant and rural proletarian organizations most linked to the so-called “old Left.”² We argue in this essay,

¹ Paraphrased from Marx and Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (Marx and Engels, 1969).

² In this essay we use the phrase “old Left” to refer to a generation of intellectuals who were theoretically and politically formed by Marxism-Leninism, and whose formation was contemporaneous with the revolutionary processes in the Soviet Union, China, Cuba and/or Nicaragua (e.g. Atilio Borón and Marta Harnecker). Their formation emphasized the centrality of the State and of the necessary dispute for state power as a mechanism for building a socialist project. Still within the broader Marxist tradition are those who express respect for the autonomy debate (e.g. Lucio Oliver) or even those argue for its central importance (e.g. Pablo González Cassanova), though tension has been injected into the whole issue by the intellectual conflicts with postmodernism. But there is a clear tendency in which political leaders and

designed to generate a healthy debate, that it is urgent to open a dialogue within the movements on the "proposal of autonomy," especially in light of the Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic opened a window that revealed the weaknesses and strengths of movements in the countryside, weaknesses that could be addressed, and strengths that could be capitalized, we argue, with a more autonomous turn in the strategies of struggle and of collective construction of territorial alternatives.

Despite great successes like the Zapatista autonomous communities in Chiapas, Mexico, and many more throughout Latin America, we perceive a reluctance to debate autonomy, or at least Autonomy "with a capital A." While there is a rich literature and history on the autonomy or lack thereof of peasant movements vis-a-vis political parties and state actors (Fox and Gordillo 1989; Hellman 1992; and many others), the arrival of the so-called 'Pink Tide' progressive governments in Latin America and their subsequent suffering of attacks from the right and from U.S. imperialism, has more recently led to the recasting of autonomy as somehow disloyal, and as playing into the hands of the right (Dinerstein 2015). The fidelity by many hegemonic movements to the these governments (in countries that had or have them) or to the possibility of them (in countries that have not) has led to a certain reluctance to address the autonomy question. Yet beyond some allegiance to a model that could be labelled as "state centric" or "old Left," there is also a palpable disillusionment with the real harvests of these governments, in terms of both their largely disappointing policies for rural areas, and with the impermanence in time of many of them, giving way to the resurgence of the Right (Gaudichaud et al. 2019). Meanwhile, the indigenous movement and its organic intellectuals continue to forcefully put forth the proposal of territorial autonomy (Burguete 2018).

The authors of this essay, as militant intellectuals of the peasant struggle,³ want to encourage what we consider to be a necessary debate, and appeal constructively and affectionately to the movements and to the organic intellectuals that accompany them, to join in a collective reflection on autonomy.⁴ We believe that dialogue, debate and feedback between academics and social movement cadre can be beneficial to both, as long as academics are careful to be respectful and not overstep boundaries (Rosset 2020). For reasons of space, we largely focus on two countries, Mexico and Brazil, and draw many of our examples from two movements, the Zapatistas (EZLN), and the Landless

intellectuals who once argued most forcefully for armed revolution and the smashing of the bourgeois state (e.g. Álvaro García Linera and Dilma Rouseff) became those who now argue for electoral politics, reformism and class compromise strategies.

³ We are organically linked to and accompany member organizations of La Via Campesina International, in addition to having direct experience with some of the experiences of territorial autonomy mentioned in this essay, such as Zapatismo.

⁴ Throughout this essay, the statements about the movements that do not have bibliographical citations come from our personal experience with them, that is, from our own work as participant-observers.

Workers (MST), that are emblematic and illustrative of *explicit* (EZLN) and *implicit* (MST) autonomies (Vergara-Camus 2014). At the same time, we also address continent-wide processes, as shall be seen below.

Why autonomy? Autonomy represents strength, when seen as the opposite of heteronomy, dependence, which is nothing if not weakness or vulnerability. The COVID-19 pandemic provided a virtual X-ray of rural communities in Latin America, making visible and highlighting many previously present but not always clearly seen or appreciated (even by rural people themselves) strengths and vulnerabilities, which together, we argue, add up to a *prima facie* case for a more autonomic turn by rural movements. It revealed a Latin American rural world—peasant, indigenous and afro-descendant—crisscrossed both by dependencies (weaknesses) and by strengths, often invisible. In this essay we use the context of the pandemic to illustrate the importance of furthering a discussion on peasant autonomy—a means of capitalizing on strengths and minimizing weaknesses and vulnerabilities—as a political proposal and as a strategy of struggle and collective construction of alternatives. Autonomy is of course an issue that dates back to long before the pandemic, and that will last for much longer, but we argue that its importance was highlighted by the health contingency throughout Latin America.

Among the *dependencies* evidenced by the pandemic, we can identify the great fragilities inherent in a food and agriculture model based on long-distance transport, which triggered a discontinuity in terms of processed and packaged food available in rural towns, and in the distribution of external inputs for local agriculture.⁵ Also, we saw dependence on intermediaries and agribusiness value chains, which normally buy the crops and animals raised in peasant territories, but stopped showing up and buying the production; dependence on public and private health systems, which had placed almost no clinics, let alone intensive care units, in rural areas; dependence on governments that did not implement quarantines in the small cities and towns of the countryside; and dependence on politicians and political parties that forgot about rural people during the crisis,

⁵ The trends summarized here on the pandemic come from a culling of hundreds of social media posts and alternative media articles by and about rural social movements from throughout Latin America. Each trend is repeated numerous times in numerous countries, but for reasons of space we have omitted a listing of the URL's as well as the detailing of individual cases and social actors involved. Due to space limitations, it is not possible to provide the URL's of each activity. However, on the Facebook pages of La Via Campesina (LVC), of the *Coordinadora Latinoamericana de Organizaciones del Campo* (CLOC), of the member organizations of both, and of the *Articulação dos Povos Indígenas do Brasil*, among other organizations in Latin America and the Caribbean, a series of activities carried out since the beginning of the pandemic context are abundantly registered, along with the weaving of collective reflections that lead naturally to the question of autonomy.

approving truly meagre emergency financial support for urban workers, and nothing, in most cases, for rural people.

At the same time, the pandemic made visible a world of capacities and strengths in terms of production and local economy, self-provisioning, collective self-defense, collective healthcare, and even self-government, all in the face of the institutional abandonment of communities. Of course, we should avoid romanticizing the pandemic, since it generally exacerbated rural poverty, in some cases even provoked famine, and the lethality of COVID was greater in rural than in urban areas in most countries (see for example, Cortez-Gómez et al. 2020).

But if one thing is certain, it is that all the forms of dependency that were evidenced were already problematic weaknesses and vulnerabilities long before the pandemic. What the pandemic did was reveal the pre-existing dependence on fragile structures of both governments and the private sector, neither interested in the problems of the communities, a dependence that had long prevented or slowed the advancement of rural social movements of the countryside, even under the so-called progressive governments. An example is dependence on electoral political parties and public sector budgets, which often make it difficult to build and/or strengthen autochthonous processes in communities and territories. And in those countries that already face *authoritarian populist* and neo-fascist governments (Scoones et al. 2018; Borrás 2020; Barbosa 2020;), depending on public institutions equals even greater vulnerability.

The material flowering of hidden capacities seen in the face of the pandemic has been accompanied by an immaterial (re)flowering of peasant and indigenous organizations in cyberspace, through innumerable "Lives" and "webinars" where cyberspace itself has reverberated with the words *autonomy*, *indigenous autonomy* and, increasingly, *peasant autonomy*.⁶ In our opinion, we are witnessing a perfect storm, composed in equal parts of disillusionment and realism, a harsh political situation, above all due to the advance of Right-wing populist authoritarianism, a health, economic and food crisis, and some very interesting proposals, which should pave the way to debate issues of autonomy within the principal rural movements and organizations in Latin America.

In the current reality, the *autonomy proposal* is on the table, put there by a significant portion of the indigenous movement of Latin America, from its own ontologies and epistemes (Escobar 2020; Burguete 2018). It is a proposal that is reinforced day by day in both really-lived autonomies and theoretical elaborations. The indigenous autonomy proposal is not the same as the most internationally visible proposal of autonomy, that of anarchism, although in certain elements and moments they dialogue with each other. Here we point out

⁶ As organic intellectuals and militants of these movements we have participated in and/or been part of the audience for literally dozens of such virtual discussions since the beginning of the pandemic.

that while the struggle for autonomy is central to peasant history (Chayanov, Sevilla Guzman, Wolf, van der Ploeg, Hellman, and Fox, cited below, and many others), part of the reluctance to debate autonomy on the part of contemporary peasant organizations comes from previous disencounters between the movement and urban and middle-class anarchism, memories of which are dragged into the current debate.⁷ In this sense it is important to point out that the indigenous autonomy proposal has its own ontological and epistemic roots, which are roots in the countryside and in indigenous-peasant life (Baronnet 2010; Baronnet et al. 2011; Mora 2017), and therefore ought not to generate the same rejection. Its roots are prior to the Conquest, based on modes of co-inhabiting territories and communal forms of organization (Escobar 2020). The very conception of *Abya Yala*⁸ as a cross-border territory represents other and earlier forms of political organization.

In this essay we take up the proposal of territorial autonomy made by original peoples,⁹ demonstrate its compatibility, convergences and dialogue during the post-Conquest centuries with selected currents of European thought (see Dinerstein 2015, and Modonesi 2014, for example), and argue in favor of its possible strategic importance for the *larger peasant movement*, which includes peasants, indigenous people, afro-descendants, rural workers, landless, nomads, artisanal fisherfolk, river dwellers, forest peoples, and inhabitants of small towns and villages sprinkled across the countryside. In this sense, what we offer here is an argumentative essay, in which we postulate that the autonomy proposal, based in part on the accumulated thought and praxis of indigenous peoples' movements, could be the key to unleash the enormous potential of rural social movements in Latin America. Thus we argue that territorial, community, collective, peasant, and indigenous autonomies, even when partial, implicit rather than explicit, and relative rather than absolute, can strengthen collective social subjects, granting them greater political force to confront the expansion of extractive capital in the countryside,¹⁰ and be, to use the language

⁷ Throughout this essay, statements about organizations and movements not accompanied by citations to the literature come from the authors' own "participant-observations" as militants of and participants in the movements.

⁸ A widely used pre-Conquest indigenous name for what today is called the Americas.

⁹ It is perhaps worth noting that many contemporary indigenous movements seek autonomy vis-à-vis the state without actively seeking state power (Ecuador and Bolivia are arguably exceptions), or in the case of some, like the Zapatistas in Mexico, even specific policies from the state. Yet over the years many social movement theorists, from progressive liberals like Tilly (2008) to Marxists like Hobsbawm (1990), see the defining feature of social movements as their antagonistic relation with the state and their aim of state power and/or concessions from the state. The autonomy discussion thus has potential for broadening the social scientific debate over social movements in general (Dinerstein 2015).

¹⁰ By extractive capital we refer to private sector investment in agribusiness, mining, energy production and other large scale activities that rely heavily on natural resource extraction (see LVC 2017a).

of the "old Left," collective subjects of a *class character* ("in and for themselves"), with *revolutionary potential* (Shanin 1970).

Indigenous autonomy, although of different origin, does dialogue and converge with traditions of European thought, in particular with currents of heterodox agrarian and humanist Marxism, agrarian social anarchism, and radical agrarian populism, which together constitute part of what is analyzed today in *Critical Agrarian Studies* (see Table 1 in Roman-Alcalá 2020: 6-7, for an analytical-relational explanation of each).¹¹ In this sense, we argue that there ought be every possibility in the world for a constructive dialogue on autonomy between peasant and indigenous organizations within the larger movement.

In the remainder of this essay we: 1) describe the indigenous roots of the autonomy proposal, with particular emphasis on the Zapatista example; 2) review European thought on peasant autonomy and its expression in the rural commune; 3) take up autonomy as a contemporary *category of analysis*, in particular the facets of relative autonomies, which are elements often found in both indigenous and peasant experiences; and 4) reflect on autonomy as a proposal for struggle and for the collective construction of alternatives. We analyze autonomy as a series of historically situated theoretical constructions, as a proposal by and for social movements, and in terms of its different facets.¹²

The long and contemporary histories of indigenous autonomy: lived experiences and theoretical approaches

For Castoriadis and other European intellectuals, the construction of autonomy as a concept of struggle was possible "thanks to the heritage and tradition of the democratic movement present in the history of [European] countries, [and] to the social-historical project of autonomy born in the heart of the European world" (Castoriadis 1999: 138). But in Latin America autonomy has roots in other ontologies and epistemologies (Escobar 2020), though these have dialogued with European thought (Modenesi 2014). As Holloway affirms (2015:115, 117):

For the indigenous peoples, peasants, popular, and afro sectors of Latin America...there is nothing that resembles a tradition of struggle for freedom like that which existed in European cities from the 13th century onwards... In Latin America we have a different genealogy: the rebellions of Tupac Amaru and Tupac Katari, the revolutions of Zapata and Pancho Villa, the revolution in Haiti, the quilombos and escaped slaves...these are the precursors... [whose] struggles were

¹¹ We will not address the "multitude" theories of the "autonomist Marxists" Hardt and Negri (2000, 2004), for reasons similar to Gunderson (2018a).

¹² We clarify that it is not the objective of this essay to exhaustively analyse empirical cases, but rather to highlight the potential that autonomy holds for peasant movements.

crushed with blood and flames... [Today's] autonomies of indigenous, black, and mestizo peoples are integral autonomies. The Zapatista *Juntas de Buen Gobierno*, the Nasa *cabildos* of the Cauca, the autonomous Mapuche expressions, address all aspects of life, from food production to justice and power. They are not part of hegemonic capitalist society but are something else, as, beyond whatever level of development they may exhibit, they point in a different direction.

A long history of autonomy in Latin America would have to begin with the European conquest of indigenous nations. For centuries there followed a tense interplay of peoples already subjugated by European colonies, of ongoing wars of conquest and resistance—even of peoples who to this day claim never to have been conquered (the Shuar of Ecuador, the Yaqui of Mexico, etc.)—of uncontacted peoples, of peoples with whom European crowns had signed treaties, and of conquered peoples who rose up again and rebelled (e.g. the Caste War in the Yucatan), even declaring themselves republics (e.g. the Republic of Yucatan). In this sense, the Conquest foreshadowed a territorial palimpsest in which, although there were conquered territories, there also persisted peoples fighting to maintain their original forms of territorial existence, even as “conquered” peoples.

To a certain extent we could say that contemporary indigenous territories represent a combination of redoubts—“what was left after the Conquest”—and the places of displacement and forced relocation of peoples, which are still inhabited and defended and by them. The long history has been marked by constant uprisings and autonomies, both made explicit in declarations and those left implicit. And not only of original peoples, but also of peasant peoples who are the product of *mestizaje*, and of the former enslaved peoples of African descent (e.g., in Brazil, we have, and have had, Canudos, Caldeirão, República de Palmares, Sete Povos das Missões Orientais and the *Cangaço*, to name a few).

At the end of the 20th century, the sharpening of the contradictions resulting from the implementation of neoliberalism caused a new cycle of struggle to emerge in Latin America. The *Continental Campaign for the Self-Discovery of Our America*, organized by the Latin American indigenous movement, and the *Campaign of 500 Years of Indigenous, Black and Popular Resistance (1989-1992)*, brought together the most diverse organizations and constituted frameworks for a regional articulation among peasant, indigenous, Afro-descendant and rural workers' organizations. They provided an opportunity to collectively develop a transnational political strategy for the defense of territories (Barbosa 2017b; 2019). A number of emblematic struggles emerged partially from this background, including the armed insurgency of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) in Mexico, multiple indigenous rebellions in Ecuador and Bolivia (1980s, 1990s, 2000s), and the formation of the Latin American Coordination of Rural Organizations (CLOC) and La Via Campesina International (LVC), articulations of popular organizations and indigenous and

peasant movements on a regional and international scale (Gutiérrez-Aguilar 2008; Martínez-Torres and Rosset 2010, 2014; Barbosa 2015).

The indigenous movement is a constituent element of this cycle of struggles that, in reality, is the continuation of more than 500 years of resistance (López-Bárceñas 2007; Burguete 2011; Preziosi 2015). Characterized by a social and organizational framework based on community life, the presence of indigenous movements gives other meanings to social struggle, while building a political project of historical character. In their political narrative, they recover the historical memory of their cosmovisions and the philosophical matrices of their languages, which demarcate their own onto-epistemic paradigm that underlies the nature of their demands, their practices and their political project (Barbosa 2017b; 2019). Although autonomy has been a common political demand in historical indigenous struggles, it has become more explicit and begun to offer a solid materiality in this cycle of struggles. In this sense, making explicit the historical-political roots of resistance has allowed indigenous peoples avoid being superseded as subjects of struggle in the construction of autonomy.

The contemporary history of indigenous autonomy proposals began with the debate and struggle for self-determination that arose from the decade of the 1960s through that of the 2000s, motivated by the establishment of normative rights in the UN, and by the decolonization processes of countries in Africa, Asia and the Middle East. It initiated a cycle of struggle in the field of international law, and the achievement of reference documents, such as the First UN Resolution on Decolonization, Convention 169 of the ILO, and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), which recognized of the right of peoples to self-determination. Issues such as the vindication of indigenous nationalities and plurinational states (e.g. Bolivia and Ecuador) derived from this cycle. The most recent part of the cycle was to lobby for the incorporation and ratification of these rights in national constitutions. Important achievements from this legalistic struggle were, for example, in Colombia, the Indigenous *Resguardos* (reserves) and Community Councils of afrodescendants, these with significant emphasis on autonomy, and more recently, Peasant Reserve Zones (ZRCs).

The absence of the State in many indigenous territories (Cortez-Gómez et al. 2020), together with the history of oppression, expropriation and discrimination against indigenous peoples, has created the historical conditions for raising the banner of autonomy, making it the cornerstone of the indigenous socio-political project (Díaz-Polanco 1997). In the discourse of indigenous peoples it is not so much a question of rejecting modernity and its legacy, but rather of demanding dialogue and the recognition of indigenous peoples as collective subjects with rights—specifically collective rights—at least equal to the rights that modernity recognized and guaranteed to individuals (Dávalos 2005).

Díaz-Polanco (1997) identified two major positions on autonomy: 1) autonomy as a juridical-political system with the purpose of re-dimensioning the nation

based on new relationships between indigenous peoples, socio-cultural sectors and the State, and 2) the conception of autonomy as something endogenous, close to autarchy, self-determined. Defining the concept of autonomy from the indigenous perspective is a complex task, since there is no univocal model and autonomy itself manifests itself in different forms and scales among different peoples. Increasingly, autonomy is revealed as a polysemic concept, in which indigenous movements are taking the lead in giving it meanings beyond the juridical sphere, generating projects of social change that are part of a project for life in community that articulates the local population, transforming internal social relations and local cultural policy (Burguete 2018).

Among the primary elements of autonomy, we highlight: 1) defense and reconstitution of territories; 2) reaffirmation of identity as original/indigenous peoples; and 3) the (re)construction of own political institutions, whether indigenous governments, self-governments or communal governments (Burguete 2018). From indigenous worldviews, three principles are central to autonomy: the principle of interrelationship, the principle of complementarity and the principle of reciprocity (Rendón-Monzón 2003). Burguete (2018: 18) affirms that autonomy "does not operate on a social body as totality, but rather on certain dimensions of social life." This is why autonomy can be manifested in the organization of the territory based on a legal framework in an autonomous government built collectively, at community, municipal and/or regional levels, in which dialogue is entered into with state institutions, or equally it can express a more radical posture, such as Zapatista autonomy, which seeks and receives no recognition by the State.

The important thing to consider in this newer cycle of struggle, which is still in force, is the fact that the Latin American indigenous movement managed to articulate the demand for autonomy in an emancipatory sense, in the struggle for decolonization (Burguete 2018). As a political project, autonomies mean building self-governments with specific powers and competencies over internal life (López-Bárceñas 2007).

The advance of autonomy as an emancipatory political project has provoked fear by States and driven immediate responses, either in the sense of repressing autonomy processes, as was the case in Guatemala and Mexico (where military and paramilitary presence surrounds autonomous territories), or with legal devices used for cooptation through "recognition" of the pluricultural character of society, as in Bolivia and Ecuador. Díaz-Polanco (1997) calls the latter a strategy of ethnophagous indigenism, that is, while the existence of identities is recognized, the true purpose is to undermine and absorb them into the institutional framework of the State. Thus we often see an appropriation of indigenous discourse by nation-states, with an emptying of the original more politicized content.

For indigenous movements, the construction of autonomy does not represent a struggle to topple the government and install themselves in power, but rather to build counter-power from the communities upward, capable of converting the

communities into collective political subjects with the capacity to make their own decisions. In a larger sense indigenous peoples seek to disperse power (López-Bárceñas 2007), this to enable the direct exercise of autonomy in the community.

There are self-management (*autogestión*)¹³ and autonomous experiences of self-government in the recent political history of all Latin American countries. However, the EZLN insurgency in Mexico highlights a radical way of demanding and building *explicit* autonomy as a political project, leading it to become the autonomous experience with the greatest national and international resonance. It is important to remember that despite their apparent radicality, *Zapatismo* represents not so much an historical rupture, but rather the historical continuity of indigenous uprisings and autonomies since the Conquest.

Zapatista autonomy

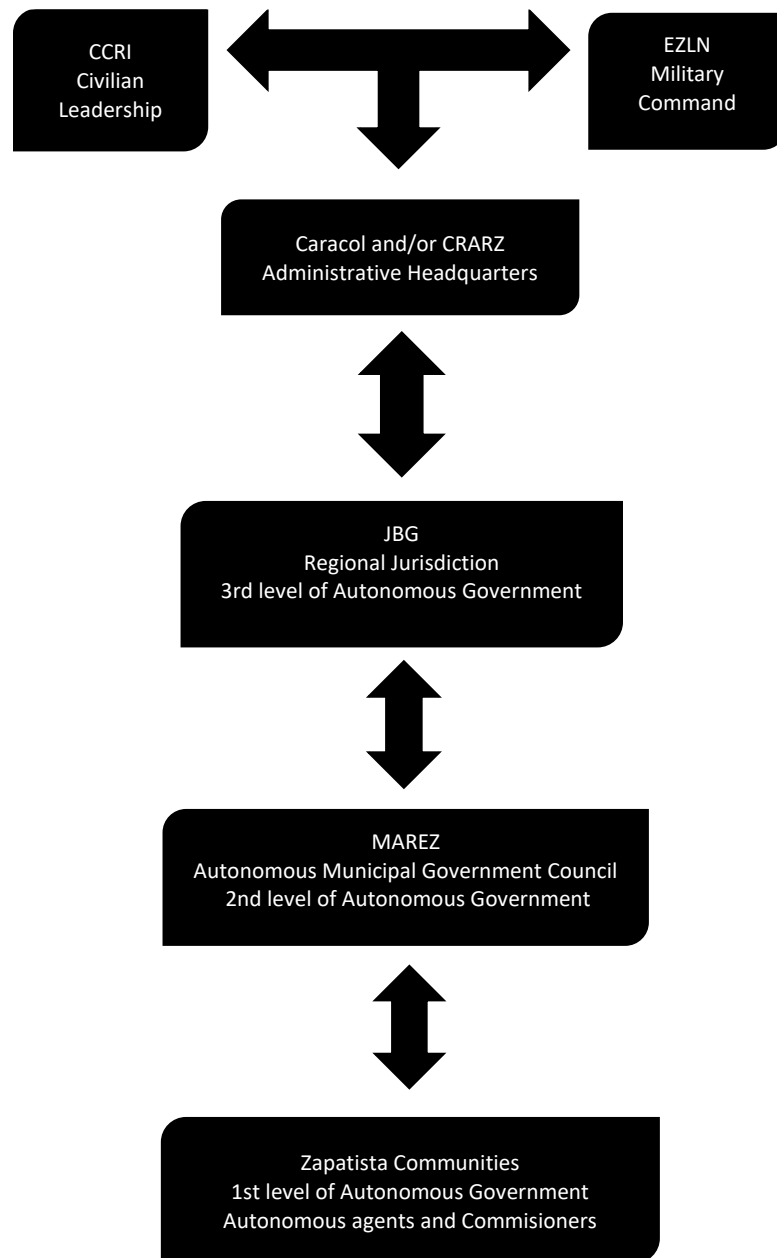
Zapatismo offers the most complete, explicit and radical version of indigenous autonomy that we know of in the contemporary world, with a political identity and ideology that articulate the following elements (Barbosa 2015, 2017b): 1) political formation with a double basis: that of the pre-existing indigenous organizations in the region, which had already been organized by both Maoist groups and by priests and lay workers espousing Liberation Theology, and that of the Guevarist guerrillas of the National Liberation Forces (FLN), an EZLN precursor; 2) inspiration from Latin American revolutionary thought; 3) inspiration from by Marxism; and 4) the historical memory of Mexican politics, such as the Mexican Revolution of 1910 and the student movement of 1968. By taking up arms, the Zapatistas initially took a stand against NAFTA and denounced the situation of extreme poverty in which indigenous peoples lived, demanding recognition as subjects of law, and called for a constituent assembly to rewrite the Mexican constitution. Since that moment the Zapatista political trajectory has been marked by different moments, from an initial attempt at dialogue with the State, with the San Andrés Accords, to the total rupture and announcement of radical autonomy in their territories.

The product, expression and materialization of a long historical process of resistance by native peoples throughout Latin America, the Zapatistas named autonomy for the first time in 1995 in the *Third Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle* (Harvey 1998; Barbosa 2015). In 1998, autonomy was formally incorporated into their political project with the creation of the Zapatista Autonomous Rebel Municipalities (MAREZ). The Zapatistas have two leadership structures: a civilian one, the Clandestine Revolutionary Indigenous Committee-General Command (CCRI-CG) and a military one, the army, or

¹³ Unfortunately there is no satisfactory English language equivalent to *autogestión* in Spanish, which goes beyond the entrepreneurial connotations of “self-management,” to mean something more like a self-organized and collectively governed process.

EZLN as such. In 2003, the Zapatistas announced a new phase of the autonomy project, with the creation of the *Caracoles* (regional centers of self-government), the *Juntas de Buen Gobierno* (JBGs, or “Good Government Councils”) and the structuring of autonomous government. The latter represented (Figure 1), respectively, by: 1) At the local level, autonomy agents and commissioners, who are the authorities in each community; 2) At the municipal level are the autonomous municipal authorities, responsible for organizing the dynamics of life in the communities that make up each MAREZ; 3) In 2003 there were five Caracols and these were expanded in 2019 with eleven more, now also called Centers of Autonomous Resistance and Zapatista Rebellion (CRARZ) (Barbosa 2015, 2016). All the spaces of self-government are collective and rotating.

Figure 1. Territorial and self-government structure of Zapatista Autonomous Government. Source: Elaborated based on information from *Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos* (2003), and EZLN (2013, 2019).



The JBGs are the administrative heart of each autonomous region, and are based at a Caracol. They are made up of one or two delegates from the autonomous councils of each MAREZ in their region, who are elected, by assembly, for two-year terms. The JBG is responsible for coordinating a certain

number of MAREZ and has specific functions (Burguete 2005): coordinating, promoting and monitoring the social projects developed in the MAREZ; deciding on the support funds that enter each MAREZ, on which a 10% tax is levied; providing justice and vigilance; accompanying activities linked to local production, trade and transportation; working to reduce imbalances between the MAREZ; mediating conflicts between the MAREZ and other municipalities and non-Zapatista communities; regulating membership, rights and obligations; regulating the entry of visitors, researchers, and others into the MAREZ; monitoring compliance with agreements. The JBGs are accompanied by the CCRI-CG, to avoid acts of corruption, arbitrariness, injustice, intolerance and/or deviation from the Zapatista principle of *mandar obedeciendo* (“lead by obeying the collective will”). This principle is directly related to the form of political participation of the Zapatistas, the construction of a direct grassroots democracy, in which the people give their voice to the representative bodies within the movement—JBGs, Autonomous Councils, CCRI-CG—so that they can lead, while obeying the people and their decisions, as agreed upon in community assemblies (Stahler-Scholck 2007; Starr et al. 2011; Baronnet 2010; Baronnet et al. 2011; Mora 2017), which allows expanding the process of building territorial autonomy (Alkmin 2017).

In the consolidation of their political project, the Zapatistas specify seven axes of what they call "autonomous resistance" (Zapatistas 2013): economic resistance, ideological resistance, psychological resistance, cultural resistance, political resistance, social resistance, and resistance to military and paramilitary presence in and around their territories. In almost three decades, the facets of Zapatista autonomy have been quite palpable, including self-government; autonomous education; autonomous community health care; agroecology; autonomous administration of justice; collective self-defense; autonomous land reform; autonomous communications and culture; economic organization and commerce in the communities, in the autonomous regions and even inter-regionally; collective work enterprises; and the active and visible participation of women and youth. In the collective work enterprises, there are local groups responsible for carrying out the tasks of cooperatives, of local shops, of cultivation of crops, of cattle raising, of local security, of information and culture, among others. It is striking that all the tasks assumed within the structure of the autonomous government, as well as in the aspects that structure autonomy, are carried out without receiving a salary, that is, by community commitment to all the activities that are linked to the material and socio-cultural reproduction of life in their territories.

A decade after the Zapatista uprising, Burguete (2005) contrasted *de facto* autonomies with *de jure* autonomies, that is, autonomies legally recognized by the State. Burguete explains that *de facto* autonomies are forms of indigenous resistance that challenge the state itself and question the legitimacy and legality of its institutions. Therefore they break with the legal order of the State and build their own institutions. Zapatismo, then, is an emblematic expression of *de facto* autonomy.

Peasant autonomy in thought of European origin

Although the roots of indigenous autonomy are from the original ontologies of Abya Yala, we can find a similar thread in thinking of European origin, in the currents of agrarian social, populist, libertarian and anarchist thought, and in heterodox currents of Marxist thought (Sevilla-Guzmán 2006, 2011; Shanin 1983; Modonesi 2014). Many great activists and thinkers emblematic of these tendencies were inspired by the mutual aid, collectivism, communality, solidarity, ethics and moral economy of traditional peasant communities and communes, that is, in the *autonomies* and in the *autonomous facets* of peasant community and culture.¹⁴

Much of what we recognize today as the European tradition of peasant studies had an important moment of gestation in Russia during the Czarist period of the 19th century, in the diverse and complex thought and movement of Narodnism (Seville-Guzmán 2006, 2011; Shanin 1983), which gave birth to Marxist, anarchist and populist currents. Much of the debate centered on the revolutionary question (does the peasantry have revolutionary potential or not?; is it a class in and of itself?) and whether or not it was necessary to go through capitalism first in order to develop the productive forces, giving birth to the revolutionary class of the industrial and urban proletariat, in order to launch a socialist revolution and eventually reach communism.

It is interesting that a clandestine revolutionary movement called Land and Liberty (*Tierra y Libertad* in Spanish) was born from Narodnism, "with the autonomous organization of the peasantry as a starting point, and rural peasant commune as the nucleus of socialism" (Sevilla-Guzmán 2011: 59). *Tierra y Libertad* would later become the slogan of Mexican revolutionary anarchist Ricardo Flores Magón, whose banner of struggle was then adopted by Emiliano Zapata as the most famous slogan of the Mexican Revolution, and in his proposal for the *Plan de Ayala* and in the Commune of Morelos, an exemplary case of territorial peasant-indigenous autonomy (Sevilla-Guzmán 2006, 2011; Paz Paredes 2013). And obviously, if it was an influence on Zapata, it is also an influence on contemporary Zapatismo. Maldonado (2000) explains that Flores Magón's anarchism was influenced by his own claims of indigenous origin (Lomnitz-Adler 2016), and in itself represented a dialogue between European and indigenous anarchisms, with the recognition of the revolutionary character of indigenous peoples. Mexican agrarian expert Armando Bartra (2014) also identifies continuities and convergences between revolutionary agrarian thought in Europe and Mexican agrarian *Magonismo*.

¹⁴ We would like to highlight a difference from indigenous thought on autonomy. The legacy of European thought is, above all, that of non-peasant intellectuals inspired by the peasantry, so that unlike the former case, it did not arise directly from the ontologies, cosmovisions, epistemologies and ways of seeing and being in the world of the subject him- or herself (Escobar 2020). Although, as we will see, it was assimilated by various peasant movements and directly dialogued with, and influenced, indigenous and peasant thought in Latin America.

Key thinkers such as Bakunin and Kropotkin emerged in the anarchist currents of Narodnism. For example, Bakunin (1990) repeatedly analyzed the peasantry as a rebellious and revolutionary subject, and emphasized the autonomy of the peasant commune. He spoke of the universally felt conviction in the commune that the land belongs to the people collectively, to those who "watered it with their own sweat and fertilized it with the work of their own hands," and emphasized "the almost absolute autonomy and self-government of the commune" (1990:604-605). And highlighted the political dimension of the commune which endows it with capacity to resist the state, to fight against it and even to destroy it (Sevilla-Guzmán 2006, 2011). Kropotkin was his disciple and analyzed communal property, the ethics of communal institutions like mutual aid and critiqued the State as the agent of the interests of the dominant classes, in charge of dismantling human institutions based on solidarity and cooperation. He argued that the rural commune facilitated equal access to land, was based on mutual aid, administered justice, organized the defense of the commune and the territories against external threats, and was the vehicle for democratic participation in decisions of common interest (Kropotkin 1978:143-168; Sevilla-Guzmán 2011:65-66).

If Bakunin and Kropotkin represented the agrarian anarchism that emerged from Narodnism, there was no lack of later currents composed of what Sevilla-Guzmán calls neo-Narodnist heterodox Marxism (Sevilla-Guzmán 2011). In fact, many of those who historically defended the idea of the peasantry as a class with revolutionary potential, and the traditional peasant commune or community as a model for a future communist society, represented and drank eclectically from Marxist, anarchist and populist thought (Shanin, 1983; Sevilla-Guzmán, 2006, 2011) to the point that, from our perspective here of searching for the roots of autonomous thought in peasant studies, these currents blended and hybridized even if often presented as contradictory.

For Chayanov (1925-1974, 1986), the peasant economy and forms of cooperation could form the basis for human progress toward communism, without first going through the industrialization of agriculture, nor through land consolidation in agribusiness or large-scale state production. Shanin (1983, 2018b) revived Marx's "late" thought, who devoted his last decade of life to studying the Russian peasantry, and who, in his drafts and letter to Vera Zasulich, among other works identified by Shanin, defended the peasant commune as a model society, and made it clear that there are multiple paths to communism, not all of which run through the urban industrial proletariat.

We place Mariátegui (1928, 1982) in this tradition, the Peruvian Marxist who postulated that in Latin America the revolutionary class was not the tiny industrial proletariat, but rather the enormous indigenous peasantry.¹⁵ For his

¹⁵ In fact, in note 67 in his book "Siete Ensayos de Interpretación de la Realidad Peruana," Mariátegui (2008) builds a broad argument around the historical evidence of Incan communism based on the analysis of the *ayllu* in the Andean world.

part, Eric Wolf (1966, 1969) analyzed the characteristics of the peasant community and the leading role of the peasantry in the revolutions of the 20th century. He wrote that the peasantry has "natural anarchist tendencies" (Wolf 1969: 295), a position that is echoed in the work of James Scott (1998, 2009).

Shanin (2018a) has argued that during the same century it was not orthodox, "non-peasantist" Marxism that was most successful in conducting revolutionary processes, but rather the heterodox Marxisms of leaders such as Mao and Ho Chi Minh. These Marxisms hybridized with local ontologies and epistemologies, which Shanin calls "the vernacular," in most cases at least partially peasant.

Beyond Flores Magón and Mariátegui, the thinking of the EZLN also draws on various sources, including the worldviews and communal forms of the original peoples of Mesoamerica, in particular the Mayas, but also the original Zapatistas of Emiliano Zapata, Latin American revolutionary thought, and the legacies of Marxism and the Soviet, Cuban and Sandinista revolutions, among others (Barbosa 2015, 2017b). While strongly influenced by the preceding generation of guerilla movements in neighboring Central America, the Zapatistas from the start differentiated themselves from them and from Leninist party ideas by taking a decidedly non-vanguardist approach (Rosset 1994; Rosset et al. 2005). Mattiace (2003) argues that both Zapatismo and the Mexican indigenous movement as a whole express a growing tendency in the Americas for collective action based on pan-indigenous identity.

Gunderson (2017, 2018b) shows how the long history of uprisings in Chiapas dating back to the Conquest (see also Wasserstrom 1983), has always been influenced by events in the world-system, including ideas from, for example, the Peasant Wars in 16th Century Germany (the same ones that were analyzed by Engels 1967), from anarchism, from the Communist Party, from Maoism and, of course, from liberation theology. These prior influences on the Zapatista communities, along with Mayan cosmovision, in one way or another all played roles in the formation of what he calls the "Provocative Cocktail" of Zapatista ideology. In other words, in Zapatista thought and their proposal for autonomy, they converge and dialogue from other ontologies and epistemologies, with European visions of the commune - and of communism. It is not so much a break with the European legacy of Marxism and communism, as it is a convergence from another history.

For Veltmeyer (2019) the new geoeconomy of capital, based on neo-extractivism¹⁶, with changes in the dynamics of the expanded reproduction of capital in Latin America, has transformed the specific forms that class struggle assumes today. The assault of capital is now directed increasingly towards the territories of the peoples in rural areas, with the advance of agribusiness, mining, wind power, and forms of extractive capitalist exploitation of natural

¹⁶ Neo-extractivism refers to the return in recent decades to greater dependence on raw material extraction, production and export in order to finance public sector budgets and social programs and to address trade imbalances.

resources. Thus class struggle, which before was expressed mainly through the issues of wages and access to land, is increasingly expressed in terms of the collective defense of territory and community. In a similar vein, Barkin and Sanchez (2017a,b) identify a "communitarian revolutionary subject," a collective, communitarian subject, and add an additional element, which is the capacity of this subject to provide leadership along "the path of new routes for social progress, formulating strategies to improve their quality of life, control their production systems, defend their territories, and conserve their natural heritage" (2017b:15).

Autonomy as a category of analysis, and the facets of autonomy

Araceli Burguete Cal y Mayor¹⁷ argues that we must avoid the temptation to use the very comprehensive and explicit Zapatista autonomy as the unit of comparison to determine whether a given process is autonomous or not. It is not only "declared autonomous" movements that struggle for and exhibit elements of autonomy. With a bar set as high as that of Zapatismo, the risk would be to disqualify many processes that actually, to a greater or lesser degree, possess important *implicit* autonomous facets. She suggests the use of autonomy as a *category of analysis* in the sense of social science research, and, we would add, autonomy as an *element in the collective (re)construction of alternatives*, in the sense of social movements.

We can put this another way, to make it clearer. If we define autonomy in "absolutist" terms, we could say that the Zapatistas are fighting for autonomy, and that their proposal is autonomous. On the other hand, one would then say that the Landless Rural Workers Movement (MST) in Brazil is *not* an autonomous movement, because it disputes public resources *within* the framework of the bourgeois state. But we would then be blind to the many implicit facets of autonomy that the MST actually exhibits, and to its struggles to increase its degree of autonomy in many aspects (Vergara-Camus 2014). Doesn't the MST fight to have its own schools in its territories, with its own curriculum? (Barbosa, 2015; 2017a). That is a struggle for educational autonomy. Doesn't the MST fight to transform its production into agroecological production, which does not depend on external inputs? That is a struggle for "autonomy from capital," to use its own words (MST 2016). Doesn't the MST fight for self-government in its encampments and settlements, based on the self-organization

¹⁷ Dr. Araceli Burguete Cal y Mayor, an expert in indigenous autonomies at the Center for Research and Advanced Studies in Social Anthropology (CIESAS) in Chiapas, Mexico, gave a class on July 10, 2019 on "Autonomy, and Resistance in Mexico," at the doctoral seminar "Processes of Territorial Autonomy," co-taught by one of the present authors, at *El Colegio de la Frontera Sur* (ECOSUR), also in Chiapas. It was in the class that she made the observation.

and coordination of families? (Miranda and Cunha 2013; Starr et al. 2011). That is a struggle for self-government, a central facet of autonomy.

In fact, the organizational structure of the MST in its different bodies —National Directorate, State Directorates, Brigades, Sectors, Base Groups and Collectives— articulates a political coordination and autonomous decision-making at the local, state, regional and national levels. This could be considered, in itself, as a kind of autonomous self-government in the peasant territories of the MST. It has an organic structure and autonomy in the conduct of socio-cultural, productive and political-economic processes in the encampments, agrarian reform settlements and in the relationship of these territories with allies and other external entities. Likewise, participation in all these instances is collective, rotating and with gender parity (Starr et al. 2011).

In other words, when we situate autonomy as a category of analysis and draw on emblematic examples of indigenous and peasant struggle in the analytical and political scenario of Latin America - with the cases of *Zapatismo* and the MST - we intend to make explicit how autonomy manifests itself *intentionally*, that is, as an autonomous political project (as in *Zapatismo*), or *implicitly*, sometimes unconsciously or unintentionally, yet which, in the end, reveals crucial facets of autonomy (as in the MST). From our perspective, this is a way to reveal the existence of bridges for dialogue between indigenous and peasant movements with respect to the potential of autonomy to strengthen their social fabric, territories and the political horizon of their praxis.

Facets of autonomy revealed by the pandemic

As we argue, the pandemic highlighted some of the contradictions inherent in capitalism, but also revealed how rural communities are increasingly resorting to their own structures to maintain their resistance and existence. Based on what we have identified in online social networks,¹⁸ we highlight seven axes that articulate these initiatives taken in response to the emptying of the public dimension of states in providing immediate and effective responses the rural crisis created by the pandemic:

1. *Agroecological food production*: the pandemic has highlighted the centrality of the peasantry in guaranteeing the production, trade and circulation of healthy food. Throughout the world, we have observed the increase in agroecological peasant production during the period of the pandemic;
2. *Social solidarity, humanitarian donations and barter*: many indigenous, peasant and traditional communities organized humanitarian deliveries and barter exchanges as a strategy for exchange of food and seed

¹⁸ As mentioned in footnote 5 above, we followed the online presence of member organizations of LVC, CLOC, and APIB, among others mentioned in the body of the essay.

between communities facing shortages. We see initiatives like this in the Regional Indigenous Council of the Cauca (CRIC) in Colombia, as well as some regions in Guatemala, Bolivia and Ecuador, guaranteeing the distribution of food among communities that were prevented from selling their products in municipal capitals, due to social isolation measures. We also observed the donation of tons of food in urban slums by peasant movements in Brazil, such as the MST, the Small Farmers' Movement (MPA) and the Peasant Women's Movement (MMC), and in Argentina by fisherfolk and by the Landless Workers' Union (UTT), in addition to CLOC/LVC organizations in several countries;

3. *Popular and traditional medicine*: in many indigenous communities, traditional medicine has been strengthened, especially remedies to revitalize the respiratory and immune systems. Traditional midwifery has also been strengthened to attend low-risk births, preventing women from running the risk of infection in rural clinics. In many communities natural medicines, based on popular and ancestral recipes have been used for Covid-19 symptoms, with some success;

4. *Community health protocols and sanitary cordons*: for prevention and mediation in territories and communities, as in the initiatives of the Mayan organization Ka' Kuxtal Much Meyaj, located in Campeche, Mexico, or in the agrarian reform settlements of the MST;

5. *Diverse forms of self-management*: during the pandemic, many communities strengthened their process of conservation, multiplication and commercialization of native seeds. Many organized internal commissions with rotating activities in to plant and rear short-cycle food crops and farm animals.

6. *Marketing of agricultural production*: many peasant and indigenous organizations created digital platforms and/or applications for use on cell phones, which allowed them to expand and maintain the marketing networks for agroecological products, by means of food baskets that are delivered to homes. This is stimulating an increase in agroecological production and has strengthened exchange networks between rural cooperatives and urban communities.

7. *Defense of territory*: many communities have created or (re)activated instances of territorial defense, above all due to the increase in violence linked to neo-extractivist mega-projects and enterprises, which have taken advantage of social isolation to make stronger incursions into their territories. In different countries, such as Mexico, Colombia and Brazil, violence in the countryside and in indigenous territories worsened during the pandemic. The Indigenous Guard of the Cauca, in Colombia, and the community guardians in Guerrero and Oaxaca, in Mexico, are examples of this process of territorial defense. In Brazil, in different indigenous territories, community security commissions were organized that

functioned on a daily basis, to monitor, and prevent the entry and movement of outsiders.

Observing these responses to the pandemic, we conclude that, in reality, peasant and indigenous organizations are exercising facets of autonomy, which sets the stage for the autonomy debate. Extrapolating, we propose some initial *facets of autonomy* that could be analyzed in their degree of autonomy (from less to more autonomous), in a wide range of processes, organizations and movements. These might include *political autonomy and self-government; productive autonomy; food autonomy; economic autonomy and local economy; collective self-defense of communities and territories; health autonomy; and solidarity autonomy*. To these we could add *autonomy in the administration of justice*, characteristic of Zapatismo and many traditional indigenous communities.

These examples make it clear that autonomy, and in particular its facets and degrees, can serve as *categories of analysis* to interpret any process of social struggle and collective construction. It is important to reiterate that autonomy is not absolute, but relative to a condition of total dependence (van der Ploeg 2008, 2010). For example, a case of agroecological food production can be more or less autonomous from the market for agricultural inputs, depending on the technology used (Rosset and Martínez-Torres 2012). Or, according to Gazolla and Schneider (2007), to the extent that a family or peasant community covers its food needs and consumption with its own production, it will have greater autonomy vis-à-vis the larger social and economic context. To this we could add that it would also have greater political autonomy in the sense of not being so vulnerable to external political pressure or blackmail, if they at least have enough to eat. Furthermore, as asserted by van der Ploeg (2008), the peasantry builds autonomy at levels of aggregation that go beyond individual units of production, for example via territorial cooperatives.

Peasant autonomy

We propose, in an effort to unblock the debate in Latin American peasant movements on the issue of autonomy, an expanded concept of *peasant autonomy* to distinguish it from, although in dialogue with, the *autonomy of anarchism*, particularly *urban anarchism*.

Peasant autonomy can extend from the partial and relative levels of using agroecological practices instead of purchased chemical inputs, to having local and territorial self-government and self-defense. Peasant autonomy, we argue, is compatible with, and shares roots and social subjects with, indigenous autonomy. It should be able to dialogue with, and learn and be inspired by, Zapatista autonomy, even as peasant organizations demand better public policies for the countryside, and enter political “broad fronts against fascism,” or even participate in an electoral campaign, without excessively ceding their (political) autonomy to politicians and their parties.

Peasant autonomy implies profound changes of anti-systemic nature, and puts on the table important axes of what for us might be termed the “peasant movement concept of autonomy,” using the perspective of *sovereignty*: food sovereignty, territorial sovereignty, water sovereignty energy sovereignty, etc. In what follows we examine how the debate on peasant autonomy is being shaped, taking as a starting point the experience of the CLOC/LVC, the transnational social movement that brings together 115 Latin American organizations of indigenous people, peasants, afro-descendants, rural workers and traditional communities.

Autonomy as a proposal of struggle for rural social movements

Today rural social movements in Latin American find themselves in a kind of stalemate, fighting fascism without much correlation of forces in larger society, and calling for the return of politicians and governments who did little for them when they were in power. Those “progressive” governments betrayed many of their promises of agrarian reform, and negotiated and compromised with Capital to the detriment of the working class and the subjects of the countryside, and, on top of that, in several countries (Brazil, for example) they are currently sidelined from the national political dispute. During these governments, many movements suffered a relative demobilization of their membership, their political and organizing work with their social bases was neglected, and as a result they were weakened in rural communities and territories. Faced with this somewhat discouraging reading, we think that a new (or renewed, as the case may be) emphasis on the construction of local and territorial autonomies could offer the key so needed to unleash the realization of much of their potential as movements, both in the materiality of territories and communities, and in the accumulation of forces for larger political disputes.

In order to situate autonomy as a proposal of struggle for contemporary rural social movements in Latin America, it is important to review the context at the beginning of the third decade of the 21st century. Out of the brutality of neoliberalism a generation of social mobilization and social movements emerged. From the anti-neoliberal and anti-globalization revolts, governments sometimes labeled as “Left” or “progressive” emerged in different countries of the region, although a critical analysis characterizes them more as “neo-populist” and “neo-nationalist” (Vergara-Camus and Kay 2017). In most cases, they did not manage to escape from the historical rent-seeking behavior of the State¹⁹, and the rents of neo-extractivism allowed them to pursue a model based on class conciliation or class compromise —political-economic pacts with important fractions of national and transnational capital— sweetened with

¹⁹ By rent-seeking behavior we refer both to a primary community to finance the state through taxes on exports (Sadik-Zada et al. 2019), leading to deindustrialization as well as the displacement of rural peoples, and the tendency of political parties to function as parasites that feed on public sector budgets (van Biezen and Kopecky 2007).

populist measures of social containment such as direct cash transfers to vulnerable sectors and the expansion of credit for consumption by the masses (Barbosa 2020; Rosset 2018; Bautista Segales 2020; Machado and Zibechi 2017; Gudynas 2015; Mazzeo 2018; Katz 2017; Svampa 2016). In the countryside, although peasant organizations obtained some important concessions (programs of public acquisition of food; credits and investments; educational programs; etc.), on the balance, the period saw enormous advances in the transnationalization of national economies (Barbosa 2020), in the total land area dedicated to the activities of extractive capital, including 'green deserts' of soybeans and sugar cane, mining concessions, windturbine parks, etc. (Rosset 2018), all signifying incursions and land grabbing in the territories of peasant, indigenous and Afro-descendant peoples (LVC 2017a,b), that is, the virtually unrestrained advance of what David Harvey (2004) calls "accumulation by dispossession".²⁰ As Giraldo (2020:62) put it, social movements and peasant organizations were "imprisoned by a Left that in its discourse fought the neoliberal phase of capitalism, but did not fight capitalism itself."

A large part of the Left, including a significant part of the rural social movements grouped in the CLOC/LVC, remained in one way or another implicated in the institutional political process, demanding and administering public support programs, receiving budgets and investments in schools and cooperatives, such that in some way they were "trapped" in the electoral process, tied to electoral political parties. On the one hand, they received concrete benefits, although very limited ones compared to the largesse of public sector subsidies to agribusiness and the mining and energy industries, and on the other hand, they suffered both the depredation of their lands, territories and natural assets, and a notable decrease in their mobilizing capacity. The individualized direct assistance programs demobilized their social bases, and their relationship with the institutional Left in power often meant leaving aside or toning down criticism and "radical" demands, so as not to "do the dirty work of the Right."

Many of the important cadre of the movements and organizations were involved in the tremendously bureaucratic administration of public programs for the countryside, to the extent that there was, in many or most cases, a net neglect of political-organizational work with the grassroots, and even greater neglect of

²⁰ "The continuation and proliferation of accumulation practices which Marx had treated of as "primitive" or "original" during the rise of capitalism. These include the commodification and privatization of land and the forceful expulsion of peasant populations...; conversion of various forms of property rights (common, collective, state, etc.) into exclusive private property rights...; suppression of rights to the commons; commodification of labour power and the suppression of alternative (indigenous) forms of production and consumption; colonial, neocolonial, and imperial processes of appropriation of assets (including natural resources); monetization of exchange and taxation, particularly of land; the slave trade (which continues particularly in the sex industry); and usury, the national debt and, most devastating of all, the use of the credit system as a radical means of accumulation by dispossession," according to Harvey (2007: 159).

political work with other sectors with whom the movements should have been building alliances and doing grassroots and political education work as well. The *coup de grâce* was the re-emergence and, in many cases, taking of power by the far Right, a context in which the social movements and the Left in general now find themselves with very little capacity for mobilization to confront the Right and, in some countries, fascism. The decision to take advantage of public resources to create schools, agroecological processes, cooperatives, etc., had the unintended effect of generating or cementing the dependence of communities and organizations on the public sector and on "friendly" politicians, in such a way that, when the Right came to power and cut subsidies, budgets, credits, and purchase contracts committed to by governments, many processes today are on the verge of collapse, because they lack sufficient strength of their own, independent, and autonomous, to persist without support from governments (Rosset and Altieri 2017, 2018; Giraldo and McCune 2019). Giraldo and McCune (2019) conclude that the movements and organizations to some extent erred by choosing to build processes dependent on a government currently in power, relying more on what Spinoza (2001) calls *potestad* (external power) than on the construction of *potencia* (internal strength). For Vergara-Camus and Kay (2017: 434-435), "access to the state did not yield more concrete results than building autonomy from below and outside the state".

Giraldo (2020) points out that the leftist critics of the autonomy proposal argue for the non-viability of giving up the aspiration of acceding to the State and its public institutions, because they consider taking the State as the only viable political strategy for large-scale change. In this regard Marxist anthropologist Gilberto López and Rivas (2011) argues that the construction of territorial autonomy does not necessarily imply the renunciation of pressure on, and dialogue with, the State, although it does imply building and strengthening a collective subject more capable of confronting it.

Thus we question the apparently insurmountable nature of the contradictions between autonomous visions and the currents of Marxism and the "old Left" that are still hegemonic in many of the social movements. It is unfortunate that the struggle for the State and the proposal for autonomy are often seen as mutually exclusive, as antagonistic, and we argue that this apparent antagonism explains in large part a certain reluctance to address the issue and enter the debate. We suggest that overcoming this barrier and launching processes of territorial autonomy could be a very important way to overcome the stagnation that currently characterizes many movements and organizations, and allow them to reach much more of their potential. We can use an emblematic case like the MST as a hypothetical example. As we pointed out, the MST already exhibits various facets of autonomy, and engages in constant struggle in the settlements to broaden and deepen these autonomies. However, the relationship with politicians and public officials of the institutional Left often slows down and undermines these autonomies, and conforming to the norms of state bureaucracies generates contradictions and new dependencies. It is impossible not to see the enormous size, capacity and strength of the MST as being

somehow held back, tied to and weakened by these relationships. It is hard not to imagine what an MST that was more autonomous of the State would look like, freed from the dysfunctional relationships that block the full expression and development of its potentialities.

We attach great importance to dismantling the apparent contradiction and mutual exclusivity between the focus on the one hand on the State, government, and public policies, and on the other, the autonomy proposal, at least in its versions of relative and partial autonomies. The Zapatistas have their very good reasons, based on Mexico's particular history, for rejecting any relationship with the State. But beyond them, in terms of the Latin American peasant movement, we believe that it is not a wrong to have interest in the State. Still, it is a mistake to make a fetish of the State, allowing electoral cycles to derail any progress toward autonomous territorial processes, and to make too many small and large concessions to politicians and political parties in order to attract programs and funding, which often disappoint (and typically generate dangerous levels of dependence). And it is a mistake to thereby neglect “taking care of one’s own,” at the grassroots, with political education work, and ignoring self-sufficiency and territorial and local autonomy. But *Yes!* to the fight against fascism, in the political sphere, *Yes!* to demanding other educational policies for the countryside (for example), but at the same time, *Yes!* to building autonomies in the territories.

On the positive side of the ledger, we can identify the tentative beginnings of dialogue between indigenous autonomy and the possibilities of peasant autonomy inside of CLOC/LVC. There is a tendency among the indigenous organizations of Guatemala, with the adhesion of some in Peru and Bolivia, around an ancestral sense of conceiving politics in a communal perspective. In the preparatory document for the 7th Congress of CLOC/LVC held in Cuba in 2019, the indigenous organizations emphasized the perspective of original peoples with respect to the contradictions of nation states, and laid out the pillars of their ontologies and epistemologies with regard to their conception of political struggle and the construction of a new civilizing model (CLOC, 2019: 49):²¹

The contribution of original peoples does not constitute a third way between capitalism and socialism; on the contrary, the worldview, culture and values of original peoples cannot be realized in societies dominated by capitalism, which by nature has proved to be antagonistic to the vision and practice of indigenous peoples. What we are clearly proposing is that the richness of the struggles of original peoples, with a history of some hundreds of years, be combined with the richness of struggles for the construction of socialism, and in that very synthesis,

²¹ Although in the preparatory document, these points were not addressed in the discussions held in the plenary sessions.

the socialism of the 21st century should be a communitarian socialism, with the roots and projection of the original peoples, and in harmony with Mother Nature.

Similarly, they argued, autonomy means breaking with the system of domination and oppression of capitalist, imperialist, colonial, racist and patriarchal society (CLOC, 2019: 45). Likewise, in the internal political debates in CLOC/LVC, the indigenous-based organizations spell out that autonomy cannot be seen just in the institutional terms of ILO Convention 169, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and similar instruments. In their words (CLOC, 2019:45), "it is not a matter of having an autonomy statute where original peoples govern themselves under [state] tutelage."

At the level of LVC International (not only Latin America), there is a very preliminary consensus, with autonomous, territorial tints, concerning some challenges and commitments facing the movement (LVC 2016: 7-9):

- We have new approaches —such as the territorial approach— and new strategies, such as the construction of autonomous spaces, relative autonomy and self-sufficiency, and the massification of peoples' agroecology.
- Rethink the relationship between our popular movements, the State, political parties and electoral processes, according to the different history and situation of each country.
- Transform the struggle for land into the struggle for territory.
- Deepen a more "autonomous" agroecology, based on the rescue of ancestral knowledge and on our own local resources and inputs.

We believe that CLOC and LVC are the ideal spaces for dialogue between autonomies and other visions and epistemes present in the movement (Martínez-Torres and Rosset 2014; Rosset 2015). Not only the indigenous side contributes to this possible construction. Non-indigenous peasant organizations, such as the Small Farmers' Movement of Brazil (MPA), a member of the CLOC, point to peasant diversity and being a peasant as a "mode of being, mode of living and mode of producing," and demonstrate many elements in common with the principles of indigenous autonomy (da Silva 2014). According to the CLOC (2019:55), "peasant culture is based on daily relations with nature, on spirituality, on broad empirical knowledge, on orality and practice, on family and community, [and] on diversified relations of cooperation."

The territorial dimension is a common element between indigenous autonomy and peasant autonomy, that is, the collective right to belong to a territory as a space for the social and material reproduction of life, a place in constant dispute with Power, and a place for the construction of peoples' counterpower. Thus the territory is where it should be possible to reach a consensus among the varied

epistemes that make up the movement, a consensus in favor of autonomy proposals, and thus the importance of the challenge to “transform the struggle for land into the struggle for territory.”

It is worth pointing out that the debate is at a very initial stage, and that many of the facets of autonomy present in peasant movements are more commonly referred to by them as "sovereignties" (food sovereignty, energy sovereignty, etc.). Therefore the similarities and differences between *sovereignties* and *autonomies* needs to be explored. However, little by little the term *autonomy* is emerging, especially in peasant discourses on defense of territorial and agroecology, and in educational projects and their own schools.

Conclusions

We have argued throughout this essay that rural social movements in Latin America are at a difficult moment in their history, caught between dependencies, heteronomies, demobilization, dysfunctional relationships with electoral processes, and the (re)ascent of populist and authoritarian Rights. This situation was made more evident by the pandemic, which at the same time revealed the autonomous strengths of the movements themselves.

Although we have argued extensively in terms of the fragility and weakness generated by dependence on external actors, another interesting way of addressing the difference between states of autonomy and states of heteronomy, to use the language of Spinoza (2001), is between *potentia* (internal power) and *potestas* (regulation by external power). The question is not only: *on whom do you depend?*, but also: *what is the power that you practice?* In this sense, we have argued that a more explicit “autonomy turn” could liberate much more of the potentialities (*potentia*) of the movements.

Faced with this negative panorama, we maintain that autonomy proposals offer a possible way out, to liberate the full potential of the movements, in the collective construction of alternatives in their communities and territories, and to accumulate forces and build strength in the “rearguard,” in the “home bases,” for both confrontation and negotiation with the State. Using two concrete examples - Zapatismo and the MST - we shed light on some key elements of the construction of autonomy not only in the context of the indigenous movement, but also among peasant organizations. In essence we observe, based on the axes that articulate the initiatives of varied organizations to confront the Covid-19 pandemic, that there is a set of factors related to socio-community life, the defense of territories, the legacy of ancestral knowledge, and the inward and outward oriented dynamics of the organizations, that lay the foundations for the construction and lived experience of the facets of autonomy. Thus we argue for the urgency to put indigenous and peasant organizations in dialogue, in order to overcome possible misunderstandings about autonomy.

We have observed that, at the level of leadership and coordinating bodies, there is a certain reluctance or fear of opening up the full debate on autonomy. Part of

this may come from the difficulty of dialoguing with orthodox Marxism, although there are great possibilities for dialogue with the heterodox currents of Marxism to build common perspectives. We believe that in the Latin American context, original peoples —much more than anarchists— are the vanguard of the autonomy proposal, although we have highlighted the historical dialogue between them.

In the CLOC/LVC the debate on autonomies is filtering in from below, from the subjects themselves, above all indigenous, but also peasants, and laterally from movement processes like as education and agroecology. The debate is initial, but at the same time it is very urgent, necessary and hopeful.

For a political and research agenda it will be fundamental to carry out specific studies to highlight and deepen our understanding of the elements that sustain the construction of peasant autonomy, including the identification of convergences and divergences in relation to autonomy as expressed in indigenous, Marxist and anarchist terms. We reaffirm that our intention in this essay is to invite dialogue based on our belief that in the current political context, it behoves the peasant movement – and its organic intellectuals inside and outside of the academy - to engage in a collective political process of reflection and re-thinking with regard to autonomy.

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About the authors

Peter M. Rosset, Ph.D. (corresponding author) is Professor-Researcher at the Department of Agriculture, Society and Environment of *El Colegio de la Frontera Sur* (ECOSUR) in Chiapas, Mexico; Visiting Professor BPV-FUNCAP at the Graduate Program in Sociology (PPGS) of the *Universidade Estadual do Ceará* (UECE), in Fortaleza, Brazil.; visiting professor at the Social Research Institute (CUSRI) of Chulalongkorn University in Thailand; former long-term staff of La Via Campesina International. Email prosset AT ecosur.mx

Lia Pinheiro Barbosa, Ph.D. is Professor and Chair of the Graduate Program in Sociology (PPGS) and Professor of the Intercampus Masters in Education and Pedagogy (MAIE) both at the *Universidade Estadual do Ceará* (UECE), in Fortaleza, Brazil. Member of the Collective of Educators of the Agrarian Reform of the Landless Workers' Movement (MST) of Ceará, Brazil. Researcher of the Latin American Council of Social Sciences (CLACSO). Email: lia.barbosa AT uece.br

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