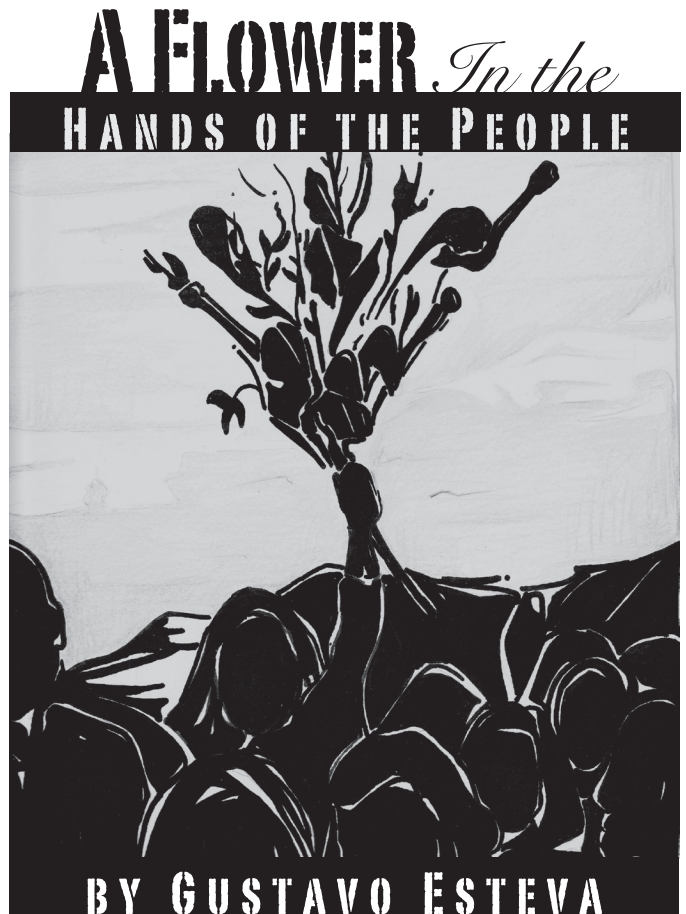




# Z A P

## ZAPATISTA AUTONOMY PROJECT



“Autonomy,” said Don Gregorio, an old Yaqui Indian, “is not something we ought to ask for or that anyone can give us. It is something we have, despite everything. Its other name is dignity.”

We are practicing autonomy more than ever in our communities. While its momentum comes from the past, it acquired new vitality and meaning with the uprising of the indigenous Zapatista rebels in 1994 when they asserted their right to dignity, humanity, life, democracy. Now it has spread everywhere.

We reclaim our own definitions of “the good life,” which we had conceded to the market and the state when the myth of development captured people’s imagination.

Capital’s appetite is larger than ever, but it lacks the stomach to digest us all. The fatal swell of global forces now scratches from the payroll the few “marginal” people who had managed to put themselves on it, and slams shut the doors of the global market to their products. We are now expendable. This growing irrelevance creates a lot of discomfort but it also creates opportunities. We don’t get harassed so much. ►

We can better resist the logic of capital and consumer society in which whoever is not a prisoner of addiction is a prisoner of envy. Greater self-sufficiency and direct bartering will allow us to keep the economy from being the center of our lives. We “marginal” people are placing the economy on our own margins.

### **Ruling by obeying**

Autonomy also includes our own way of regulating community life. In Mazateco the word for person, *shu*, means “a walking flower.” The *shu-tashá* —“a walking flower in the hands of the people” is the supreme authority for the Mazatecos, one of the many indigenous peoples of Oaxaca, the state in southern Mexico where I live. No-one would dare to challenge it. This authority deals with marital problems and conflicts between communities. It has no power of the kind exercised by officials or rich people, rather only the authority bestowed by the community. It rules by obeying, as the Zapatistas put it, in search of the common good rooted in harmony.

2 In thousands of indigenous communities, whoever commits a transgression needs comfort, not punishment. The point is to compensate the victim and re-establish harmony. Whoever kills someone must support the family of the victim for the rest of their life. There are no lawyers, judges or prisoners. The killer is free. To flee from their grave responsibility would be worse than death or jail.

One of our best traditions is how we change tradition in a traditional way. Each generation inherits the customs that govern our community life, but each changes them autonomously, adapting them to the times and learning from others. By refusing to break with the past to escape to the future as the “moderns” would have it we maintain our historical continuity.

Even those who built the poor barrios in big cities managed to keep intact the social fabric woven by the community spirit brought from the countryside. They have not allowed the rampant individualism that surrounds them to defeat them entirely.

In 1994, the Zapatistas’ cry “Enough is enough!” was an instant inspiration, their dignity contagious. Millions of us started moving, linked in broad coalitions of the discontented. They did not offer new promises,

man-eating idol, the future. Innumerable initiatives and processes that no-one can control produce “society at large” or “the world at large,” the “global order” dreamed up by conventional or alternative globalizers. It seems to us to be as insane as it is ridiculous to propose that some ideological or doctrinaire vision of that “at large” should be a pre-requisite for us to get moving, that every political initiative must define beforehand its final goal or the abstract future condition of the world. Those who live with their feet on the ground don’t hang themselves with abstract “at larges” or final finalities. More likely, they see in the distance a brilliant, diffuse and unreachable rainbow. The regime that will succeed the nation-state will not be the fruit of preconception or social engineering, but of sociological and political imagination wielded through transformative actions.

As the Zapatistas say, to change the world is very difficult, if not impossible. But we can build a new world, a world in which many worlds will be embraced. It’s not another unrealizable utopia or a new universal doctrine. It is a feasible way forward that rests on hope and common sense, the sense that we have in community. That’s what we are doing. Here and in many parts of the world.

7 Morelia is one of the Zapatista communities battered most severely by military and paramilitary forces. The restrictions the people of Morelia face are overwhelming. One night I asked *Doña* Trinidad, a lucid and vigorous old woman, how they could survive under such insufferable conditions. She told me with the bare hint of a smile, “Look, they kill more than before. But now we have hope. That changes everything. What was truly insufferable was living without that.”

I was left speechless. But inspired. ■

the market. To accelerate the transition we'll promote "shadow laws" that protect our autonomies from state or market intrusions and slowly reduce the political centre to nothing but administrative functions.

Instead of losing our roots, as globalization encourages, we have opened up to broad coalitions of the discontented across national borders, while always asserting ourselves in our own places. That's how we have moved from resistance to liberation.

We find it comforting to find a similar spirit in other places. The Congress of Ecuarrunari, the largest organization in the indigenous peoples' network CONAIE, broke off its alliance with the Ecuadorian Government and demanded that the members of the Pachakutik movement who held public office resign from the leadership of the movement. Humberto Cholango, Ecuarrunari's new president, pointed out: "We have always been autonomous from all governments, and of course from the current one that has swindled the people by imposing neoliberal policies... The principles of the indigenous movement are more important than any post of minister or undersecretary, and that fact can't be revoked."

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At the Latin American conference on "Indigenous Movements: Resistance and Alternatives" held in Mexico City at the end of May 2003, the participants repeated this message over and over again: "On the road to self-determination," said the Mapuche, José Naín, "we do not wish to be inside the state, rather we wish to surround the state." The indigenous movement, underlined the Aymara, Felipe Quispe, must have two arms: one framed within the state and the other outside it. "They say that democracy is not perfect but it is the best system," commented Félix Patzi from Bolivia. "We say that the communal system isn't perfect either, but it is better than democracy... In the communal system political leadership, the administration of justice and decision-making do not lie within an individual or a group, rather in the collectivity. The vested authority is an expression of community decision-making. The system is based on truth, trust and commitment. What is said is what is done."

### **Against doctrine**

As we walk along our way, we keep in mind the fact that even the most valiant and enlightened initiatives of the past crashed and sank by giving in to that hu-

doctrines or ideologies. Only hope. And hope is the essence of popular movements. If we don't use it to fuel our political potential, that potential will be stifled by fear or paralysis. Our common "no," which unites all of us who do not want something, is open to multiple "yeses" which reflect our plurality. Instead of the abstract and manipulative doctrines, the "yeses" of functionaries and political parties, we affirmed those that flow from our differentiated autonomy.

The Zapatistas' cry of "Enough" directed at the new forms of colonization and militarism affirmed what we are and helped us hold off the invading insanity. That's how we blocked a McDonald's in the historic centre of Oaxaca, the extension of the Mexico City airport, the shrimp farms in Tonameca or Unión Hidalgo...

Step by step we undermine and block projects or policies that threaten us. On 31 January 2003 in Mexico City, "The Countryside Can't Face Any More" held the most important peasant demonstration in decades. A movement built from the grassroots brought together hundreds of organizations and obliged the Government to begin to review all aspects of policy that affects rural areas, including the hare-brained opening of the agricultural market under the North American Free Trade Agreement.

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Nobody would attribute the dismantling of the authoritarian regime the PRI ruling party we suffered under for 70 years solely to the Zapatistas, but they were a decisive factor. They changed the political correlation of forces. The insurrection of civil society in support of the Zapatistas but in favor of a peaceful resolution stopped the armed confrontation and made them champions of nonviolence. In the month following the uprising, the political opposition wrung more concessions from the oppressive regime than they had in the previous 50 years. Thus began the political transition we are in the midst of, still inspired by Zapatista initiatives.

### **We walk at a slower pace**

The old regime is dead but another has not taken its place. The political classes would like to reduce the transition to the simple transfer of state power from one political party to another and the improvement of the representative system, in order to consolidate a "neoliberal republic" tied like a caboose to the

US engine. Meanwhile we are rebuilding everything from below. Against the spirit of old-style vanguards, we walk at a slower pace. What counts isn't to arrive sooner or first, but to arrive all together and on time. What they call "democracy" can only be where the people are. Instead of representation, we want presentation, presence. And that can only exist in political bodies where we can all take part, in our own communities.

Political activists and market boosters take turns trying to co-opt us. They pressure us to participate in broader political initiatives, in elections, in struggles to occupy the seats of power, or at least to have a piece of them. They recognize the value of what we do, but say that we won't get anywhere this way. They consider our struggle to be sterile and they warn us that we'll just keep wearing ourselves down under police repression and mercantile colonization, until global forces wipe us from the map or turn us into their servants...

4 Some within our own ranks share that concern. They observe that in our own communities we might win, but on the outside we lose battles as threats and repression escalate, while the schools and the media conquer the hearts of our young people. These people form political groupings, accept positions in the Government or candidacies in the parties both conceded in order to seduce us and they hector us to take part in elections. (Our absence could be dangerous, they say; they see the risk of the triumph of the despotic and the far-Right.) Others seek to complement the representative regime with popular initiative, referendum and recall (usually called direct democracy), to make government more participatory.

We don't close our ears to those voices, but we continue learning from experience. Every time some of our people win political office, even as the result of a collective struggle, they get lost in the logic of the governmental and party system. We don't understand the obsession with political office which is accentuated among our friends on the Left, who are still convinced that if they win office it will help the common good. Thanks to the challenge posed by the Zapatistas in Chiapas, in the neighboring state of Oaxaca we won legal recognition for our political autonomy in 1995 and 1998. Since then, graffiti appears regularly

in our towns: "No political parties allowed, least of all the PRI." Parties split us, they dissolve our communal bonds our way of living in community they divide us and subordinate us to forces beyond our control.

In Mexico we have had a reasonably effective formal democracy for only a few years. But here, as in the countries that have been working on this for many years, what they call democracy is a regime in which a minority reproduces itself in order to control and dominate everyone else. A minority of the people decide which party will take office and a tiny minority write the laws and make all the important decisions.

### Surrounding the state

The nation-state is a conglomerate of economic and professional corporations. Each one promotes its products and services and takes care of its own interests. Periodically, the parties bring together all the stockholders businesspeople, union leaders, professional associations, churches, corporations to elect a board. Democratic process is conspicuously absent inside the parties. Electoral victories are determined by marketing techniques in a media circus. Once legitimized by the vote, the winners barely take note of people's opinions. That's what leads to disenchantment with the ballot box, which attracts fewer and fewer voters.

We follow with interest the debate on the supposed death of the nation-state, whose central function to administer the economy is evaporating as all economies lose their national character. Macro-national or "global" structures imitate the design of the nation-state to compensate for its progressive weakening. We are concerned that this process tends to encourage the use of force, while uncertainty and disorder deepen. But that won't turn us from our path, which does not lead to reforms that prolong the agony of those outdated structures of domination and control.

We don't live on Mars. The newly elected, Left-wing presidents of Brazil and Ecuador, Lula and Gutiérrez, are not the same as George Bush or Mexico's Vincent Fox. The transition we are in is still happening within the framework of the nation-state and the globalized economy. Like the Zapatistas, however, we trust in the exercise of our autonomy and our coalitions. Thus we will build a political force not a political party capable of blocking policies and actions of the state or