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Building Post-Capitalist Worlds: Zapatistas, Via Campesina and other rebellions*

David BARKIN AND Blanca LEMUS

ABSTRACT: In the context of the prevailing abundance of diversity (biological, ethnic), the profound social inequalities, and the trends and attitudes of hegemonic forces in Latin America, a coherent process of environmental governance is proving difficult and environmental injustice is aggravated. Regardless of where one turns in the region, there is an increase in the number and intensity of conflicts between groups committed to promoting economic development (i.e., growth), and those claiming to speak for the planet and/or the welfare of the large majority of the population or particular minorities, who feel excluded from these processes and are bearing the brunt of the negative impacts of these activities. This paper gives voice to the actors actually involved in developing alternatives to the development proposals of the hegemonic forces driving the transformations in their societies. These alternatives emerge from groups whose organizations are shaped by different cosmologies, products of their multiple ethnic origins, and by the profound philosophic and epistemological debates of the past half-century that emerged from numerous social movements proposing different strategies for achieving progress, improving well-being and conserving ecosystems.

Introduction:

In 1999, protestors outside the negotiating sessions of the World Trade Organization lifted their voices and banners to declare "Another World is Possible," taking their cue from the theme of the World Social Forum. In Latin America, however, we had a different slogan: "**Many other worlds are possible, AND they are already under construction**." For a very long time communities throughout the Americas and in the rest of the world have been actively involved in forging alternatives to the strait-jacket of globalization, the present stage of neo-liberal capitalism that has triggered the current triple crisis in which most of humanity is currently living. Our colleagues in the economics profession are desperately searching for paths out of the multiple crises—economic, social, and environmental— without recognizing that they are the product of the very institutions within which they are operating. Further, the renewed official commitment to implement environmental governance mechanisms, as the global problem of climate change begins to become increasingly evident, will remain difficult, if not impossible, to achieve. This is the result of deep social inequalities and trends and attitudes of hegemonic forces that have shown an extraordinary "perverse resilience," not only preventing progress in the implementation of public policies and social strategies that protect the various dimensions of the planetary system and its extraordinary diversity –biological, cultural, and ethnic– but also managing to restructure their own agendas and discourses, claiming to be leaders in the implementation of a 'green economy' without changing their basic strategies or reducing their impacts (Barkin, 2013). This process is provoking the double movement that was central to the Karl Polanyi's analysis (2001): a direct confrontation between, on the one hand, politicians, wealthy investors,

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technology providers, investors with concessions in regions and sectors recently opened to foreign investment, and, on the other hand, organized social groups that consider these intrusions a threat to their productive systems and their ways of life and health, while also destroying their communities and cultures and the ecosystems on which we all depend.

Our analysis is grounded in the visions of the myriad local and regional groups who, over the centuries, were continuously relegated to increasingly inhospitable regions as successive waves of conquerors laid claim to their lands, their resources, and even their bodies, transforming them into victims of colonialism and (inter)national capitalist development. Today many of these peoples are rejecting their insertion into global markets, the appropriation of their lands and resources, and their assignation into the lowest ranks of highly stratified and polarized societies. Today, they are creating new spaces in which different social and productive structures are responding to demands for local control of the governance process, ensuring local welfare and environmental stewardship. This requires new ways of doing research and building models for understanding these societies; this paper reports on some of the results of our recent work.

As participants in this process, we find that, since classes are deeply rooted in institutions, an intercultural dialogue has proved particularly fruitful, in going beyond both universalism and cultural relativism, to accept and value cultural pluralism for advancing towards a democratic, just and peaceful harmonization of conflicting interests (Panikkar, 1995; Vachon, 1995; Dietrich *et al.*, 2011). The growing interest in the commons, as a system that emerges beyond the market and the State, offers a context within which to understand this process (Ostrom, 1985, 1990; Walljasper, 2010; Bollier and Helfrich, 2012; Linebaugh, 2013; McDermott, 2014; Barkin and Lemus, 2014). On this basis, these groups are designing and implementing their own proposals for decision-making, based on a system of values that promote collective over individual well-being, assuming a cosmocentric vision of planetary processes. These proposals arise from a more complex system with different objectives, rooted in historical experience, cultural traditions and intergenerational relations and responsibilities, based on goals fixed on a much longer time horizon than we are accustomed to. To overcome inherited inequalities, exacerbated by the public policy, communities are adopting strategies to create opportunities for their members, considering both social justice and environmental restoration. In many cases this implies a redefinition of identities, combining their knowledge of their cultural roots with their history of struggle. These struggles...

> … have never been a blind reflex, spontaneous, to the objective economic conditions, [rather] they have been a conscious conflict of ideas and values all the way (Thompson, 1959:110). [1]

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1 Although Thompson describes the idea of class consciousness in post-war England, it seems appropriate to apply his analysis to the indigenous struggles in Latin America.

In this way, the communities are strengthening their commitment to a vision of collective welfare, based on discussions of social progress, including life styles and community organization. These are being codified into important discussions about “Sumak Kawsay”, “mandar obeciendo”, “Abya Yala” or “comunalidad”, formulations emerging from distinct ethnic groups in Latin America, which are being compared to “Ubuntu” in South Africa or “Swaraj” (Radical Ecological Democracy) from India (Kothari et al., 2014). From these varying approaches to codifying community identities, we have identified five basic principles: autonomy, solidarity, self-sufficiency, productive diversification, and sustainable management of regional ecosystems. One insightful observer of this process commented: “Indigenous peoples are on the front lines of the battle, fighting a war for the benefit of us all, because that is where the capitalist system finds a new ways to attempt to relaunch accumulation” (Esteva, 2014).

Throughout the world, communities and social groups are challenging governmental attempts to ‘manage’ them. They argue that market-based definitions of private property are inappropriate for determining governance mechanisms; their historical claim to lands has shaped spaces into territories that cannot be defined solely in terms of lands, natural resources, and residential areas, but rather as areas where the whole panoply of activities that comprise social life within an ecosystem are inextricably intertwined. These are spaces imbued with cultural heritages that reflect the complex interactions of society and the planet, processes guided by a dynamic that can only be understood within the context of their cosmologies, quite different than the judicial mechanisms that governments attempt to enforce.

For this reason, a complex set of new rules has emerged to protect the rights of peoples living in these territories and, more recently, extended to urban areas. International law has now codified these rights: obliging governments to engage in “prior consent” when attempting to appropriate the resources, modify the territories of indigenous peoples, or limit their ability to govern themselves. This recent development has a long history, from the concessions granted the peasantry in Britain in the *Magna Carter* of 1215 to the recognition of the “Indian Republics” in Mexico in the XVIII century were not simply spaces but rather a place for a different style of life and governance, albeit subordinated to the Spanish crown. As a result, the communities consider themselves to be part of the “commons”, “movements of human activity and global demands for the distribution of wealth and the safeguarding of the common resources on each continent” (Linebaugh, 2013: 279). They are not simply involved in creating “an alternative economy, but rather an alternative to the economy” (Esteva, 2014: i149).

The importance of surplus

The decision of indigenous peoples and peasant communities to create autonomous forms of self-government represents an audacious challenge to the prevailing model of governance and social justice based on representative democracy with its marriage to "free" trade. Rooted in a commitment to define and defend their territories, the process involves the creation of new institutions and processes for the social appropriation of the natural environment and production systems that have been created in order to assure

their ability to maintain and strengthen community, to meet their basic needs and facilitate the exchange with peers (barter) and on the market. The mechanisms often involve complex dynamics for dialogue between the various groups within communities, as well as ways to delegate responsibilities to its members based on their knowledge and social commitment, or to ensure broad participation and accountability.

Therefore, it is not only the choice of activities, but also the process of implementing them, that is crucial for the design of the social mechanisms that contribute to equity and sustainability. In the discussion of individual projects with which we have been in contact, an interesting aspect of the analysis is not only the choice of technique, but equally important, a concern for attending the socially defined needs of community members, while creating a balance between the use of natural resources, the regulation of land use, and conservation of their ecosystem.

These activities are organized on a voluntary basis to ensure their viability and continuity. In many cases, groups are trying to rebuild the social fabric eroded by internal and external forces alike. While we focus on the collective nature of decision making, it is equally important to understand the mechanisms that enable the consolidation of the community and its ability to advance. During our interactions with the communities in their search for solutions that provide the means to move forward, we identified a key feature that contributes to this success: they explicitly organize social and productive resources to generate surplus for "reinvestment" and "redistribution" (Baran, 1957).

The central role of surplus in community management often goes unnoticed and is misunderstood. Much of the literature describes rural communities in general and indigenous groups in particular, as living on the edge of subsistence, since their material poverty limits their ability to progress and limits the range of activities they can undertake. In contrast, our relationships with communities throughout the Americas reveal their ability and commitment to produce and collectively manage a surplus, using it to reward members who have made significant contributions in the production, channeling most of it for collective purposes.

Focusing on the production and management of surplus to socially defined needs within the limits of their ecosystems, the collective management of local projects has proven effective in building a framework of environmental justice that would be difficult to achieve in the market based societies of which they are a part. Unlike those other societies tied to the global economy, these communities have created possibilities to organize to ensure that their members not suffer poverty and unemployment. As a result, they have a greater productive potential than might be expected from a simple examination of the financial resources at their disposal. A portion of this potential is well documented in the literature, as is the case of "voluntary" work expected of all members for collective tasks, including construction and maintenance of infrastructure and conservation of ecosystems (e.g., *tequio*, *faena*, *minga*).

The social mechanisms for the allocation and rotation of administrative and political positions, so important for local governance, are another way in which

resources are generated in these communal organizations, guided by worldviews quite different than those based on individual gain. But equally important, the commitment to universal participation in decision-making also creates a shared responsibility among the members to contribute to collective tasks, ensuring that most people are involved in a variety of activities for their own benefit and that of community. These resources, often invisible in the market economy, emerge from the social capacity to promote broad participation.

Recently, these societies have improved their abilities to implement new projects and generate more funds for their projects. They are taking advantage of some advances in science and technology, combining them with local knowledge to increase production, improving their welfare and their ability to protect their ecosystems. By examining the availability and use of surplus, the communities are better prepared to determine how best to implement their long-term projects. What is astonishing about individual experiences, is the clarity of many of the participants of the ways in which particular activities contribute to overall objectives.

Paths to environmental justice

Throughout the Americas communities are implementing new approaches to environmental justice in the face of harassment and outright violence by the State. While obliged to protect their natural resources and subject to the discipline of the market and political systems, it is remarkable that they continue to mobilize at the national and local levels, while continuing to collaborate internationally with others to consolidate new lines of production and experiment with ways to improve existing activities.

During the second half of the twentieth century, Mexican communities waged a relentless battle to assert their rights to control the lands they were able to recover after the Revolution. In the 1980s, they were particularly effective in reclaiming forest concessions from private firms (71% of the nation’s forests). They are implementing innovative management schemes that are now widely recognized as outstanding examples of sustainable management, testimony to the skills that communities have acquired in reconciling pressures to ensure conservation with the need to create jobs and generate income (Bray and Merino, 2004; Bray *et al.*, 2007; Cronkleton et al, 2011; Barkin and Fuente, 2013).

The movement to assert indigenous identity and autonomy in Mexico was further strengthened after the January 1994 uprising in Chiapas by the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (http://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx) (Muñoz, 2003). Since then there has been a growing recognition of the importance of indigenous peoples; their growing visibility is a result, in part, to their responses to the repressive actions of the state and private companies with mining and renewable energy concessions to remove them from their territories.

The combination of traditional conservation strategies with cutting edge technologies to protect their natural water sources and streams, while assuring adequate supplies has proved controversial. It contrasts sharply with the

approach of national water authorities, who prefer a uniform, centralized administrative model along with an infrastructure program to harness these resources for large-scale hydroelectric projects and for supplying the insatiable demands of industrialization and urban growth. As a result, many communities that have historically been able to meet their own needs and even share surpluses with neighboring communities are now involved in struggles, along with environmentalists, arguing that this approach to public works simply postpones "the day of reckoning" regarding the need for a sustainable water management approach; denying the right to emplace micro-hydroelectric plants is one example of this irrationality, resulting from narrow neoliberal economic policies and a fear of the independence that this would give the communities.

A particularly successful project is “Agua para Siempre,” which transformed one million hectares of arid, steeply sloping lands in a region near Tehuacan, Puebla. Using "appropriate" technologies, it created underground aquifers and filtering structures similar to those found in some of the oldest irrigation projects in the Western Hemisphere dating back to the eleventh century. This project, which began in the 1980s, combines agro-ecological and cooperative agro-industrial enterprises, creating jobs and products that are proving attractive to consumers because of their social, ecological, and nutritional qualities (Barkin, 2001; Hernandez Garciadiego and Herrerias, 2008).

Despite the obstacles and conflicts, many communities are reorganizing production to supply their basic needs and produce goods that can be exchanged for others (barter). Ongoing efforts are oriented to identifying new activities that make use of renewable resources to produce goods that can be advantageously exchanged. The aim of this approach is to promote social dynamics that bring together producers in organizations that become stronger as they become part of their communities. To further this process, new collectives are forming to introduce new activities and technologies to strengthen their organizations and their ability to govern.

One of the most important organizations that is accompanying the communities is the Via Campesina (VC, http://viacampesina.org). This group has a presence in more than 73 countries, representing over 200 million members. Founded in 1993, the VC adopted a strategy of food sovereignty and agroecology as the appropriate path by which to strengthen peasant organizations consistent with improving health and caring for the environment (Rosset, 2013). The FAO adopted a highly controversial decision to declare 2014 the "International Year of Family Farming," reflecting the VC’s increasing ability to advance its agenda. (CEPAL/FAO/IICA, 2014)

Other social groups are actively involved in promoting social, political and productive changes to help improve their own lives while attempting to preserve and improve the quality of the environment and sustainability. In Chiapas, Mexico, the Caracoles (local governments established in Zapatista territory in 2003) are contributing to this goal, directly improving the lives of hundreds of thousands of its members, while also offering a model of social organization and change that continues to have a powerful effect on other communities and other countries. There is ample evidence that their activities

are improving welfare, contributing to the diversification of the economy and increasing productivity; the communities have reached a high level of self-sufficiency in food, health care, and education (Baronnet et al., 2011).

In South America, numerous Andean communities participate equally in the promotion of collective strategies, known as "good living" (Sumak Kawsay in Quechua). Throughout the Americas, communities are forced to defend their territories, cultures and societies from invasion by those who covet their resources, or institutions that might erode their cultural differences. Among the most visible are groups like: “Idle No More” in Canada, the Haudenosaunee Confederacy (Iroquois) in eastern North America; the Movement of Landless Workers (MST) in Brazil, the Mapuches in Chile, the National Indigenous Congress, the National Assembly of Environmentally Impacted Peoples and the Network of People Affected by Mining in Mexico.

Accompanying these acts of resistance, many groups are involved in constructive activities, promoting collaboration with university researchers and civil society to explain the value of their approaches, contributing to the sustainable diversification of their production (Toledo *et al*., 2013; Toledo and Espejel-Ortiz, 2014). One illustrative example involves research that led to the inclusion of ‘rotten’ avocados (*Persea Americana* "Hass"), in the diets of fattening pigs in backyard lots, resulting in metabolic changes that reduced their cholesterol levels, improving incomes and environmental conditions; in this case, as in others based on a similar paradigm, indigenous women were especially benefited, since they were the innovators and their communities soon recognized their leadership (Barkin, 2012; Fuente and Ramos, 2013).

With a different approach, academic activists are working with producers in various regions to protect and enhance the production of a traditional Mexican alcoholic beverage –mezcal--, modifying traditional planting and harvesting techniques of the cactus (*agave*) and enriching the life of the community by promoting cooperative production that is helping to increase revenue and recuperate ecosystems (Delgado *et al*. 2014). In one widely recognized project[2], the Environmental Studies Group (Illsley *et al*., 2007) contributed to local governance capacities to promote local forms of "good living" and ecosystem restoration.

In another region of Mexico, in the state of Oaxaca, four Zapotec communities continue to tend their mulberry trees (*morus alba*), raising silkworms to produce the traditional thread that is woven into attractive garments that are marketed locally and through an exceptional Textile Museum in the state capital. Elsewhere there are experiments with new plantations of a perennial native cotton, *coyuchi* (widely cultivated before the Spanish Conquest), which are woven into clothing also sold at the museum, as an alternative to genetically modified cotton which currently dominates the industry.

In Peru, and more recently in Bolivia, Pratec, a well-established grassroots technical assistance organization is implementing effective strategies for

2 It was awarded the Equator Prize by the UN Development Program in 2012 for this project.

community learning, improving production of potatoes (*Solanum tuberosum*) in the complex ecologies of the Andean world, carefully balancing this work to also support progress with other resources (Gonzales, 2014).

Building Post-Capitalist Worlds

While these initiatives are changing the map of America, many other "developments" threaten to erode the possibilities of improving the lives of peoples and conserving the environment. Even while indigenous communities are asserting their recently "re-discovered" rights to continue their forest and water management activities, governments are encouraging large-scale initiatives by transnational corporations that threaten the delicate balance of activities production on which the communities depend for their livelihoods and for ecosystem balance. These projects raise fundamental questions about the ability of communities to defend their territories, including their substantial cultural, social and productive patrimony that tie them to their ecosystems.

Conflicts are the order of the day, occasioning seemingly intractable differences and often violent clashes, because the mines, dams, petroleum, natural gas, ecotourism and other projects threaten the very existence of the communities. Generally, they reject the notion that the sacrifices that this destruction involves can be compensated with money, arguing that this would force them to move towards a path of institutionalized marginalization as isolated individuals, a life of limited opportunities without social support systems and the security that their communities offer.

Ongoing initiatives to strengthen or create post-capitalist worlds (or "niches of sustainability") by indigenous and peasant communities in the Americas are extremely important and encouraging. While the momentum of the global market is clearly threatening social groups and ecosystems around the world, the continuous and successful efforts of indigenous peoples and peasants to implement their own strategies of social and productive change shows that environmental justice can become a reality in growing segments of the population; this will not happen where the capitalist structure of production dominates. Therefore, the implementation of local solutions that create areas for autonomous action, will be even more significant and effective, while the areas dominated by the world market will continue to suffer environmental degradation and heightened social conflicts.

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