

Undoing the Damages of Development: The Zapatistas as a Model for Indigenous Resistance

Olivia Hart

Rural movements today are the central force of opposition to neoliberalism and the most important sources of democratic transformation in national and international politics.¹ The Zapatista Movement in Chiapas, Mexico, is one such example of these movements, which operates within a framework of the wider alter-globalization movement. In an effort to explore grassroots resistance, this research paper raises and answers the following question: how does the Zapatista movement illustrate post-development and resistance to neoliberalism? I argue that the Zapatistas' assertion of Indigenous rights presents a decolonial development approach that challenges contemporary neoliberalism. A community-based model of de facto autonomy, traditional practices of justice, and challenging borders as colonial structures under neoliberalism each aid in the Zapatistas' struggle. First, this paper will follow the trajectory of neoliberal reforms in Mexico and analyze its impacts on rural communities. Following this, a case study on Chiapas will illustrate the ways in which the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) resists neoliberalism through a decolonial approach to governance and development.

Literature Review

The pre-existing literature regarding Indigenous resistance, social movements and their relationship to neoliberal development is extensive, and this paper brings this literature into conversation and contextualize it through the example of the Zapatistas. First, it is critical to lay out the framework and clarify the definitions of some terms. Escobar argues that violence is an essential element to development and that modernization necessitates violence. Furthermore, modernity is "essentially about displacement, conquering territories, uprooting peoples from place, restructuring spaces... and so forth."² The mass displacement that we see today, which disproportionately impacts racialized minority groups in rural areas, is the result of the cultural, social, and economic processes that are inherent to neoliberalism and consolidated in modern

capitalism.³ Colonial development models have prompted resistance from numerous groups in Latin America, making it necessary to understand the nature of social movements and resistance.

Acevedo and Sato present various definitions of social movements but argue that social movements can be characterized by three main tenets: collective mobilization, intent, and the shared identity of *political outsiders*. These characteristics come together to define social movements as "collectivities acting with some degree of organization and continuity, partly outside institutional or organizational channels, for the purpose of challenging extant systems of authority, or resisting change in such systems, in the organization, society, culture, or world system in which they are embedded."⁴ Davis contests this framework, arguing that little has been done to formulate theories of social mobilization that are sensitive to the unique political, social, cultural, and economic developments in Latin America, and that common understandings of social movements are built on Western assumptions and a Eurocentric perspective that does not translate to Latin America.⁵ She proposes a new framework constructed with a more nuanced appreciation of spatiality, arguing that, in Latin America, some citizens or groups are more distanced from the state than others, and it is the extent of this distance that affects citizens' likelihood of joining social movements and the ways in which they engage in mobilization. Moreover, the origins and character of social movement activism in Latin America will differ from a Western conceptualization of activism due to the historical differences in citizenship and state formation.⁶

Lastly, it is important within the context of Chiapas and the Zapatista to consider Indigenous resistance. Taking Escobar's work into consideration, Stewart-Harawira holds that due to the pervasive and violent nature of development, resilience and resistance have become essential to Indigenous cultural practice. The resurgence of Indigenous communities in Latin America in the 1990s brought incentive and momentum to Indigenous opposition to

the exploitation and extractivism that threatened Indigenous lands.^{vii} Furthermore, sovereignty has been central to Indigenous resistance against colonization since the late 15th century.^{viii} This literature will come into conversation with each other to create a framework for the arguments present in this paper.

Neoliberalism in Mexico

Over the course of history, the Mexican economy has seen many changes; it has experienced periods of great economic growth, and intense economic crisis. The 1983 debt crisis marked the beginning of neoliberal structural adjustment, when the Mexican government accepted a two-stage orthodox International Monetary Fund (IMF) prescription. The first stage aimed to reduce inflation and stabilize public finances, while the second aimed to achieve growth through structural reforms and by targeting trade liberalization.^{ix} This prescription resulted in a significant shift from labour to capital, which led to major decreases in salaries and a rise in unemployment and precarious work. The 1988 election brought Carlos Salinas into power, and he continued charting Mexico on the path of neoliberal reform.^x This included the privatization of public companies, charging students for post-secondary education (a once free public service), ending land reform, and entering Mexico into the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) between Canada, the United States and Mexico was a significant advancement towards deregulating and liberalizing capital flows, while continuing to regulate labour.^{xi}

Mexico also saw neoliberalism transform social policy, where general subsidies were substituted for targeted poverty programs (which saw modest impacts on indigence), and the protection of income, employment, and free access to services was removed. Public social security had become commodified, subverting wages to market forces and increasing the pre-existing socioeconomic gaps.^{xii} The health sector saw reforms following prescriptions from the World Bank, which introduced market competition for personal, medical services, restricting the role of the state to public health action, regulation, and planning, and subsidizing select essential health services.^{xiii} These regressive social and economic reforms were promised to be Mexico's ticket to the First World, but the impacts on citizens, particularly rural peasants, were catastrophic.

Economically speaking, the neoliberal globalization and free trade agreements destroyed national productive structures, exposing nations to the logic of transnational corporations and increasing Mexico's vulnerability to external shocks.^{xiv} This forced a heavier reliance on the

US economy and a continued shift away from domestic agricultural productive structures. The social consequences of neoliberalism were severe and gave rise to a new social scene with an extreme polarization of wealth; decreasing or stagnated wages; mounting informal activities and precarious or criminal jobs, and massive domestic and international migration. As a result, Mexico experienced a dramatic rise in poverty.^{xv} While wealth has been concentrated in the hands of the few elites and Multinational Corporations (MNCs), rural Mexican populations, made up of primarily Indigenous and peasant farmers, have been stripped of economic power.^{xvi}

NAFTA and the other neoliberal policies affected the agriculture industry intensely, shifting the focus to crop specialization and global exportation. In 1992, President Salinas passed a new agrarian code, which was part of a series of moves made by the Mexican government to appeal to US businesses and other foreign investments in anticipation of NAFTA.^{xvii} This new code amended Article 27 of the Constitution, putting an end to land reform and effectively privatizing the countryside. Article 27, which emerged from the Mexican Revolution (1910-1917), set forth principles by which poor, landless peasants could petition the government for parcels of land; this demand was met with the introduction of the Mexican *ejido*.^{xviii} *Ejid*os created a basic framework for "collectively managed, community-based land holdings"^{xix} that allowed farmers access to state-owned land for agriculture. This amendment forced rural farmers to compete with larger agribusinesses, which pushed them out of the market and left them no other choice but to find work elsewhere, contributing to the mass displacement and increase in the informal sector that was observed during this time.

Similarly, Patten writes that "production specialization degraded natural and human resources, subordinated local producers to the whim of foreign-based TNCs and governments, impinged on the food security of Mexico's poorest populations, threatened Mexico's food sovereignty, and sacrificed domestic consumers' nutritional diets."^{xx} For example, after the agreement was signed between Mexico, the US, and Canada, cheap US corn flooded the Mexican market and decreased farmers' income from corn by 66 percent;^{xxi} peasants could not compete with the wealth of capital-intensive US agribusiness. This influx of American corn into the Mexican economy is particularly significant when one considers the important role that corn maize plays in the culture of Indigenous groups who primarily reside in rural areas of Mexico.

Chiapas is one such state that experienced the pitfalls of neoliberalism. As the southernmost state of the country, its population is primarily made up of Indigenous farmers who have tended to the land for years. The disruptions

of liberalization and the socioeconomic impacts of the neoliberal project prompted resistance from the Zapatistas, a resistance group in the region. Their story of resistance will be explored below, giving careful attention to the ways they illustrate post-development through their practice of Indigenous self-governance.

Background to the Zapatista and Their Resistance

The Zapatista movement was one of the numerous identity-based social movements that emerged in the 80s and 90s in Latin America, rooted in the struggle of Indigenous communities for land, territorial autonomy and democracy, as well as social justice and a recovery of national identity that was at risk under neoliberalism.^{xxii} The movement has been brewing since 1983, and on January 1, 1994, the day NAFTA took effect, the Zapatista rebellion emerged from the remote southeast region of Chiapas and seized control of various zones across the state. This uprising held a promise of a fresh approach to radical change, focusing on the transformation of society from below rather than the seizure of state power from above.^{xxiii} By declaring war, the Zapatistas made a serious claim that many Mexicans, primarily Indigenous and subsistent farmers, would be victims of NAFTA.^{xxiv} This can be understood as another installment of colonial domination exercised by the state over Indigenous populations in Mexico. The rebellion was a forceful expression of massive popular resistance against neoliberalism and was supported by millions of Mexicans all over the country. Laurell notes that "it should, however, be understood that the massive claim for change and justice was also for peace and rejection of state violence,"^{xxv} which had been incited through years of neoliberal reform. Zapatismo as a social movement consists of various layers, including the political-military structure (insurgents and militia) of the EZLN, the "networks" of national and international supporters, and the "support-base" Indigenous communities in the "conflict zones."^{xxvi} These support bases will be examined further to uncover the ways in which the assertion of Indigenous rights through a community-based model of autonomy illustrate resistance to the colonial structures of the neoliberal project.

The Zapatista: An Indigenous Social Movement Against Neoliberalism

First, it is necessary to note the contributions that armed resistance has made to the uprising of the Zapatista. Petras and Veltmeyer claim that one of three ways that the peasantry responds to capital accumulation and agrarian transformation is to construct a social movement to mobilize forces of resistance and engage in class struggle. They state that "this struggle tends to be or is neces-

sarily violent... the state in its concerted efforts to impose on the proletarianized peasantry the economic regime and political 'stability' that capitalism requires resorts to violence."^{xxvii} This echoes the arguments of Escobar in that violence is an intrinsic aspect of development. Though the Zapatistas struggled militarily and were eventually pushed back into the jungle by state forces, their initial emergence and display of resistance to neoliberalism put them on the map and garnered wide-spread media attention and international support. However, while militant action is one form of resistance that the Zapatista use, their practice of resistance in more covert ways is just as impactful to rejecting neoliberal development.

After their military retreat, the EZLN engaged in negotiations with the state government to reconcile their disputes. From these negotiations, the San Andrés Accords that were to recognize the rights of Indigenous groups in Mexico were drawn up. However, the federal government did not hold up its end of the deal and none of the issues discussed in the accords were addressed as the Chiapas Indigenous citizens had expected and hoped for. Instead, the communities of Chiapas saw increased militarization, leading to heavy surveillance and outbreaks of violence.^{xxviii} Rather than take up arms again, the Zapatista fell back on the assertion of their Indigenous rights to the land and de facto autonomy as a form of resistance. De facto autonomy (as opposed to negotiated autonomy) refers to everyday practices of autonomy, without waiting for permission from government to dictate the ways that the Zapatista can govern themselves within the neoliberal structure and enforcing its rule in their Indigenous territories. This resistance emerges from over 500 years of oppression, centred on concepts of human dignity rooted in shared colonial experiences and rejection of the hegemonic structures of oppression.^{xxix}

Stahler-Sholk argues that borders erected selectively for people, but not for capital, represent a continuation of colonial practices of domination. With the NAFTA trade pact, ancestral and communal lands became overnight commodities and subsistence cultivators suddenly "bordered" and competed commercially with transnational agribusiness corporations, marking a striking resemblance to European encounters 500 years prior.^{xxx} Neoliberalism and agrarian reform made Indigenous populations more vulnerable, and the Zapatistas proclaimed this to be a death sentence for their right to define their own way of life. This is captured by Stahler-Sholk, who writes that

They saw their struggle not just as a defense of land in a strictly bordered geographic sense but as the defense of territory, which includes the right to define one's own cultural, social, and economic relations on that land. In this sense, autonomous existence in

their territories is resistance to models imposed by the powerful.^{xxxii}

By asserting their right to land and exercising constituent power rather than waiting to access constituted power, the Zapatista effectively undermined the influence of neoliberalism and the state.

The EZLN support bases exercise their right to self-governance in approximately 38 autonomous municipalities in the Highland and Lacandon Jungle regions of Chiapas.^{xxxiii} Critical resistance and displays of post-development include a critique of the coloniality of power, specifically that which is represented by the neoliberal globalization, through the daily practice of their culture within these municipalities. The self-governing structures created by the Zapatistas draw on Indigenous traditions such as decision-making by assembly, and the Zapatistas have deliberately developed governance norms of inclusive, horizontal, participatory democracy to reinvent their collective identity as a movement.^{xxxiii} For example, positions of responsibility are unpaid, rotated and decided upon by the collective. These practices create intimate bonds within the community and a sense of obligation and accountability, preventing the reproduction of new oppressive hierarchies and diffusing any potential of strong leadership that may result in an abuse of power. Agrarian practices are shared by members of the community, for the community: rootedness in the land, the traditions of sustainable subsistence agriculture, and the Indigenous practice of cultivating cornfields with related activities of production and social reproduction are essential components of this resistance.^{xxxiv} A closer look at the system of justice further articulates the ways in which Indigenous autonomous communities resist state domination.

Traditional forms of justice that are centred around mutual healing, restitution and community resolutions are essential to the autonomous Zapatista communities. These methods bring an element of morality and compassion to justice that is often missing from colonial interpretations of justice. Mora expands on this, stating:

This political-ethical expression of legitimating power is reflected in...the cultural practices centered on mediations that redress the harm done, rather than simply finding one party guilty and the other innocent, as would be a state-centered standard approach; resolving cases in the population's native

languages; the focus on re-education... as well as the emphasis placed on social reparations through community work, rather than an economic fine or incarceration.^{xxxv}

These traditional practices of justice are often contextualized through disputes over land. While neoliberalism would encourage this sort of competition and conflict over property, the autonomous communities resist this structure and fill vacuums left by the withdrawal of neoliberal state function. They do so by employing a moral force that attempts to resolve cases with peasant organizations while avoiding new tensions.^{xxxvi} Practices of justice by the Zapatistas destabilize the regulatory forces of neoliberalism and are hence central to disrupting the continued legacies of coloniality.^{xxxvii} It is the culmination of communal agriculture, the implementation of traditional justice systems, and other practices of Indigenous self-governance not mentioned that support these autonomous communities. These set the Zapatistas' resistance to neoliberalism apart from traditional tactics of armed struggle and public mobilization that social movements during this time saw.

Conclusion

While the neoliberal project in Mexico aimed to pursue a liberal economy, embrace free trade, and open markets, the transition to this economic model came at the expense of peasant farmers in rural regions. The social impact of this process is particularly notable with a polarized income distribution, falling wages, increased precarity of the labour market, rising inequality, and extreme violence overtaking the region. The Indigenous peasants of Chiapas, Mexico suffered particularly under neoliberalism, sparking them to take action and resist. Through asserting *de facto* autonomy, the Zapatistas were able to protect their cultural practice and way of life and reject the rigid mandates of neoliberal reform. This active practice of decoloniality not only resists neoliberalism and the oppressive structures and institutions that derive from it, but also shapes the discourse surrounding Indigenous resistance at the grassroots level. Chiapas and the Zapatistas can serve as a model for other Indigenous groups seeking to reclaim their dignity from under the boot of neoliberal development, which is critical to the pursuit of agency and sovereignty under colonialism.

Notes

1. Adam David Morton (2007), "Global Capitalism and the Peasantry in Mexico: The Recomposition of Class Struggle," *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 34 (3-4): 444.
2. Arturo Escobar (2004), "Development, Violence and the New Imperial Order," *Development* 47 (1): 16.
3. Ibid.
4. Emily Acevedo and Atsuko Sato (2016), "Why Collective Action? Explaining the Rise of Social Movements," in *Doing Comparative Politics: An Introduction to Approaches and Issues*, (Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers Inc.), 283.
5. Diane E. Davis (1999), "The Power of Distance: Re-Theorizing Social Movements in Latin America," *Theory and Society* 28 (4): 585.
6. Davis, "The Power of Distance: Re-Theorizing Social Movements in Latin America," 601-602.
7. M. Stewart-Harawira (2021), "Colonialism's miasmas: Indigenous resistance and resilience" in *The Essential Guide to Critical Development Studies*, (Milton: Taylor & Francis Group), 362.
8. Stewart-Harawira 2021, "Colonialism's miasmas: Indigenous resistance and resilience," 359.
9. Asa Cristina Laurell (2015), "Three Decades of Neoliberalism in Mexico: The Destruction of Society," *International Journal of Health Services* 45 (2): 250.
10. Laurell, "Three Decades of Neoliberalism in Mexico," 248.
11. Ibid., 250.
12. Ibid., 253.
13. Ibid., 254.
14. Daniel Patten (2022), "Crimes Against Agriculture: NAFTA as State Crime in Mexico," *State Crime* 11 (2): 261.
15. Patten, "Crimes Against Agriculture: NAFTA as State Crime in Mexico," 257.
16. Ibid., 262.
17. Ibid.
18. Pete Brown (1997), "Institutions, Inequalities, and the Impact of Agrarian Reform on Rural Mexican Communities," *Human Organization* 56 (1): 102.
19. Brown, "Institutions, Inequalities, and the Impact of Agrarian Reform on Rural Mexican Communities," 103.
20. Patten, "Crimes Against Agriculture: NAFTA as State Crime in Mexico," 262.
21. Ibid., 263.
22. James Petras, and Henry Veltmeyer (2007), "The 'Development State' in Latin America: Whose Development, Whose State?" *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 34 (3-4): 393.
23. Richard Stahler-Sholk (2021), "Resistance at the Borders of power: reflections on the Zapatista and Palestinian Experiences," *Humanity and Society* 45 (4): 577.
24. Patten, "Crimes Against Agriculture: NAFTA as State Crime in Mexico," 262.
25. Laurell, "Three Decades of Neoliberalism in Mexico," 248.
26. Richard Stahler-Sholk (2007), "Resisting Neoliberal Homogenization: The Zapatista Autonomy Movement," *Latin American Perspectives* 34 (2): 50.
27. Petras and Veltmeyer (2007), "The 'Development State' in Latin America," 374.
28. Mariana Mora (2015), "The Politics of Justice: Zapatista Autonomy at the Margins of the Neoliberal Mexican State," *Latin American and Caribbean Ethnic Studies* 10 (1): 88.
29. Stahler-Sholk, "Resistance at the Borders of power," 582-583.
30. Ibid., 580.
31. Ibid., 585.
32. Mora, "The Politics of Justice," 88.
33. Ibid., 584.
34. Ibid., 585.
35. Mora, "The Politics of Justice," 99.
36. Ibid., 103.
37. Ibid., 87.