

**Participatory Democracy in Action:  
Practices of the Zapatistas and the Movimento Sem Terra**

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*abstract:* Participatory democracy has been studied as an auxiliary to state processes and as an institutional and cultural part of social movements. This paper examines several aspects of participatory democracy used as a form of self-governance in extraparliamentary organizations. It examines two case studies: the Zapatistas (México) and the Movimento Sem Terra (Brazil). This article contributes to expanding the theory and models of democracy.

**Keyword:** Democracy, social movements, governance, Zapatista, Movimento Sem Terra.

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## Introduction

One of the hallmarks of alterglobalization<sup>1</sup> movements is their insistence on finding other ways of achieving power than elections, parties, and unions. "They are not fundamentally organized to seize state power." (Stahler-Sholk, Vanden, and Kuecker 2007, 6) Instead, in various contexts, these movements have innovated institutions and practices. It is here at the opening of alterglobalization's power that it meets its most damaging critics, who insist that because it so often refuses to "address the question of the state", it can only be trivial and marginal. And yet, around the world, although the struggles and tactics and ideologies of alterglobalization vary dramatically, these movements recognize each other in their passion and commitment to create democratic power here and now. Their claim, equally compelling and controversial, is that an intensely personal participatory democracy is a response to the deprivations of globalization. (Meanwhile, as Stahler-Sholk et. al. point out, these movements effects include dramatic change in states and parties. Nevertheless, that is not our interest here.) They have also have inspired political practice all over the world by changing the discourse about the sources and structures of social justice.

We are interested in the specific internal democratic practices of alterglobalization's most powerful social movements – because their project is to create the power to solve their own problems, and to do so democratically. We imagine that movements around the world are interested in adapting successful practices to their own contexts and yearn for specific information about how these movements operate. We are also interested in confirming the recognition that many forms of democracy are active and possible and that the rejection of the neoliberal fantasy is accompanied by a rich collection of tangible alternative realities, among them authentic democracy.

One would expect political scientists to provide a rich literature exploring an array of approaches to democracy. Disappointingly, this is not the case. The bulk of political science research regarding democracy is devoted to the study of political parties, elections, and representative/parliamentary systems. Indeed no compendium exists of world-historic democratic practices; despite considerable anthropological evidence that a range of unmistakably democratic practices are widely used. (see Clastres 1987) Indigenous communities, in a own valiant attempt to save the world from their conquerors, have become increasingly organized in arguing that their "ways" contain the needed social and political technologies for ecological, diverse, and dignified societies. (Indigenous Peoples 1999; Indigenous Peoples Kyoto Water Declaration 2003; Indigenous Peoples Council on Biocolonialism)

Those works which do seek a more inclusive view almost always understand "participatory democracy" as some kind of advisory process to state decision-making. (Barber 1983; Wainwright 2003; Mutz 2006; Goodin 2003, Fung and Wright 2001, 2003, 2006) Likewise, in Latin America, decentralization has not referred to a localization of political power but a way of responding simultaneously to cost-cutting pressures from International Financial Institutions and local pressures for more accountable social services. (García-Guadilla and

Pérez 2002; Fox 1994; Barczak 2001; Forero-Pineda 2001). The forms of "direct", "deliberative", and "decentralized" democracy discussed in these works are all ways of participating in the state. Participatory democracy as a viable political practice *independent of the state* has seldom been a serious object of scholarly attention.

Any investigation is prematurely obviated by Robert Dahl's discouraging but influential (1970) pronouncement that participatory democracy is simply infeasible and therefore an indulgence (or, at best, a resource) for social movements. There has been a wide-spread pessimism among academics that participatory forms can ever really work on a large scale or be sustained on any scale.

Our cases need no introduction to readers here. The Zapatistas and the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST) are among the most influential movements of the last two decades. The Zapatistas contributed concepts and inspiration which directly and visibly shaped the emergence of the movement confronting global summits, the development of participatory media, indigenous movements of the Americas, and local movements across the North America and Western Europe. Meanwhile the MST was central to the building of an effective and accountable international peasants movement, the Vía Campesina, now representing representing some 500 million families around the world.

These movements have been written about extensively. Regarding the Zapatistas, scholars have examined their construction of a response to neoliberalism (De Angelis 2005; George A Collier and Jane F Collier 2005; Ross 2002; Ross 2006), their contribution to the emergence of transnational networks (Midnight Notes Collective and Autonomedia 2001; Rosset, Martinez-Torres, and Hernandez-Navarro 2005; Olesen 2005; Khasnabish 2007), their participation in postmodern forms of politics (Langman 2005; Callahan 2005; Cleaver 1998, 1994; Tormey 2006), their contributions to Mexican politics (Swords 2007; Weinberg 2000), their contributions to politics elsewhere (Swords 2006; Holloway 2005; Zugman 2005), and they have also contributed extensive texts of their own to public discourse (EZLN; Marcos et al. 1995; Marcos et al. 2004; Mora 2007) Scholars have attended to their theological-political origins of the MST (Löwy 2001), the political economy of their land reform strategy, (Wright and Wolford 2003; Houtzager 2005), their role in the emergence of a solidarity economy (Eid and Pimental 2001), cooperativism versus cooperation (Scopinho 2007), the social contexts in which they organize (Wolford 2006), leadership (Veltmeyer and Petras 2002), the development of subjectivity (Leite and Dimenstein 2006), their spatial creativity (Castells 2002), and their *mística* (Issa 2007).

Yet little of this work addresses democratic practices in great detail. Dias Martins (2006) has studied the development of participation in the MST, and Ross (2005) has studied part of the Zapatista governance structure.

We focus specifically on the movements' practices of participatory democracy with an eye to the lessons for other movements who seek to try their techniques. We first describe each movement's structure of participatory democracy in some detail. We conclude with a short comparative analysis. The case studies are based on extensive fieldwork with these movements. Martínez-Torres and Rosset have been studying the Zapatistas since 1995 and the MST since 1998 and 2003, respectively.

### **Zapatismo, México**

Since appearing as an army in January 1994, the Zapatistas have worked to elaborate the practice of autonomy as a response and alternative to globalization. This has especially been the case since the government betrayed the 1996 San Andrés treaty, which

would have granted limited autonomy to indigenous regions of Mexico. Since the government failed to live up to its commitment, the Zapatistas made the decision to claim and construct political autonomy unilaterally. As of 2007, they are implementing participatory democracy in six functional dimensions, each of which has a specific democratic method suited to its responsibilities.

*First dimension: The Zapatista political & military leadership* is represented by the Clandestine Revolutionary Indigenous Committee (CCRI). The CCRI is composed of civilian comandantes – at least one male and one female – representing each of the 11 indigenous ethnic groups in the area, plus mestizos. CCRI members are long-term. The CCRI directs the military operations of the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN) and until 2003 was also responsible for matters of civilian affairs.

*Second dimension: Consultas & asambleas:* All CCRI decisions are taken through a consultation process involving all of the more than 1111 Zapatista communities.<sup>2</sup> No decision is made until it has been considered and approved by consensus in every community's assembly. Major decisions take about six months, at which point the CCRI makes a declaration announcing the decision. The community assemblies also make political decisions regarding community matters, including elections to the Zapatista government.

Assemblies are held at community, municipal, and regional levels. Communities elect representatives to attend municipal and regional assemblies. On certain matters of general concern, such as health, people from all levels will attend a special regional assembly on that issue. Attendance at community assemblies is mandatory for all Zapatistas from age 12 or 15, except for reasons of illness or conflicting work obligations.

Assemblies can have from 50 to 200 people, depending on the size of the community. The decision-making process begins when the coordinator explains the issue to be discussed, after which everyone starts discussing the issue at the same time, in their respective languages. There is no order or structure to the discussion; everyone speaks at once, and it proceeds organically until eventually 2 or 3 different ideas or positions emerge and the coordinator summarizes the positions. Those summarizing and coordinating are not necessarily political leaders. The process repeats in the same lively chaotic manner with questions and opinions about the positions/ideas on the table and someone summarizing until eventually, when someone asks "acuerdo ya?" (did we reach an agreement?). While this process of many people talking at once is characteristic of the smaller, local meetings, when a major decision has to be made at large meetings, everyone listens to each speaker.

*Third dimension: Councils of good government/Juntas:* In July 2003 the EZLN relinquished its civilian governance function to municipal and regional juntas. The CCRI remains responsible for military and political functions (strategy), but the juntas manage economic affairs for the municipalities and provide services that people need from government. There are 38 municipal councils/juntas and 5 regional Juntas de Buen Gobierno (also called the Caracoles). Being autonomous, each one has slightly different rules and methods of rotation. The regional juntas were needed because there was not enough coordination between the assemblies of the autonomous municipalities.

Service in the juntas is designed to give every Zapatista the experience of government. The idea is that everyone should serve eventually, so that people will no longer be mystified or fooled by the process of government. Representatives are elected in community assemblies, by open ballot, to a rotational pool from which 8-16 members govern in the council or junta at any one time. People serve in the pool from one to three years, periodically rotating into the

council or junta for periods of ten to thirty days, so they are able to maintain other responsibilities. Each community supports the representatives, paying for their transportation, taking care of their milpa (fields) when they are away, providing their food, etc.

While only Zapatistas can serve, the juntas provide government services for Zapatistas and non-Zapatistas alike who live within the Zapatista regions, estimated to be about 300,000 families. Zapatista municipalities actually contain two governments (the former/official government and the Zapatista one), and two separate sets of institutions (schools, health, festivals...)

The municipal and regional juntas have no staff. There are some volunteers who serve occasionally in secretarial roles or other staff roles. The juntas have commissions which report to them; these involve more people than the elected representatives and they are not required to rotate. These commissions do a lot of the ongoing work in the areas like health, education, and production; the number of commissions varies with the level of organization and development of that area. The juntas make the decisions; the commissions process the details. Each commission has promoters/volunteers who do the actual work. The juntas address problems and issues (of the Commissions and justice/mediation) on a first-come, first-serve basis. The juntas have no bank accounts. Enlace Civil is an NGO which handles donations to the Zapatistas, but the juntas make the decisions about the expenditures of finances.

The municipal juntas provide conflict resolution and criminal justice through the Commissions de Honor y Justicia, doing careful. In just a few years, the juntas have worked hard to prove they are unbiased against non-Zapatistas and provide to them good services. Since the juntas have established a reputation for impartial resolution of conflicts, they are often preferred and chosen even by non-Zapatistas over the regular government justice system (in the latter it is often the case that the person with more money or political influence wins, regardless of the facts of the case). There are several benefits of the Commissions de Honor y Justicia: the services are free and non-bureaucratic, they are conducted in indigenous languages, and they are impartial (winning does not depend on your political connections or how much money you have). Even one of the taxi drivers unions outside of Zapatista territory traveled to a Zapatista junta seeking dispute resolution. In matters of criminality, even for very serious crimes, community service is required as restitution (planting 1000 trees, building a school, opening a road), after which the person is pardoned and accepted fully back into the community. In most cases punishment is temporary (there is no permanent criminal record attached to a person), except in the most extreme cases, in which the maximum penalty is expulsion. This system of justice is based in traditional methods of indigenous communities.

The regional juntas govern the activities of foreign charitable/solidarity projects, ensuring that the projects are directed by the Zapatistas and that they provide benefit equally to communities, rather than only the more accessible ones or the ones where outsiders have already established contacts. Foreign projects now have to work through the regional junta, which knows the priorities. The junta will change or adapt proposed projects. For basic goods that come from outside the territory, the juntas organize cooperative purchasing for Zapatista territories, making sure to get good prices and to avoid corruption. These goods are provided to the Zapatista stores in the communities.

The regional juntas have two additional commissions with which they work side-by-side. The Commission of Information is the unelected “political” dimension of the junta, staffed by those by long-term Zapatista leaders/cadre who live in the region. These are people who are the product of the history of the movement, and they have a lot of experience. The Commission

de Vigilancia, which is elected, is responsible for informing the communities of what is going on with the junta. They have a separate space from the junta. Anyone who takes an issue to the junta has to also go to this commission, to make sure that the Commission knows what is going on.

In its first public evaluation of the juntas in August 2004, the CCRI acknowledged that it needed to control its impulse to make suggestions and to intervene in the civilian process. Also, in the first year, only one quarter to one third of the junta representatives were women, which falls short of the intended ratio of one half. The CCRI recognized the need to work harder to confront issues at the family level that make it hard for women to be away from home to serve in the juntas.

*Fourth Dimension: Local Economy and Autonomy:* The Zapatistas are engaged in a conscious attempt to autonomously re-construct a vibrant local rural economy after the devastating effects of free trade and neoliberalism in recent decades. These effects included the inundation of the local maize market with cheap imports that local farmers could not compete with, the privatization and cutback of credit for farmers, the privatization of parastatal marketing agencies that had helped farmers bring crops to market, cutbacks in essential services, deepening of rural poverty, and driving more members of rural families into migrant streams. Reconstruction of the local economy involves organizing cooperatives and collectives that produce agricultural products, handicrafts, and even clothing and boots. Transportation cooperatives move these products (as well as people) regionally and community shops facilitate regional trade. It also involves creating training opportunities for youth who would otherwise have to migrate in search of paid work. This training may include learning how to cut hair, design clothes, repair machinery, bake bread, fix computers, carpentry, electrical, masonry, bricklaying, plumbing encouraging the development of small business that strengthen the village economy. At the same time, The Zapatistas have established programs to promote agroecological farming practices, in order to decrease dependency on purchased imported farm chemicals and establishing agricultural independence. These programs also connect Agroecology with indigenous cosmology.

*Fifth dimension: The Other Campaign:* As a very popular social movement in México, the Zapatistas have reluctantly accepted responsibility for assisting in the transformation of the political framework of the country as a whole. The Other Campaign (launched with the Zapatistas 6<sup>th</sup> Declaration in 2005) is a project with Mexican civil society in which the Zapatistas are generating a “different way of doing politics”. In the old way of politics the same people always dominate, discuss, and decide and there is marginalization of women, indigenous people, and others. The Other Campaign instead is composed of those who are “below and on the left” in the structure of society. In December 2006, the Other Campaign became consciously and explicitly anti-capitalist and anti-patriarchal. In the Other Campaign, the Zapatistas reach out to all sectors, especially the peasant sector, including those who continue to accept financial support from the government. Everyone willing to sign on to the 6<sup>th</sup> Declaration (which can be done through the website at <http://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/especiales/2/>) may be part of the Other Campaign. However, people may not also be a member of a political party. Participation means forming and participating in your local assembly of the Other Campaign.

The first phase of the campaign, “getting to know you”, involved a politics of listening, in which Subcomandante Marcos himself traveled around the country for 6 months modeling how to listen to voices in the community. With him, everybody listened to everybody else

telling their stories of resistance. In the second phase, a commission of comandantes is touring the country, meeting with people again, trying to facilitate the process of coming up with a consensus national platform of struggle and also creating a national mutual assistance network of local resistances. The local resistances are to government and corporate actions, gas stations, dams, World Bank and Inter American Development Bank actions, the repression of sex workers, etc. By linking together ubiquitous local struggles and resistances all over México they all become more powerful. If the police repress one, then all the others can do solidarity actions. Through this process local resistances can grow into a national movement for national transformation.

So far the Other Campaign does not have a structure. Despite the cultural diversity amongst the indigenous peoples, they all seem to have the same processes for decision-making, a mixture of consensus of the whole community plus a council of elders. Indigenous people seem to envision that the Other Campaign will take on some structure similar to the juntas. Those in the Other Campaign who come from the traditional left, however, anticipate that the Other Campaign will take on the structure of a hierarchical party. The alternative collectives in the Other Campaign are allergic to the idea of structure because they are worried that it will bring back the "old" politics (but in fact without a structure, those politics are entering in already). Confrontation between these three tendencies seems inevitable, but for now they are coexisting.

*Sixth dimension: International Encuentros:* As part of a global social movement, the Zapatistas have periodically invited allies from the rest of the world to meet in "intergalactic encounters". The first intergalactico was 1996 in which the Zapatistas invited activists and social movements from all over the world who are anti-neoliberal to gather together and exchange ideas and experiences. The comandantes were present at every table of discussion, but they never spoke, only listened. People though it was weird and said "we came all the way around the world to hear the Zapatistas speak, so please give us your opinion" and they said "no we are here to listen and to facilitate the emergence of collective positions." There were two more encuentros in Spain in August 1997, but the Zapatistas themselves were unable to travel and did not participate. The next international encounter was December 2006 in Chiapas, the first encounter between Zapatista communities and the peoples of the world. At that one it was almost exactly the opposite. Each junta and the different sectors gave reports to the gathered people from the rest of the world on how they're structured and organized and the progress that they've made with the new form of internal organization in their territory. Subsequent encounters in July and December of 2007 followed similar formats. The Encuentro at the end of 2007 was also the first Encuentro of Zapatista Women and the Women of the World.

One of the main elements that the Zapatistas and Marcos have stressed, almost in a scolding tone, is that if you want to create a truly democratic structure the first thing you have to demonstrate is your ability and willingness to listen. They demonstrated that in their first intergalactico. Marcos demonstrated it in his 6 month tour of the Other Campaign in meetings running for twelve to sixteen hours in which hundreds of people would get up and tell personal or collective stories and he would patiently listen for hours and only speak at the end. Some people claimed these meetings were intensely boring and longwinded. The December 2006 Encuentro was part of the same point. In effect the pedagogy of the Encuentro said "if you want to work with us, you have to be able to listen." If you look at the methodology that most indigenous communities use in México, typically they have general assemblies of the community through consensus in which everybody speaks and for as long as they want to (but

only once per person). After a person speaks as much as they want – maybe 3 hours – they say “esto is mi palabra” (this is my word). Meetings can take a week to come to a decision. That’s why listening is a key element in building a democratic structure. That’s how all the Zapatista meetings in the other campaign are conducted. Everybody who wants to speak, speaks once and for as long as they want.

### **MST Communities, Brazil**

With a strict ideological and intricate structural plan based in Liberation Theology and Marxism, The Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST) has organized 1.5 million landless workers in 23 of Brazil’s 27 states. Since 1985, the MST has legalized 2000 settlements, housing 350,000 families. Another 180,000 families are currently encamped awaiting permanent land titles. The settlement communities range in size from less than one hundred to 5000 people comprising in total a land area larger than the country of Italy. The communities include multiple productive cooperatives. The MST structure of participatory democracy also has 6 components.

*Encampments:* Before an occupation, MST organizers (“militantes”) conduct outreach to landless workers, encouraging them to gather the necessary materials to join with others to prepare to form a community.<sup>3</sup> Once the materials are gathered, which may take some people up to a year, they start an encampment in temporary land, just next to a road. Many of the people are extremely poor and also have problems such as alcohol, drugs, violence, abusive behavior, lack of trust, etc. All of these problems end in the encampment, partly due to the rules and partly due to the intimacy of encampment in which it’s impossible to hide these behaviors. When there is a discipline problem, the person goes before the discipline sector of the camp, and they can be required to give community service. Expulsion from the community is very serious and only happens if the resolution of community service has not worked. Immediately, everyone is participating in governance and their futures, building trust and community. Every adult immediately chooses or is assigned a “sector” (education, health, gender, discipline, production, cooperation, mistica...)

After years in the encampment, the community makes an occupation of land. At this point, the lawyers go to work negotiating with the government for permanent land title, but this may be on yet another piece of land. Once the permanent land is acquired, participation becomes more challenging as there are more residents who have not been through the bonding process of the encampments. (This is always a difficulty for land reform movements (see Anderson 1994)) Nevertheless, the MST’s participatory process results in a far lower rate of abandonment than other land reform settlements.

*Decision-making:* The MST operates according to democratic centralism. Each group of 10 families is called a “nucleo de base” (NB) and elects one man and one woman to the council of their settlement/community. Each settlement then elects one man and one woman to the regional council. Each regional council elects one man and woman to the state- or province-level council. Each region elects one man and one woman to the national council, which meets for 2 days every 45 days. About 1/3 of the members of any council rotate off and are replaced at the National Congress, which is held every 3 years. The re-election of some incumbents ensures that the Congress doesn’t lose the benefit of more experienced representatives.

The MST decision-making process strives for consensus, but uses a modified process. This means, for example, that when disagreements arise that cannot be resolved by consensus,

the elected leader will make the decision. It also means that people must place their faith in their representatives to higher levels. The MST uses the concepts of ascending and descending democracy. 'Ascending' means that all issues to be decided are debated in the nucleos de base, and the instructions on how to vote on decisions rise up from the nucleos de base through the higher levels of representation. 'Descending' means that once the final decision is made at the higher levels, then the implementation of the decisions flow back down through a descending structure to the level of the nucleos de base. Criticism or lack of conformity with the decisions descending is generally not expressed through the implementation chain, but rather through the ascending process of democracy that must always begin with a debate in the nucleo de base, and is only transmitted upwards if it is the decision of the nucleo de base as a collective to do so.

In the MST, people are in meetings a lot of the time. The meetings are coordinated by the people who know the most. The nucleos de base have meetings at least once a week. In the MST culture of meetings, the emphasis is on short and efficient. Speakers are obliged to be efficient in making their points. (In contrast, in a Zapatista meeting you can talk for 5 hours and no one would interrupt you or leave the room. With the MST, if someone speaks more than 5 minutes without clear content and point, someone will inevitably say, "Companheiro, be more synthetic please. What is the point you are trying to make?")

At larger regional and national meetings, people are still organized into nucleo. If there are 500 people at the meeting, they are divided into 50 groups of 10. Each group reads the preparatory documents, debates, decides their position, and prepares comments to present at plenary. Afterwards they go back into group of 10, redebate what everyone said in plenary and decide what they want to say at the next plenary. Each group of ten also has a representative on the coordination team of the meeting which meets every night to decide how the day went and how to tweak the agenda as well as to address any problems of the gathering itself such as food or housing. At the June 2007 Congress of the MST in Brasilia, this method was used with 17,000 participants. The nucleo groups were a little bigger, about 50 people, organized by the bus they traveled in. Each bus began their discussions as they started their journey to the Congress.

*Education:* The MST believe that knowledge is power. The MST ideology is clear that this is a movement to change the system. Domination occurs through keeping people in ignorance. The MST runs its own schools, on a Freirean model blended with the ideas of other noted pedagogues, like Anton Makarenko from the early days of the Russian revolution. The teachers and staff and students in the schools participate in the MST governance structure by electing one man and one woman to represent each nucleo de base of ten students, ten teachers, etc. In addition to the schools, members of the MST, regardless of age or any other factor, are obligated to continue their learning. To know the system and defend yourself, each member spends two months per year studying. Education occurs at whatever level you are. If you are illiterate you are studying 2 months a year learning to read and write. If you finish college, you must go to graduate school.

In addition, the nucleo de base meets regularly for ideological study. The MST ideology is strengthened and reinforced through the creation and practice of rituals called "mistica" which build a peasant-worker identity and unity. No MST meeting begins without a mistica, which are also common in fellow peasant organizations in the international organization, La Vía Campesina (<http://www.viacampesina.org>), but the MST seems most committed in using them. (See Issa 1997)

One of the features of the MST that makes it such a powerful force in Brasil is being able to count upon large numbers of trained militants or cadre, who are like community organizers or outreach workers. Every nucleo de base of families must “liberate” one member for 1.5 to 2 years at a time, to work as a part- or full-time activist for the movement. The families in the nucleo de base commit to covering that person’s labor on their family’s farmland, either through contributing work or farm products to the person’s family. The person who has thus been liberated, then attends a political training school for the formation of militants. The school is not in a central location, but moves around the country providing training to each region. Militantes go to an area where landless people are not yet organized, to organize them to do occupations of unused land and create settlements. They then accompany settlements in the first few years of life until they’re self-running based on their own sectors. This system gives the MST more than 15,000 militants at any given time, making it possible for the movement to simultaneously organize dozens of new land occupations, accompany dozens of encampments, mobilize large marches and sit-ins at government offices, and administer regional and national cooperatives.

*Resources:* “We are very Cartesian. Everything has coordinates.” Among the things with coordinates is a method for getting resources from the state without becoming contaminated ideologically or clientalistically. While the Zapatistas avoid this contamination by refusing all state funding and support programs, the MST protects themselves through ideological formation and combative methods. They use powerful actions to “hit the state hard and take the resources.” They get educational funding and agricultural credit funding by demanding their proportional share of the state and federal budgets. They use the laws on cooperatives to establish and legally register production and consumption cooperatives. They get capital through the federal programs for credit unions.

*Production:* Originally, one of the sectors was “cooperatives,” which really meant “collectives.” However, it soon became apparent that while slum- or favela-dwellers who participated in land occupations were happy working together in farming collectives, recently landless peasants dreamed of recovering the individual family farm. To make room for this range of expectations, the MST changed the name to the “sector of cooperation” in order to allow for a broader set of activities. Production coops are established within a settlement. Some families within a settlement form together to collectively work a piece of land, while others work separately but have a coop for the purposes of credit and marketing. The families involved decide what they want to do.

There are also regional cooperatives for marketing, transportation, storage, processing, technical assistance, and collective purchasing of inputs, as well as credit. There are national cooperatives for agriculture and education. These manage very large amounts of money in an accountable way for the MST. The federal education money goes through one of these. Another national cooperative is for all of the agricultural projects. The cooperatives are represented in the MST governance structure as part of the production sector.

There is some debate about how the big bureaucracies of the coops, and the tasks of administering money and organizational resources does not always seem compatible organizationally with the social movement functions of the MST. The more administrative functions are seen as possibly depoliticizing. So there is lots of discussion about what degree of bureaucratization is useful given the need to manage huge amount of money and institutions (schools, distribution, etc.) and how bureaucracy impedes mass mobilization and political

action for land occupations and massive protest marches. It's an ongoing internal process to find the right internal structures that can do those different things well.

*Engaging with other social movements:* The MST has come to the conclusion that it needs strong alliances in order to achieve the structural changes it desires in Brazil. At the national level, this has meant trying to strengthen allied rural movements through the *Vía Campesina-Brasil*. As the “strongest sibling” among the rural movements, with an established training infrastructure, the MST has begun to open 50% of all training and political opportunities to cadre from the five other member organizations of *Vía Campesina-Brasil*. Because change in Brazil also requires change in global economic governance structures, the MST has also begun to devote substantial resources to strengthening the *Vía Campesina International*. As a result of the movement's participation in the global peasant alliance *La Vía Campesina* –in which the issue of farming technology has become politicized as a historic clash between the ecologically destructive industrialized agribusiness of farming and a rediscovered ecological peasant model of farming – the MST has developed internal programs to promote agroecological farming.

And, in a move similar to, and indeed influenced by, the Zapatista's Other Campaign, the MST is building a national political movement allying the rural and urban Lefts, which is called *Asamblea Popular* (“Peoples’ Assembly”), an open political space in which different movements seek to negotiate consensus positions for struggle and for a new “National Project” for Brazil. Within the *Asamblea Popular*, the MST promotes a smaller, more tightly controlled space called *Consulta Popular* (“Peoples Consultation”), which functions as a sort of steering committee between mass based social movements. Similar to the methods of the Other Campaign, in 1998 the MST held discussions across the country as part of an 80-column march across the country. (Dias Martins 2006)

## Analysis

Although these two movements operate in very different contexts and with very different kinds of power, for both the central concern of participatory democracy is *autonomy*. Unfortunately, many social movements scholars, political scientists, and much of the traditional left are, as a Zapatista supporter articulated, “illiterate in terms of autonomy” (in Mora 2007, 66).

Mora points out that the neoliberal state attempts to construct a concept of multicultural autonomy that is universalistic, individualistic and ultimately another form of the “consumer choice” touted by globalization. Zapatista autonomy is collective, relational, “intercultural”, and centrally concerned with territory, self-governance, and control over resources. (Mora 2007) The Zapatistas establish their own systems of governance, manage provisioning for communities (including health and education), control the activities of outside organizations (including both the Mexican military and foreign charities), and establish policy (such as the ban on alcohol use). The MST establishes autonomy by creating self-governed, self-provisioning communities committed to liberation at every level, from the family to the economy. These communities trade internally and produce their own essentials (seeds, food products, education).

Unlike many other social movements, these two have a sense of space and place which they defend militantly. In the core of their “territory” Zapatistas have authority to bar pesticide salesmen. At the outskirts, Zapatistas live in mixed communities with two systems of government. Between is a zone of communities some of which are 100% Zapatista, some are

non Zapatista, and some are mixed. The MST think in terms of “land” rather than “territory” but they are examining issues regarding contiguity and permeability.

For the MST and the Zapatistas the biggest issue of autonomy is how to avoid demobilization through clientalism and paternalism induced by government programs and political parties. Zapatistas cannot accept any funds from government programs (like agricultural subsidies or the subsidy to families called Oportunidades). Since some people have had to leave the Zapatistas in order to receive this support, the Other Campaign is a way for them to continue to participate in the Zapatista process, as Campaign members may receive subsidies. Unlike the Zapatistas, the MST does accept government money. It is pragmatic about (and powerfully expresses entitlement to) government money and relations with elected officials, but defends itself from electoral politics through ideological and cultural means.

Members of electoral parties cannot be Zapatistas, nor can they members of the Other Campaign. (Members of revolutionary parties that are not electoral can be part of the Other Campaign.) The MST is allied with an electoral party, the PT, but it maintains autonomy structurally by endorsing a cross-party slate of candidates. They support some PT candidates and also candidates from other parties who have signed a pledge that they will be loyal to peasant interests over party interests whenever these conflict. MST Militants cannot be members of political parties, but grassroots members of the communities may be, and may also run for election to local municipal councils.

The MST focus intense efforts on *ideological formation* to inoculate members against clientalism and paternalism. (See Dias Martins 2006) The Zapatistas are not so organized on this point but in Zapatista communities they do work to intensify the contradictions between the old way of politics and the new way. People are pressured to choose a side. While the MST insist that only mass struggle can make real change, not elections, the Zapatistas emphasize the need to create culturally another way of doing politics.

We were most impressed by the movements’ emphasis on the *school of democracy*. For the Zapatistas, once everyone has the experience of “being government”, no one can be mystified or fooled by it. In the MST, democratic decisionmaking is pervasive and immediate. Each group of 10 families (nucleo de base) has democratic meetings and participates, through rotating representatives, in shaping the community. We were also struck by the concept of *obligations of participation*. The Zapatistas require attendance at community consultations and rotate participation in community government. The MST require participation in the nucleo de base, in rotating governance, in sectors, and in education. In both the Zapatistas and the MST, people are obligated to contribute to the support of community members who are serving as representatives or militantes. Moreover, ideological formation is an obligation in the MST. As Dias Martins points out, members of the MST also “observe their individual attitudes...to make changes from inside themselves.” (2006: 273)

In their introduction to the previous volume, Stahler-Sholk et. al. ask “whether...autonomy yields more horizontal and participatory and transparent processes”? (Stahler-Sholk, Vanden, and Kuecker 2007, 10) Both movements seek autonomy from what they describe as the old ways of doing politics, creating new, more accountable and participatory forms of politics and a more equitable material situation as a result.

One of the things learned in the school of democracy is a *political culture*. For the MST, the struggle is not only to gain land, but to change the culture in which people are living – Che Guevara’s “new man and new woman”. The Zapatistas are also constantly trying to develop the level of consciousness. For the Zapatistas, this struggle also includes the issue of

migration, which is a force devastating the fabric of communities. Zapatistas may not participate in migratory work. One of the goals of the schools is to provide a form of education that links children to their communities instead of shaming campesino life and glorifying the city. Zapatista schools educate children in local history in national and global context and also in skills for use in their communities.

Political culture also includes how people relate to each other. (Polletta found that associational style was both the strength and the Achilles heel of social movements.) Zapatista political culture involves a lot of time spent listening to whatever people want to share with the group. The MST political culture is “a culture of meetings”, short efficient ones, in which it is important to speak succinctly and to the point. Militants’ training includes how to conduct meetings and they teach by example. These movements do not fit into the styles Polletta identified in US movements. The Zapatistas and the MST have a revolutionary party style based on allegiance to an ideology that is internally defined and held together with communal social control. Trust is determined by membership. Having survived the years of commitment in the encampments is the basis of trust for the MST. To be in the Zapatistas requires commitment and hardship. From the moment that a family is demonstrating commitment through practice (quitting the government programs, not sending their children to the government school, etc.) they are trusted members. If they stop these practices, they are no longer.

Polletta found two practices that enable participatory democracy to surmount the limitations of associational style: deliberative talk and experimentation. Both movements use these two practices extensively. The Zapatista “culture of listening” and the MST culture of upward flowing and downward flowing democracy are both methods of empowering deliberation while preventing domination. Both movements use rotation to avoid a few persons gaining too much authority. In addition, the Zapatistas do internal reports and an issue of self-criticism has been too much intervention by the more experienced cadre. Openness, information flow, and genuine deliberation is protected in the Zapatistas through the use of community consultations with no time limits and in the MST by the regular meeting of the *nucleo de base* and the method of democracy flowing upward.

The Zapatistas’ vision of autonomy asserts that things can be done differently at different levels of autonomy, in the context of consensus. It’s easy to get authorized to do something differently as an experiment. For example, when a community did not want to contribute money to a region-wide program, the regional junta agreed that community should experiment with their own method for that program, and would self-finance it. The MST uses experimentation as well. For example, they experiment with how to lay out the settlements (clustering the houses or dispersing them with the farmland) to best promote political consciousness. The MST is generally becoming more flexible in practical matters and more willing to experiment.

A major concern of leftist observers is movements’ commitment to social diversity. The Zapatistas and MST hold themselves accountable for fully integrating and including those who are an organic part of their base community. So the Zapatistas provide representative positions to all of the ethnic groups in their territory and mestizos. The MST are in alliance with indigenous organizations and do not do land occupations in areas claimed by indigenous people. This solidarity extends back to the MST’s origins, in a refusal to participate in a colonization project on indigenous land. (Angus Lindsay Wright and Welford 2003) Most fascinating is the fact that these two movements are committed to the full participation and equal power of women. The Zapatistas and the MST address this structurally and they are continually self-critical of their unvanquished plague of machismo. Moreover, in their political dialogue beyond their own communities, the Zapatistas do express solidarity with people who

are politically marginalized and oppressed in many ways in many places, exhorting a broad alliance of solidarity.

Anthropologist David Graeber (Graeber 2007) reminds us that modern civic representative systems were based on an “interstitial cosmopolitan” proletarian and multicultural history of “democratic improvisation”, owing little to ancient Greece and possibly something to pirate ships. We hope that this detailed view of these movements practices can be helpful to communities building democratic movements in other spaces. We especially encourage movements to give consideration to their school of democracy, obligations of participation and defense from political parties.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Alterglobalization’ is a term which has succeeded ‘anti-globalization’. It expresses multilingually these movements’ generation of alternatives accompanying their rejection of corporate/capitalist globalization. See Starr 2005.

<sup>2</sup> In September 1997, representatives from 1111 communities made a caravan to Mexico City. That is the most recent official count of the number of Zapatista communities.

<sup>3</sup> At the beginning of the MST, the organization donated the materials to the encampments, but discovered that with donated materials, people would flee if the police attacked. If, on the other hand, they have had to gather their own tenting, etc, they stay and fight to defend it when attacked by the police.