Title: Food Sovereignty and the Politics of Indigenous Resistance in Chiapas, Mexico

Abstract: This paper examines how agricultural production is implicated in the politics of indigenous autonomy in Chiapas, Mexico. In the past decade the Zapatista-aligned communities of Chiapas have articulated new forms of autonomy, sovereignty and food production systems through practices that diverge from the neoliberal model. Through efforts to strengthen subsistence food production, and produce for global fair trade markets, Zapatista-aligned communities are seeking to renegotiate a fundamental dimension of their marginalization within Mexican territory. Existing analyses of Zapatista autonomy tend to focus on the movement’s national and global indigenous rights agenda or their critique of neoliberalism as a political economic system. Few examine in-depth how indigenous families and communities in resistance enact autonomy and food sovereignty on a day-to-day basis. Drawing on conversations with Zapatista agroecology promoters from preliminary fieldwork conducted in 2010, this paper expands on these more theoretical observations to discuss how food production practices that have been enacted in resistance communities both ameliorate inequities associated with unequal access to resources and shape new narratives of indigenous autonomy and food sovereignty. This research has implications not just for understanding what is going on in Chiapas; it shows the importance of incorporating the agriculture and food production strategies of marginalized communities into broader conceptions of sovereignty and autonomy as well as Latin American Studies.

Keywords: autonomy, food sovereignty, fair trade, coffee, indigenous peoples, Zapatistas
Food Sovereignty and the Politics of Indigenous Resistance in Chiapas, Mexico

Recent violence and riots in response to global food shortages and price increases demonstrate that food production-consumption systems are in crisis (Brown 2011). From Egypt to Mexico, post-2007 violence protesting rising food prices and food scarcity has exposed long-standing problems with the capitalist industrialization of agriculture and food production, which has left over one-billion people hungry (Holt-Giménez 2009; Essex 2012; Rosset 2009a; Rosset 2009b). As Akram-Lodhi and Kay have argued, the 2008 food crisis highlighted the ‘dominance of capital’ over global agricultural systems and the disproportionate impact this has had on peasant producers; “…in a world of ‘stuffed and starved’ (Patel 2007) three-quarters of the world’s poorest people live in the countryside and face a systemic livelihoods crisis” (2010a:178). On a global scale industrial-capitalist agricultural production systems come into conflict with peasant production systems generating (and displacing) such crises. In the wake of these crises there have been increasing demands from rural (and urban) areas for food sovereignty.

Yet this plays out differently in the highlands of Chiapas, where peasant farmers are producing for subsistence and for the fair trade marketplace. In agreement with strategies adopted by petty commodity producers worldwide (Akram-Lodhi and Kay 2010a; 2010b), farmers in the highlands have undertaken coffee production to generate cash income for the purchase of goods they cannot produce themselves and to access the marketplace in food insecure times; yet such practices cannot be viewed simply as responses to the vagaries of the neoliberal market or attempts to gain food sovereignty. Both the maintenance of subsistence production and the harnessing of the fair trade market are critical components of a political strategy to enact autonomy in self-declared ‘communities in resistance.’

This paper is based on preliminary work and will explore how agricultural practices in these communities in resistance are implicated in the enactment—creation, maintenance and practice—of autonomy. The first section of this paper gives an overview of the case study. The second section, broken into two parts, examines food sovereignty and fair trade as they are positioned as alternatives to the industrial-capitalist agricultural model. The final section provides an initial analysis of how the narratives of social movements interact on the ground through everyday agricultural practices, including fair trade coffee production, agroecological practices and subsistence production, and poses further questions for this ongoing research.

Background

Communities in resistance in the highlands of Chiapas, Mexico are part of the Zapatista movement, which, over the last fifteen years has promoted a political agenda based on the right to land and resources (among other fundamental human rights) and autonomy from the Mexican state. The Zapatistas are an indigenous social movement that began to foment in the early 1980s in response to the simultaneous lack of recognition and oppression by the Mexican government. Crucial to their mobilization has been a sustained critique of capitalism (Stahler-Sholk 2007); and timed to coincide with the official commencement of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) on January 1, 1994, the movement was made publically known through an armed uprising.¹ Although the armed insurgency lasted only twelve days, the rebellion remains, and the demand for indigenous rights to land, work, housing, nutrition, health, education, liberty, democracy, peace and justice are still being pursued by the movement. These demands are based in reversing the ‘500 years of oppression’ (EZLN 1993) of the indigenous peoples of the
Americas and are consistent with other indigenous movements for self-determination throughout the region.

The heart of the Zapatista movement is in Chiapas, the southernmost state in Mexico (see Figure 1). Chiapas is one of the poorest states in Mexico, with the highest rates of malnutrition, illiteracy and child mortality in the country; moreover, it has the highest population of indigenous peoples of any state in Mexico with roughly half of the population of Chiapas identifying as indigenous (Collier and Quaratiello 2005). The Zapatistas and their supporters populate eastern Chiapas, an area that Collier and Quaratiello have argued has “exemplified the marginalization of the poorest peasants in contemporary Mexico—it is a region completely cut off from government services, political power, and economic opportunity. Without roads, cities, or even small towns, eastern Chiapas was a kind of dumping ground for the marginalized…” (ibid:11). This observation, true in the first edition of Collier and Quaratiello’s book (1994), is still important when examining the region today. However, the uprising opened up a space for the marginalized of Chiapas to enter into dialogue with the government on indigenous rights and autonomy (Fox et al. 1999).

The struggle for self-determination in indigenous communities in Mexico is longstanding (ibid), however, the Zapatista uprising punctuated—and made public—the need to reevaluate the political economy of indigenous peasant relations to the state. In the months following the uprising, the San Andrés Peace Accords on Indigenous Rights and Culture (signed in 1996) were negotiated by Zapatista representatives with the government of Mexico. This agreement recognized the indigenous governance system of usos y costumbres and signaled state support for autonomy at the community scale (Stahler-Sholk 2007). While already put in practice in communities supportive of the Zapatistas (the original autonomous Aguascalientes, established in late 1994), the implementation of state legislation was significantly delayed in the Mexican Congress. In 2001, following the meetings of a multi-party Congressional Commission of Concord and Pacification (COCOPA), a rewritten version of the San Andrés Accords was signed into law, which removed many of the most fundamental components of indigenous rights and self-determination that had been agreed upon in 1996 (Stahler-Sholk 2005; Van der Haar 2004).

In 2003, combined with an unwillingness to accept the weakened provisions of the new indigenous law, and a prolonged state-sponsored counter-insurgency, the Zapatistas proposed new autonomous areas in the form of five administrative units called Caracoles² (Stahler-Sholk 2005). The Caracoles created a more formal division between the civil and military arms of the movement and alongside them were established the juntas de buen gobierno (good government councils, to challenge the ‘bad government,’ as the Mexican and Chiapas state governments are referred to by the movement) (Van der Haar 2004). In addition to creating a civilian governance structure, the establishment of the juntas allowed for more structured engagement with civil
society and other external networks, as well as maintaining relationships (and offering services, such as education, dispute resolution and healthcare) with non-Zapatista supporters residing in the autonomous areas (ibid).

A key component of autonomous governance in the past decade has been a denial of state government assistance and a refusal to comply with state-led land privatization programs (Stahler-Sholk 2007). This is significant because the maintenance of autonomy in these areas is very much linked to the ability to maintain land and produce food. As a result of this, indigenous peasants aligned with the movement have established other strategies. As recognized by Stahler-Sholk, the formation of autonomy in Zapatista communities “defies easy classification” (2007:54) as each heterogeneous community is encouraged to develop and maintain its own methods of democratic governance as well as networks and connections. Crucial to the Zapatista struggle for autonomy has been the connection with other social movements and transnational networks, especially the long-standing food sovereignty movement of La Vía Campesina and the continuously evolving fair trade movement.3

The next sections of this paper will draw out these connections as they relate to the Zapatista project of autonomy in the highland areas of eastern Chiapas. Critical to understanding how this political agenda is mobilized by supporters of the movement is an examination of the agricultural practices associated with establishing a resource base that allows for the continuous enactment of autonomy in Zapatista-aligned communities. This paper draws from preliminary research conducted in 2010 in Zapatista-aligned communities in the highlands of Chiapas to form concrete questions about how agricultural production practices shape narratives of indigenous autonomy and ameliorate inequities associated with unequal access to resources. Fundamental to this understanding is an examination of day-to-day practices of farmers affiliated with the movement, thus shifting the focus from the macro-scale of the movement to the micro-scale of daily practice.

**Food Sovereignty**

Responses to the current food production/consumption crisis have come from above and below, worked within the neoliberal marketplace and against it and, in some cases sought the wholesale disruption of the ‘capitalistization’ (Born and Purcell 2006) of agriculture. In many cases, such responses have been posited as alternatives, which can ameliorate pervasive issues of hunger (and obesity), environmental degradation and uneven economic development. The food sovereignty movement, which seeks greater producer/consumer control over food systems, is one response that has garnered a significant amount of attention and support. Conceptualized in 1996, by the transnational agrarian movement La Vía Campesina, the term food sovereignty has gained traction in peasant communities and social movements worldwide (Martinez-Torres and Rosset 2010). Food sovereignty is promoted as an alternative to neoliberalism, a model, which has, for decades, supported economic policies based in industrial, capital-intensive and corporatized agriculture and trade (Wittman et al. 2010).

The term “food sovereignty” was coined to recognize the political and economic power dimension inherent in the food and agriculture debate and to take a pro-active stance by naming it. Food sovereignty, broadly defined as the right of nations and peoples to control their own food systems, including their own markets, production modes, food cultures and environments, has emerged as a critical alternative to the dominant neoliberal model for agriculture and trade (ibid:2).
Although this definition is potentially problematic (see: Patel 2009), it serves as a basis for understanding not only how food is accessed, but also where it is produced and who is producing it (Rosset 2009b). This is an important departure from previous discourses of the “right to food” and “food security,” which emerged in post-war and neoliberal political economic contexts (Fairbairn 2010). The right to food was a part of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), was rooted in the economic development project of the post-war period, and was largely based on citizenship and enforcement by the state (Shafir 2004 in ibid). Not surprisingly, the shift to the discourse of food security in the 1970s and 1980s was based in individual decision-making within the marketplace (ibid). The concept of food sovereignty is intended to go beyond both the right to food and food security through seeing food as not simply a commodity available on the market, but as a critical locus of social connections of production and consumption (Handy 2007).

Food sovereignty proponents have focused much attention at explaining the pitfalls of neoliberal agriculture and positing food sovereignty as the alternative (see for example: Holt-Giménez 2009; Rosset 2009b; Wittman et al. 2010). And food sovereignty narratives have been readily applied by scholars (see for example: Altieri 2009; Ayres and Bosia 2011; Boyer 2010; McMichael 2010; Mousseau and Mital 2006; Schanbacher 2010; Wittman 2009) and adopted by states. Between 1999 and 2009, Bolivia, Ecuador, Mali, Nepal, Senegal and Venezuela passed legislation signing food sovereignty into law, signaling recognition that food is ‘of strategic importance to the state’ (Wittman et al. 2010:8-9). Indeed, Rosset (2009b) has argued that food sovereignty is a critical component of state sovereignty and national security. Despite this, there is no clear indication of how these newly adopted laws will be implemented. Although some scholars have argued that there is “no blueprint, no single political strategy” (Desmarais et al. 2011:21), after fifteen years of promoting and attempting to enact food sovereignty, how it is practiced on a daily basis remains less understood. What is clear is that food sovereignty is articulated as a framework that has been developed ‘from below,’ whereby the most marginalized (yet persistent) population, peasant farmers, are petitioning the state for their “right to have rights” (Patel 2009, drawing from Arendt (1967):668). This practice is bound up in state citizenship and the implementation, guarantee and enforcement of rights within a sovereign territory governed by the state (Patel 2009).4

Zapatista-aligned communities in resistance are an exceptional location in which the narratives embodied by food sovereignty play out, as the Zapatistas—unlike their policy-focused contemporaries within the food sovereignty movement—are not petitioning the state for their right to food and food production systems, they are attempting to bypass the state to create their own systems. Yet simultaneously, some communities are linking into transnational networks, such as fair trade, potentially complicating their larger political agenda against neoliberal capitalism. Although this turn to the marketplace represents somewhat of a departure from the broader Zapatista anti-neoliberal agenda, it allows the members of the movement an important opportunity to access cash for the purchase of items that cannot be produced at home (e.g.: medicines, soap, salt) and an opportunity to bypass the state and make their struggle visible on the international marketplace (Collier and Quaratiello 2005; Naylor 2011a).

**Fair Trade**

Despite the insistence that the peasantry would disappear as capitalist agriculture became the predominant mode of production (see: Kautsky 1899[1988]), scholars have continued to work with peasant communities to understand the impacts of neoliberal agriculture systems as
they relate to rights, and issues of access and allocation of resources. A rich body of literature shows, not only has the peasantry persisted (see for example: Edelman 1999; McMichael 1997; 2006; 2008; Van der Ploeg; 2010), but communities of subsistence producers have established creative, local and transnational alternatives to the neoliberal market (Martinez-Torres and Rosset 2010; Van der Ploeg 2010). Peasant livelihood strategies are diverse and encompass interaction with the formal/informal, capitalist/non-capitalist, subsistence/commodity and so on. One strategy has been to engage alternative marketplaces, such as the fair trade market. Selling commodities through the fair trade marketplace represents one key strategy for supporting socially and ecologically just agricultural production and gaining cash income in peasant communities. The fair trade movement represents an effort to create alternative South-North trading relationships that are intended to improve producers’ earnings, empower marginalized communities, and promote ecologically sustainable production systems (Nicholls and Opal 2005; Raynolds 2002). Developed and deployed by organizations in the global north, fair trade was designed with the aim of redistributing wealth in a more equitable way than ‘free trade.’ Very basically, fair trade reduces the number of steps in the producer-consumer commodity chain and uses a system of certification and price floors to reduce small-scale producers’ susceptibility to commodity price shocks. As originally conceptualized, fair trade was posited as a challenge and in some cases a direct alternative to the neoliberal marketplace (Nicholls and Opal 2005).

By some measures fair trade has been successful. However, the measurement of this success is generally couched in neoliberal standards, such as market share (Jaffee and Howard 2010). As a small-scale movement begun in the 1980s to create an alternative to neoliberal producer-consumer relations fair trade purchases have increased at a 40% annual growth rate (FLO 2007 in ibid:392), capturing an increasing market share since its inception. Through the incorporation of more products as well as the mainstreaming and standardization of production and distribution practices, fairly trade products have been absorbed into the very market they were originally intended to challenge (Fisher 2009). Long hailed as a panacea for small-producers, recently the ‘fairness’ of fair trade has been questioned (Bacon 2010b; Jaffee 2007). Although fair trade has been consistently framed as an alternative that works ‘within and against the market’ (see for example: Fridell 2006; Levi and Linton 2003; Nicholls and Opal 2005; Raynolds 2000), the ‘scaling up’ and mainstreaming of the fair trade market to reach larger sellers, and through them increasing numbers of consumers (and from the perspective of the certifiers, thereby increasing the number of farmers benefiting from fair trade pricing and regulation), has not been without its complications. Jaffee and Howard have argued that rather than read the fair trade movement as an unequivocal success, it can also be seen as:

…[the] partial capture of the alternative by large commercial participants who have engaged with it at only token levels, the weakening of standards by those market forces, the distancing of key governance bodies from the producers they ostensibly serve, and the dilution of the movement’s transformative power and its relational character (2010:391).

This is demonstrated in the increasing number of products receiving fair trade certification (e.g.: bananas, tea, cut-flowers, honey) (Goigoi 2007 in ibid) and the ongoing debates regarding the limit of benefits to small-scale producers. In the past five years, these debates have played out in both policy and academic realms.

Within these debates there is a body of literature focused on the relative merit of fair trade certification as an income generating tool in rural areas (see for example: Bacon et al. 2008; Barham et al, 2011; Jaffee 2007; Lyon 2007; Torgerson 2009). A major focal point of this
research has been on fairly traded coffee. Coffee makes up the largest share of fairly-traded products world-wide (Jaffee and Howard 2010) and the sale of coffee within the fair trade marketplace is intended to put a larger share of the coffee dollar in the hands of these producers. For producers, the decision to grow and sell coffee is a long-term and risky one, as the maturation time for coffee plants differs substantially from edible crops and they take up space that could otherwise be devoted exclusively to food production. Yet, as noted above, the sale of coffee has been an important income earning activity for subsistence producers, creating access to a cash economy for the purchase of items that cannot be produced in the community. However, dramatic changes in certification systems and the weakening of standards in the U.S. (as discussed by Jaffee and Howard 2010) has prompted small-scale coffee roasters to proclaim that “fair trade is dead” (Earley 2012). While studies have shown that fair trade coffee producers are slightly better-off than their conventional counter-parts (Jaffee 2007; Raynolds et al. 2007; Sick 2008), certification requirements bring a greater burden to fair trade producers, which is a trade-off (Jaffee 2007; Smith 2007).

Analyses of fair trade coffee production have focused on access and benefits accrued by small-producers (see for example: Bacon 2010a; 2010b, Jaffee 2007; Lyon 2007; Martinez-Torres 2002; Raynolds et al. 2004). This literature has contributed to understandings of how fair trade impacts coffee producing communities, yet it is uncommon for such studies to discuss how fair trade interacts with other social movements, such as food sovereignty or the Zapatista movement. Indeed, Collier and Quaratiello have charged researchers with assessing issues of social and economic equity in the use of such transnational networks by supporters of the Zapatista movement (2005:204). Examining the intersection of these movements on the ground is crucial because the agendas of each, while seemingly accommodating, are actually in conflict in day-to-day practice in these communities. While the shade production coffee systems are able to provide some subsistence products (tree fruits for example), there is a trade-off between the production of edible versus non-edible crops, as the major staple in coffee-producing communities is corn, which cannot be grown in shade conditions. Furthermore, as noted above, their interaction with fair trade represents an inconsistency in the anti-neoliberal agenda of the Zapatista movement. At the community level households are negotiating these contradictions on a daily basis.

Everyday Autonomies – preliminary research

At the outset of this paper, I drew attention to the global food crisis to highlight macro-scale understandings of the failings of industrial-capitalist agriculture and to make a space for discussing food sovereignty and fair trade as they are positioned as alternatives. This is a useful starting point for a discussion of the use of these macro-scale narratives are implicated in everyday practice. However, as presented, there is a danger in creating strict binaries—capitalist agriculture/non-capitalist agriculture, informal/formal, subsistence/commodity, and so on. Indeed on the surface, what is happening in autonomous indigenous peasant communities in the highlands of Chiapas may appear to fall neatly in such binaries, however, upon further scrutiny, the production of food for subsistence and coffee for cash forms a dialectical relationship that is far more complicated.

At this point in the debate over the existence of the peasantry under capitalism, we can most assuredly state that despite the dynamics of global capital, peasants are still pursuing rural livelihoods worldwide (Akram-Lodhi and Kay 2010a; Patel 2007; Van der Ploeg 2008; Wittman et al. 2010). Importantly though, Akram-Lodhi and Kay (2010a) have demonstrated that research
with the peasantry cannot be based in the approaches of the past half-century, which are firmly constructed around examinations of access to land. Their argument stems from the recognition that couched in a global food crisis and the vagaries of the neoliberal marketplace, rural livelihoods cannot be solely based on farming. As a result, it is essential to examine the social relations and networks of subsistence and petty commodity producers. I would argue that rather than subsuming small-scale farmers (or relegating them to solely non-capitalist production), capital has created diverse economies of subsistence in the rural areas of the world, creating networks and relations within and outside rural communities that extend beyond accessing land, selling labor and/or facilitating trade. In a macro-scale analysis surveying the agrarian question Akram-Lodhi and Kay (2010a; 2010b) suggest that neoliberal agricultural production on a global scale has reframed (and in essence subsumed) peasant production strategies in the capitalist marketplace (whether for export or domestic markets). Given this examination, it would be easy to conclude that peasants are indeed beholden to capital and household decision-making and rural agrarian change is wholly based in responses to the capitalist market. However, such a conclusion neglects alternate conceptualizations that move away from the binary of capitalist/non-capitalist; furthermore, it positions capital as the locus, closing out alternate explanations for diverse peasant livelihood strategies.

It is this last point that I wish to turn to here. As discussed in earlier parts of this paper, the political agenda of the Zapatistas is highly critical of neoliberalism, yet supporters of the movement are taping into the neoliberal marketplace at the same time. To understand this contradiction, it is important to step outside the macro-scale analysis that places the social movement as a generalizable entity positioned against the neoliberal marketplace and ‘decenter the movement’ (Nelson 2003). In working with and analyzing ‘new’ social movements, there has been a tendency to romanticize the struggle (Edelman 1996) eliding the important political and economic tensions present in the practice of resistance as well as the “zones of awkward engagement” (Tsing 2005:xi) that belie binary construction of peasant livelihoods. There are a number of political agendas and narratives present in communities in resistance and these are bound up not only in the macro-scale of the movement but in the everyday practices of supporters of the movement.

In the Zapatista autonomous area of Oventik, located in the highlands adjacent to the city of San Cristóbal da las Casas, the struggle for autonomy is bound up, not only in political maneuvering, discourse and claims to territory, but in agricultural practices. There are three key components to this that I observed during preliminary work with Zapatista agroecology promoters in 2010: 1) the production of shade-grown, organic coffee for the fair trade marketplace; 2) the adoption of agroecological principles in agricultural production; and 3) the maintenance of the traditional milpa (corn, beans and squash). Each of these elements is tied to larger narratives of resistance, food sovereignty, and fair trade, which are global in nature and yet each is a part of daily life and practice, which is fundamental to survival. This observation is an important part of my developing research and I will use the remaining sections of this paper to examine preliminary observations and pose key questions for future analysis.

Harnessing Fair Trade

In 2010, over a six-week fieldwork period I worked with Zapatista agroecology promoters and coffee farmers to better understand how their interaction with the fair trade movement fit into their struggle against the neoliberal marketplace. As discussed above, the interaction with the fair trade marketplace is just one of many income-earning strategies that are
undertaken by farmers who are working to maintain a rural livelihood and through this uphold their connection to the Zapatistas and the project of autonomy. Among these diverse income earning strategies I focus on fair trade coffee production explicitly for two key reasons: 1) it is an agricultural activity which requires already scarce land space; and 2) it is a crucial access point to the international marketplace, which is important for gaining cash income, bypassing domestic markets and for increasing the visibility of the movement. The harnessing of the fair trade marketplace also complicates the politics of the movement as the Zapatistas eschew the neoliberal market, while their supporters work within it.

Coffee-producing cooperatives in the highlands predate the Zapatista movement, however, following the uprising—as early as 1997—cooperatives populated solely by Zapatista supporters (e.g.: Maya Vinic, Mut Vitz, Yachil Xojobal Chu’lchan) emerged both to create cash-flow for coffee-growing communities and transnational solidarity networks. Although this has been important outlet for supporters of the movement for attaining visibility and more stable livelihoods the use of the fair trade marketplace by Zapatista supporters has not been looked at in any depth by scholars. This raises questions regarding who benefits and how recent changes in standards and certification methods have impacted these cooperatives. Government efforts to destabilize the Zapatistas have been directed at the cooperatives as well. In conversations with the former assessor for the Mut Vitz cooperative I learned that the cooperative had been shut down and their equipment confiscated by the Mexican government due to failure to pay taxes. This too demonstrates a complication inherent in cooperative coffee production (versus the sale of coffee beans to coyotes, for example) for the export marketplace, to what degree can the government be bypassed and how? Furthermore, the decision to grow coffee is an important one in communities where land is scarce and the milpa essential (as will be discussed below).

As noted above, fair trade has been viewed by policymakers, NGOs and scholars alike as a solution to the problems experienced by small-scale producers in the neoliberal marketplace. However, in my initial conversations with coffee farmers about fair trade they referred to it as “comercio mas justo” (more fair trade), meaning that it was more fair than free trade. The farmers feel that it is important that everyone receive a fair and consistent price, but argue that fair trade is simply “a window to better money” (Naylor 2011a). Far from providing a market-based solution, fair trade is simply a neoliberal fix that remains mired in unequal structural relations of the marketplace. It is especially important to note that not all coffee sold by the farmers who produce for fair trade cooperatives is sold at the fair trade price. Thus, the sale of coffee beans in the fair trade marketplace is an opportunity to receive a potentially better return on a long-term investment (the planting of coffee), but it cannot be the only strategy for income-earning in these communities. What is more important in this analysis is an understanding of the use of the fair trade marketplace to bypass the domestic market and to create transnational networks for the resistance movement. Thus, questions for further inquiry include: How does linking into the fair trade marketplace impact everyday practices on the ground; and how are day-to-day decisions made with regard to fair trade versus subsistence production? How do these practices contribute (or not) to the autonomy and food sovereignty project of the movement?

**Appropriating Agroecology**

As part of their struggle to resist and create food sovereignty, farmers that are aligned with the Zapatista movement have adopted agroecological methods in the cafetal (shade coffee plot) and the milpa. Agroecology, broadly defined, is a whole-systems approach to agriculture and food systems based on the application of ecological concepts to the creation and

Naylor 9
maintenance of sustainable systems (Altieri 2009). This definition, however, raises questions as to what “whole-systems approaches,” “ecological concepts,” and even “sustainable systems” are (Naylor 2011b). Vandermeer and Perfecto, however, have noted that the term has been widely used to describe systems by what they are not—namely, they argue, “conventional” (2007:173). They imply that an agroecological system is one that does not use agrochemicals, instead “emphasizing techniques like intercropping and agroforestry, agroecology effectively promotes an agriculture that uses the ecological principles known from the natural world as a basis for agricultural planning” (2007:173). Such systems of agroecology have been “appropriated” by Zapatista-aligned communities (Perfecto et al. 2009:129). The agroecological systems that are utilized in these communities are self-defined and based on the interactions that they want to have with the natural environment (and the marketplace). As part of the governance arrangement under the Caracoles there is an agroecological training approach where Zapatista supporters take turns as educators who work with farmers in autonomous communities to create more efficient agricultural systems. The promoters operate under the idea that it is ‘possible to produce without destroying nature.’ To this end, they create a dialogue with farmers and work to employ agroecological practices that are polycultural, which increases biodiversity, makes more efficient use of water, reduces losses from weeds and insects and has overwhelmingly higher outputs than monocultural systems. It is a sustainable approach to farming that allows communities to be more food secure and also to innovate and adapt through interactions with their contemporaries (Altieri and Toledo 2011).

As I have discussed elsewhere (2011b), in interviews with the agroecology promoters working in autonomous communities in Oventik I learned that in the years following the rebellion, during the negotiation of the San Andrés Accords, the farmers were petitioning the Mexican government for access to inputs (including: chemicals, hybrid seeds and petrol based synthetics and machines) so that they could produce corn “the modern way.” After the failure of the San Andrés Accords and through the discussions that came out of the creation of the autonomous Caracoles, farmers began to reject the production systems promoted by the state. In the words of one of the promoters, the farmers determined that their ancestors:

…did not know about chemicals and the land was strong and fertile then, when the government brought in chemicals it killed the fertility of the soil and now the land does not produce. Now we have the promoters and we teach people to use the fertility of the land.

The promoters stressed the importance of native corn species and the diversity of the milpa; each milpa has many varieties of corn, beans and squash, with some producing up to five varieties of corn. One of the largest threats to this diversity is the potential incursion of genetically modified seeds. Due to this imminent threat, promoters encourage and teach seed saving and seed banks have been developed in the communities, so that seeds can be shared. In addition to cultivating diversity and saving seeds, farmers are encouraged to create increasingly sustainable systems. These farmers have always farmed on small plots and maintained a milpa, with the appropriation of agroecology, now too, they are establishing a closed system for their plots (however, it is important to note that agroecological methods are not universal in their use by Zapatista supporters). By enacting food production practices that more closely mimic natural systems and have the supporting structure of the Caracol, farmers have been able to fundamentally change the way they produce and access food.
The change in the level of support and interaction has enabled farmers to be food secure in a way that was not possible prior to the creation of the autonomous Caracoles. Through the movement, these farming communities have incorporated an understanding that the support for subsistence farming comes from a restoration of their land, their native crops and food products, rather than from an industrial-capitalist system. Altieri notes that the productivity and sustainability of these types of small-scale agroecological farming systems, with their emphasis on closed systems, small-scale production and sustainability, “can form the basis of food sovereignty” (2009:104). Zapatista-aligned communities are using agroecological subsistence food production to maintain and assert autonomy, both from the government and from the industrial-capitalist food system. Through developing a new narrative of autonomy that is based on the capacity of the communities to grow food, the movement is attempting to enact food sovereignty. Key questions that remain include: How is food sovereignty mobilized locally and does this enactment by Zapatista supporters align with or elide the larger goals of the food sovereignty movement as articulated by La Vía Campesina and by the Zapatistas? How is agroecology being practiced on a day-to-day basis and how does this impact access to resources?

**Maintaining the Milpa**

In many peasant communities in Mexico corn is not viewed as an effective livelihood strategy, but is instead positioned as an important marker of identity (de Frece and Pool 2008; Fitting 2011). In Elizabeth Fitting’s (2011) work, she has found that the cultivation of *maize* is the purview of an aging population and the children of peasant farmers are portrayed as uninterested in farming or struggling for land and water rights. The *milpa* instead is a marker of Mayan identity. However, in communities aligned with the Zapatista movement the *milpa*, and particularly corn, extends beyond Mayan cultural identity claims, it is the linchpin of autonomy. Education for all generations about the importance of corn and farming is crucial to the maintenance of the movement and communities in resistance. Within this, the three-tiered structure of support (education, healthcare and agroecology) extending from the Zapatista Caracoles is pivotal; a Zapatista health promoter commented to me that the relational aspect of education, health promotion and agroecological production was essential to maintaining a healthy population and creating access to better foods. He further commented that:

…in the war of five hundred years, they attacked our food systems and replaced our education, the education system of the colonizers has caused poor health…people should be eating diverse foods and the food that was grown and consumed by their grandparents and their grandparents before them.

The interconnectedness of health programs, primary and secondary education, and agriculture is a critical component of this. It is an assemblage of knowledge and knowledge production, which allows health promoters to practice preventative healthcare and discuss diets centered on *milpa* production, the younger generations are accessing and generating information about health and agricultural production systems and farmers of all generations are providing food and knowledges.

While the desire and need to maintain the *milpa* in communities in resistance strikes a contrast with contemporary examples of peasant *maize* production in Mexico (and elsewhere, see: Isakson 2009), it is important to note, notwithstanding the support for *milpa* production there are still significant challenges facing these communities with regard to self-sufficient food production—and the inability to be self-sufficient has very different consequences in
communities in resistance. There is already a rich body of literature addressing the successes and pitfalls of the Zapatista movement (see for example: Collier and Quaratiello 2005; Earle and Simonelli 2005; Harvey 1998; Mattiace 2003; Mora 2008; Nash 2001; Ross 2006; Stephen 1997; 2002; Van der Haar 2004; 2005), however, the virtues and faults of what has been characterized as the first ‘postmodern social movement’ (Burbach 1994; Castells 1997) must be characterized in terms of the very real struggle of its adherents. There is nothing to romanticize about food insecurity. Without food, there can be no social movement.

When discussing autonomy with farmers during my fieldwork period, the conversation was always about corn, always about the milpa. Most importantly, our conversations centered on the very real difficulties that families face in being able to sustain themselves year round. There were three main issues that consistently came up in conversations with farmers. The first issue focused on the desire of farmers to not have purchase corn from outside the community; the second was pest problems (and related to this, climate change and the potential incursion of genetically modified corn); and finally, farmers were concerned about the trade-offs of time as it related to their official Zapatista duties.

In the highlands of Chiapas there is only one corn harvest per year and the food that is harvested must last until the next harvest. The ability to be self-sufficient in agricultural production is a key component of both resisting the negative impacts of NAFTA and maintaining a degree of autonomy from the marketplace. When discussing how to be self-sufficient, most farmers argued that they needed more land or better land (“there is not enough land,” “the land doesn’t give too much”). Between harvests, families generally needed to purchase corn from the nearest town; a small percentage of the harvest is immediately sold to generate cash to facilitate this. In addition to storage methods for raw corn that are used following the harvest, many will process their corn into tostadas, which can be stored in discarded coffee sacks for up to a year. Without exception, the farmers discussed the need to purchase corn as a problem and as an obstacle to sustaining autonomy. There were competing understandings of why this was detrimental to autonomy and reasons varied from not knowing the origin of the corn seed purchased in the marketplace, and the inability to save their own seeds to weighing their options for cash generation, such as through migration.

One of the major issues discussed as lessening the success of the harvest and minimizing the corn available for consumption (and for planting in the following season) was pests. Pests ranged from insects to small rodents and were viewed as a threat in the field and in storage. Despite the use of agroecological methods farmers still experience pest problems. Problems with insects in the field are attributed to warmer weather/climate change and to super-pests (“stronger bugs”) that, farmers in one community argued, are the result of nearby non-Zapatista farmers’ use of pesticides. This highlights the ever-present recognition that political boundaries, such as autonomous communities, do not contain environmental problems. However, farmers in the communities in the highlands are using their connections through the Caracoles to develop solutions to these issues. The two main projects that are being undertaken on a trial basis in communities in the autonomous area of Oventik are: 1) obtaining Neem leaves, which are grown in Zapatista-aligned communities located in the hot and humid regions of southeastern Chiapas, and using them for preventative pest management in the fields and in storage; and 2) gathering corn seed from warmer climates to test in the highland climate. Again, these strategies are fundamentally based in the ability of farmers to create self-sufficient production of corn.

Finally, in one of the communities I visited, which had acquired a substantial amount of land during the 1994 uprising, farmers argued that they would be self-sufficient in corn

Naylor 12
production if they were able to dedicate more time to working in their *milpa*. This is directly related to their participation in the social movement. A municipal leader explained to me: “Here we have enough land, but we also have a lot of work for the struggle, if we could always be working in the field we could have enough food.” In this instance, the trade-off in time is between their official Zapatista duties (which, as noted above, are linked to civil-religious cargo systems) and their work in the *milpa*. This is also complicated by the fact that unlike other peasant communities in Mexico, (see for example: Fitting 2011; Jaffee 2007) Zapatista-aligned farmers rarely hire laborers to assist in their fields. Supporters of the movement undertake some degree of cargo service during their lifetime (a voluntary service to the communities—“we live off our own sweat”). This service could be a rotation (three-year service) in the *junta de buen gobierno*, a leadership role in the municipal government or a chance to become an education, health or agroecological promoter, for example. In each case, the person performing the cargo is supported (with food, clothing, and housing) by the community. This time divide is an important, yet conflicting component of the movement, whereby the movement strives for autonomy and through its supporters aims to achieve self-sufficiency but by its own devices reduces the capacity of its members to do so.

The *milpa* is a crucial component of daily life, the enactment of autonomy and interaction with the marketplace. As noted above, the ability to grow their own food, successfully store it and thereby reduce their reliance on the marketplace is something that is viewed by farmers as a critical element of their resistance. Yet key questions remain regarding how Zapatista supporters make day-to-day decisions about work in the *milpa*, in the *cafetal* and in the movement. Furthermore, how do farmers and their families understand the practice of subsistence and fair trade production in relation to the autonomy project of the Zapatistas?

**Moving Forward**

It is clear to see, moving forward, that communities in resistance offer a complex dimension of the peasant question that challenge categorization couched in traditional binaries and offer a critical space for further inquiry. Here subsistence meets market production, formal and informal economies mix and alternative capitalisms are tested, each negotiated at multiple scales. At the center of these negotiations are social movement discourses and everyday decision-making fixed on the continuation of the struggle for autonomy and self-determination. Within this, spaces (and places) of agricultural production are absolutely central.

Communities in resistance are important spaces from which the larger-scale political economy of food production-consumption and food sovereignty can be understood. Agricultural production is a critical analytical lens for exploring issues of autonomy, food sovereignty and indigenous rights. At the same time, because food is a fundamental component of survival and daily life, it provides an entry point for understanding how broader social movement discourses are translated and made meaningful in everyday life by a range of actors. Preliminary work in the highlands of Chiapas has been critical to developing questions about how autonomy and agricultural practices (subsistence and fair trade) are mobilized in the context of resistance. Building from these preliminary observations further work is required to understand the relational nature of such practices and how they are imbricated in everyday life.
Work Cited:


Notes:

1 In the period leading up to the signing and passing of NAFTA, changes to the Mexican Constitution (1917) made it so that the land reform initiatives that were hard won during the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920) were removed and land reform was effectively cancelled. The changes allowed for communally held land, called ejidos, to be privatized. This was deemed by the Zapatistas a “death sentence to the indigenous peoples of Mexico” (Collier and Quaratiello 2005). Prior to the 1992 reforms, it was illegal to sell or rent ejido property; peasants had access and rights to land that were transferred through inheritance. The reforms allowed individual plots within ejidos to be titled and privatized and opened these spaces up to both domestic and foreign investment (Goldring, 1998). Under the reform the government’s land titling program, PROCEDE (Programa de Certificación de Derechos Ejidales), allowed peasants to petition the community for individual title to land. With land reform unevenly applied throughout the state of Mexico, peasants in Chiapas, who had been petitioning for land for decades, lost what little opportunity they once had to secure land with the introduction of the 1992 reforms (Washbrook, 2005).

2 Literally translated as snail; the snail shell, for the Zapatistas is meant to symbolize two things—1) slow and steady progress and 2) the inside and outside constantly meeting (Naylor 2011a).

3 It is important to note that, of course, these are not the only connections that are made by the Zapatistas or their supporters. There are many NGO connections (e.g.: Schools for Chiapas) and solidarity movements (e.g.: the Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca (APPO)). However, for the purposes of this paper I will focus my attention on these two connections (fair trade and La Vía Campesina’s movement for food sovereignty) explicitly.

4 Patel has noted that “to demand a space of food sovereignty is to demand specific arrangements to govern territory and space. At the end of the day, the power of rights-talk is that rights imply a particular burden on a specified entity – the state” (2009:668).

5 Gibson-Graham (2006) have argued that there are multiple forms of alternative market transactions in which goods and services can be exchanged around socially determined compensation. Specifically, they have noted that with regard to fair trade that “producers and consumers agree on price levels that will sustain certain livelihood practices” (2006:62) outside of the scope of production within a capitalist firm or purchase within a formal market. “One has only to think of the fair-trade networks that connect third-world producers with first-world consumers so that in the buying and selling of coffee or bananas or craft products, the act of commensuration is not disembodied, but is ethically negotiated in a quasi face-to-face manner” (2006:79).

6 In particular, they discuss the fair trade cooperative Mut Vitz.

7 A review piece by Kay (2008) indicates that myriad of survival strategies are undertaken by peasant producers in Latin America, including farming, the sale of waged labor, petty commodity and handicraft production, trading and reliance on remittances.

8 Although they are careful to assert that this is not a linear process, nor is it universal—as each is embedded in country-specific and historical circumstances that differ from place to place (2010:195).

9 Here, the reader may wish to consult the work of J.K. Gibson-Graham (1996; 2006), and the concept of “capitalocentrism.” Capitalocentrism, as it is termed by Gibson-Graham (1996:6), refers to capitalism being the gauge against which other economic activities are measured. Gibson-Graham argue that in using capitalism as a reference point, all other forms of economic activity are seen as being the same as
capitalism (modeled on, a complement of, or participating within the same space), as substandard imitations of capitalism, or as the opposite of capitalism.

It is based on these preliminary observations that I am developing further work on the enactment of autonomy. The original aims of this project were to determine what the impact of fair trade production was on the growing of *milpa* crops, whom in the communities benefitted from fair trade and how the production of fair trade impacted the landscape.

All interviews were conducted in Spanish and were translated by the author.

Income earning strategies of the farmers I spoke with included: coffee production, and family member participation in other cooperative, such as the metalworking cooperative, the women’s weaving cooperative and the bread-making cooperative. Each of these cooperatives brings money back to the community first (a key difference in Zapatista-aligned communities) and is use to reproduce the cooperative activities (the purchase of materials for weaving, for example), income generated is also used to fund hospital visits or the purchase of medicines when someone is ill. This has been an important strategy in Zapatista-aligned communities for limiting out-migration to earn cash (a critical component to maintaining the strength of their autonomy).

Peter Rosset has called this “social neoliberalism” (interview: 03, August 2010).

This practice is aligned with traditional indigenous *cargo* systems.

Following the implementation of NAFTA, farmers aligned with the movement were only producing about 1/3 of their yearly needs (Collier and Quaratiello 2005:197).

This complaint was not consistent across communities that I visited and is an important point for further inquiry.

This concern was twofold: 1) farmers were suspicious about GMO corn; 2) farmers were concerned that they were buying corn seed that had come from the ‘bad government,’ such as the hybrid seed that has been recently promoted in the highlands.

Migration is generally discouraged for the basic reason that communities in resistance need their healthiest and strongest population to be present in order to resist threat.

The Neem tree is native to India and its leaves produce a natural insect repellent (for further discussion see: Shiva 2000). This project is being pursued with the financial assistance of a U.S.-based NGO.