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Publication Date

2022-06-03

Undergraduate

Food sovereignty as purpose and strategy: the role of agriculture in the Zapatista approach to Indigenous autonomy and governance from below.

When the Zapatistas, more formally the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN), first declared their uprising in January of 1994, the militant group of Indigenous peoples and leftist intellectuals in Chiapas were responding directly to the signing of NAFTA by the United States, Mexico, and Canada (Marcos et al, 2008). The deal directly pertained to the land and livelihoods of peasant farmers in the region as it attempted to reshape the agricultural industry, particularly that of corn, along privatized, neoliberal lines opposed to the traditional, communitarian subsistence methods of peasant farmers and their milpa system that had existed for millennia (Marcos et al, 2008). The Zapatistas chose the start of their uprising to align with NAFTA's implementation as they believed the agricultural reforms of the deal would be a "summary execution" for indigenous peoples in the region (Marcos et al, 2008, p. 34). Emerging primarily in response to these changes, the Zapatistas declared new rules and visions for land in Chiapas that would assert Indigenous values and practices over the state's mission of increasing industrialized agriculture. Attempting to reassert the value of common property and cooperative production, the Zapatista uprising centered food sovereignty as both purpose and strategy. The role of agriculture in the Zapatista movement shows how the movement was not just a response to economic and social conditions of the time, but a move towards an alternative vision of Indigenous futures in Mexico centered around a traditional yet revolutionary commitment to self-reliance and environmental and cultural sovereignty based on land reform. In this paper, I argue that Zapatista agriculture and associated food sovereignty are an essential piece of the Zapatista attempt at governing from below in two key ways: these practices embody EZLN ideals by asserting Indigenous values over the logic of the state and neoliberal economics, while

also providing the food that fuels the past, present, and future of the resistance itself.

Acknowledgment of the impact of research methods and positionality on this paper are included in Appendix B and C, respectively.

I. Neoliberalism's impact on Mexican agriculture: spurring a need for revolutionary land reform and food systems

The shift in Mexican agriculture resulting from NAFTA—shifts that helped spur Zapatista resistance movements—is exemplified by the case of one crop in particular. Corn in Chiapas acted as a focal point for neoliberal reforms, as well as one site of Zapatista resistance— a more thorough understanding of these dynamics, and this plant, help to ground the claims of this paper in an ecological, cultural, and geographic context. Among the neoliberal reforms for Mexican production and trade, corn emerged as a flashpoint for the Chiapas region in particular due to the impacts of reforms on the plant's cultivation and the crop's importance to local livelihoods and Indigenous culture. The case of corn illustrates the conflict between the neoliberal logic of NAFTA and Indigenous ways of relating to the land. Maize, the more precise term for the plant, is a key component of the milpa system, an environmentally beneficial permaculture system of maize, beans, and squash that is the foundation of Indigenous Mexican diets and was the key to the development of Mayan society thousands of years ago (Ford & Nigh, 2009). The system is key to Indigenous food sovereignty and security as it is highly adaptive, protects and rehabilitates soil health, and is the basis for Indigenous diets (Nigh & Diemont, 2013). Not only did maize represent the source of life in many Indigenous origin stories, but it also represents two-thirds of the national caloric intake (Mullaney, 2014; Keleman & Bellon, 2009). The sustainable management of maize, particularly the protection and propagation of native seed

varieties and biodiversity, was designed to respond to change and shock (Ford & Nigh, 2009). This adaptive management system, then, emerges not just as essential to Indigenous ways of life historically, but also as essential to the current moment in 1994 as the Zapatistas prepared to survive through conflict, preserve their culture in a neoliberal paradigm designed to erase it, and to imagine new and sustainable futures for their communities.

The role of NAFTA in agriculture cannot be overstated in the Mexican context. As a nation dependent on maize for both bodily and economic sustenance, the influx of heavily subsidized and genetically engineered American corn as a result of the trade agreement began to undermine traditional foodways and methods of production and income. Since US corn is so heavily supported by the American government through guaranteed buying programs and agricultural subsidies, American corn sets the international price standard by being by far the cheapest option (Nisivaco, 2017). As Mexico had to open its trade borders under neoliberal market liberalization, US corn flooded the market and forced Mexican producers to compete with this lower price (Nisivaco, 2017). This competition means that farmers had to either increase production, with environmentally deleterious effects due to the practices of large-scale monoculture, or cut labor (Nisivaco, 2017). This put a squeeze on land resources while displacing small-scale peasant farmers. The emphasis on supporting large-scale agribusiness over other forms of production was met by a shift in internal Mexican policies for agriculture. Neoliberal commitments to reducing government intervention in all spheres of life (encouraged hypocritically by the United States) led the Mexican government to make several changes related to maize production. Immediately following NAFTA, Mexico lifted corn tariffs on American products, cut overall state investment in agriculture by 90%, and farm support payments nearly in half. (Nisivaco, 2017). The removal of programs like price floors, affordable credit,

guaranteed markets and distribution, input subsidies, and land reform— many of which the United States continued to provide to its farmers— eliminated the social safety net for Mexican farmers (Nisivaco, 2017). When combined with a new program of cash payments to farmers per hectare, these programs began to impoverish Mexican farmers reliant on the old system and encourage a transition away from maize (Nisivaco, 2017). Economic changes to the Mexican maize system under NAFTA had the goal of bringing farmers into neoliberal national and international commodity chains and to concentrate agriculture in large scale industrial operations— this worked in direct opposition to practices of customary reciprocity, barter, local knowledge, seed diversity, complementarity, and communal lands that had all been built around traditional maize production and the milpa system (Galvez, 2018; Nisivaco, 2017). The pressure on farmers to move away from their traditional methods of small-scale subsistence with income-providing trade, or to abandon maize entirely, had life-or-death implications for the economic well-being of many Mexican communities. For Indigenous communities, in particular, this pressure also threatened their cultural, spiritual, and communal heritage.

II. Land rights as a motivation for and effect of the Zapatista uprising

The Zapatista uprising was in many ways a response to the threat of neoliberal policies on Indigenous and peasant agriculture and livelihoods in Chiapas. The milpa and maize systems of Indigenous peoples in Mexico are constructed in ways directly opposing neoliberal ideology and practice. While the Zapatista movement is seen by many as primarily an assertion of Indigenous sovereignty, Indigenous autonomy cannot be separated from Indigenous territory, and therefore the Zapatista uprising is not just about identity, but also about space. The name itself, the Zapatistas, harkens back to the work of Emilio Zapata in the early 20th century, who

organized peasants in Mexico to redistribute land and fight for ‘Tierra y Libertad’ to preserve indigenous agrarian traditions through territorial rights and control (Marcos et al, 2004). To emerge out of nowhere in 1994 with thousands of supporters, a clear action plan, and the means for success, the Zapatistas had been preparing for years before January 1st came around— state suppression of leftist ideology and protest in urban areas in the 1960s and 70s eventually led to organizing efforts and substantial formation of the EZLN in the 1980s (Marcos et al, 2004). The formation of the revolutionary movement was substantially rooted not just in the political ideology of intellectuals, but in the lived experience of local Indigenous peoples, especially their struggles for a decent livelihood on the land they worked (Marcos et al, 2004).

One catalyst for the armed mobilization of Zapatistas in 1994, in addition to the threats of NAFTA, was the recent and drastic change to the land reform process in Mexico. For much of the 20th century, under the rule of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), Mexico had been engaging in a land reform process outlined in Article 27 of the Constitution. In this process, aimed at making land ownership more equitable, communal landholdings—*ejidos*—were established by the state and under the control of those who worked the land, with the only requirement being that it remained productive (Mora, 2017). This process of land reform moved forward in somewhat erratic ways from one administration to another— while many regions benefited from the process, the slow pace meant that Chiapas was largely left waiting (Mora, 2017). As of 1960, 52% of the land in Chiapas was still held by only 2% of the population (Eisenstadt, 2008). Indigenous farmers in Chiapas were likely expecting the break up of haciendas and establishment of *ejidos* to reach them sooner or later; this process could have had the potential to formalize their rights to their territories. However, following the economic downturn of 1982 in Mexico, the government began to enact the first of many neoliberal reforms

under IMF structural adjustment programs that were necessary for debt relief (Galvez, 2018). This included relaxed limits on foreign land ownership, the end of agrarian reform, and the break-up and privatization of communal landholdings. These changes dismantled traditional communal land tenure in favor of a system more amenable to privatization, commodification, and foreign investment (Galvez, 2018). In 1992, an official repeal of Article 27 meant that land reform by the state would not make it to the southernmost state of the nation. The state government during this time was also twisting the legal code to imprison many land-seeking peasants— who made up 90% of the prison population of Chiapas in 1990— which also allowed the repossession of many small farms and communal lands (Eisenstadt, 2008). It was in this context of the breakdown of state protection and enforcement of the *ejido* system that the Zapatistas began to organize; nearly 40% of the central base of insurgents came from Chiapas' largest land advocacy group, the Asociación Rural de Interés Colectivo (Eisenstadt, 2008). Not only was EZLN organizing rooted in land rights, but the emergence of global awareness of Indigenous rights provided the Zapatistas with a new framework. The framework of Indigenous rights allowed the Zapatistas' claims on territory to extend beyond the conventional land rights they were entitled to, yet the state had denied them, as farmers. (Eisenstadt, 2008). In summary, Chiapas in particular suffered from the broken system of land reform as it was denied the reorganization of territory around the rights and labor of local peasant farmers that it had been promised. An armed mobilization focused on Indigenous rights and practices to secure land that rightfully belonged to the Zapatista constituency and their neighbors arose not just in the context of international neoliberal reforms, but also due to the national land policies enacted, or rather abandoned, by the Mexican state.

Living in fear that the new agricultural system built by neoliberal reforms would push farmers off their lands and displace Indigenous peoples, the Zapatistas made discursive claims to and plans for land rights and repossession and acted upon them. Weeks of insurgency in the Chiapas countryside at the start of 1994 led to a process of land expropriation that allowed the Zapatistas to occupy and control their own lands. This process inspired occupations among the rural peasantry outside of the organization, to the tune of 148,000 hectares across 1,700 occupations (Hernandez et al, 2022) directly following the uprising. The conflict with and occupations of the Zapatistas forced the government to restart the process of land redistribution in Chiapas, and agrarian agreements established and enacted between 1995 and 1999 led to 300,000 hectares of land being placed back in the hands of peasants (Hernandez et al, 2022). Today, beyond their communal landholdings derived from the *ejido* system, the Zapatistas have reclaimed 60,000 hectares of finca land (Hernandez et al, 2022). The militant claiming of territory for communities was not just an assertion of the autonomy of peasants over the land they work, but also an assertion of Indigenous rights, identity, and communal practice over neoliberal ideologies of the individual, isolated, capitalist farmer. Both an economic and a cultural argument support the establishment of autonomous collective lands in Chiapas. Holding fast to traditional land ownership structures gives resilience to the subsistence system and allows peasants to continue to feed their families in a neoliberal system that wishes to turn them into wage laborers for large corporations. However, the Zapatista commitment to land reform takes sovereignty beyond just control over space by asserting sovereignty over what is allowed within that space. The elevation of Indigenous practices of farming in Chiapas within Zapatista territory makes the Zapatista food system both a very real representation of autonomy and resistance, and a means to maintain those commitments.

III. The importance of agriculture in the Zapatista movement

The centrality of land rights to the Zapatista movement ties Indigenous rights to agriculture by building physical spaces of sovereignty that are committed to and fueled by traditional Indigenous land tenure practices, specifically Indigenous food systems. The importance of agriculture to the movement becomes clear in an analysis of the Zapatista Agrarian Law, released on December 31st, 1993, one day before the uprising began (Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional [EZLN], 1993). The establishment of this law and its ideals at the very start of the Zapatista uprising communicates the central importance of agriculture and land tenure to the movement. The law targeted only large and privatized operations, excluding communal and ejido lands, to claim the land for those who work it— from the very first words of the declaration, the Zapatistas are performing the work of the state where it has fallen short. This redistribution focused on those without land and day laborers, the persons who had become displaced by the end of land reform and were especially vulnerable to the impending impacts of NAFTA. Upon committing to this process of redistribution, the Zapatistas immediately jump into assertions of their new vision for the food system. The law states that anyone who benefits from it must commit primarily to providing food for the Mexican people, rather than for sale or exchange— this is the subsistence, rather than capitalist, foundation of the Zapatista move towards food security. Additionally, to work the land, individuals must meet conditions of sobriety, collective work, and enrolling their children in Zapatista schools rather than public schools (Mora, 2017). Finally, after outlining the details of the Zapatista land reform process around the theme of agriculture, the law envisions a holistic support network for communities established around the connection between land and food. A commitment to trade centers,

community health centers, education, housing, entertainment, roads, and utility services shows how the Zapatista desire for autonomy of land and food comes with an understanding of the need to provide state-like services to its constituents; this is especially necessary because *La Resistencia* of the Zapatistas emphasizes a rejection of government programs and support (Mora, 2017). The fact that this law intertwines autonomy with land and agriculture from the very beginning of the rebellion creates a cohesive vision for a Zapatista way of life built around subsistence farming, traditional practices, and a commitment to the local community over the state and its economy.

The Zapatista uprising's central focus on land and agriculture is not just evident in the group's name and their response to land reform and NAFTA but comes through in an analysis of Zapatista communications and media. When analyzing an EZLN poster held by the UCLA Library Special Collections, images of corn and agricultural labor as being tied to revolutionary mobilization come through in this visualization of the movement and its call to action; the more contemporary date of this poster shows the lasting influence of these agrarian ideals on the movement (EZLN, 2010). Art has long been a communicative tactic of the EZLN movement and its ideals, particularly in the medium of murals; murals in Oventic, the headquarters of the Zapatista movement, combine revolutionary imagery with illustrations of seeds, farms, and a deep connection to the Earth and its natural systems (Strom, 2018). Specific images include Zapatista masks made of maize kernels, fighters emerging from endless fields of maize or meant to look like maize themselves, women armed with plants rather than guns, community members holding hands supported by maize fields, and depictions of the agricultural productivity of communal lands, among other images. Words alongside these images also communicate a deep intertwining of agricultural practice with the identities of both individual Zapatistas and the

Zapatista movement as a whole. Some examples of such murals have been included in Appendix A. These art pieces emphasize the integral role of food and agriculture in crafting a revolutionary vision of life in Chiapas and hope for the future. The existence of farming and maize motifs in both early and more current Zapatista posters and murals shows how Zapatista agriculture is not only an internal commitment made by the EZLN and directly integrated into physical living spaces, but also a key piece of its mission that it wishes to communicate to the wider world.

IV. The Zapatista agricultural model: a means for Indigenous food sovereignty

The Zapatista commitment to sovereignty in and over space manifests in the movement's systems of food sovereignty. Food sovereignty is defined as the ability of people to exercise autonomy over food systems that ensure an ecologically sustainable and socially and culturally just production and distribution of food (Gahman, 2017). The EZLN's development agenda reflects a commitment to food sovereignty since the five axes of development that the organization is formally committed to— education, health, food and seed sovereignty, agroecology, and a solidarity economy— all reflect the importance of agriculture to development and help to support the agricultural practices themselves (EZLN, 1993; Hernandez et al, 2022). Food sovereignty realized by subsistence agriculture is necessary to the realities of Zapatista life in two key ways. One, since *La Resistencia* mandates rejection of government support, Zapatistas do not participate in the cash payments of programs like Oportunidades that would allow them to purchase the foodstuffs they need for survival— instead, they must grow it for themselves (Hernandez et al, 2022; Mora, 2017). Two, strengthening the system that allows peasants to provide for themselves outside of the neoliberal economic system, and making sure this system can be sustained into the future, not only provides the literal fuel for resistance but is

also resistance in itself. Food sovereignty is a commitment to the larger political struggle of Zapatista autonomy both today and tomorrow. The Zapatista interpretation of this sovereignty emphasizes agro-ecological farming practices, education through place-based teaching and learning, collective work, and the establishment of local cooperatives to support production and trade (Gahman, 2017).

The right to food sovereignty can serve as an example of how Indigenous peoples resist not just the practices of neoliberalism, but its discourses as well. Human rights as a global discourse takes on many forms, yet this narrative is often constructed by the Global North's transnational non-profit and development agencies and somewhat imposed upon local communities. Rather than being reliant on the state to dole out rights to land and methods of cultivation, the Zapatistas claimed the right to their land and food systems through territorial practices and very focused organizing and mobilization. Analyzing Zapatista food sovereignty in this way ties into Speed's assertion that Indigenous people are not the passive agents that some might perceive them to be, but rather active agents asserting their local identities in the context of a global discourse (Speed, 2008). These local identities require the right to space and place, the right to healthy food and soil, and the right to practice Indigenous farming and land-tenure methods to thrive. The land reform and agricultural commitments of the Zapatistas reveal food as an essential element of human rights when those rights are allowed to be envisioned and ensured by Indigenous communities themselves. Furthermore, in the context of Chiapas, cultural rights cannot be fully severed from bodily and territorial rights. This case study, therefore, suggests a more holistic and context-specific approach to human rights— more than just itemized lists of vague guarantees— is necessary. Further analysis on Zapatista land tenure and agricultural

programs could also address some of Speed's ideas on individual versus collective rights, although that analysis is not included here.

The commitment to food sovereignty furthered by the EZLN begins in the structure of land tenure within Zapatista communities, which prioritizes Indigenous autonomy at all stages. The Zapatista land reform process sows the seeds for autonomy over space and sustenance first at the scale of the individual, allowing farmers to choose the land they feel inclined to work and never permanently assigning that space to any one family (Mora, 2017). This micro autonomy of the individual family unit is scaled up to the community level as the Zapatistas fill another gap in administration left behind by the government, which is the resolution of land tenure conflicts (Mora, 2017). Once the places and spaces of farming have been established through collective discussion and deliberation, the work of farming begins in a system centered around collective labor.

This primary requirement of participation is followed by the terms of the work itself. Zapatistas officially committed to agroecological farming systems in 2003, with an emphasis on eliminating chemicals, promoting collectives for food production, and agrobiodiversity conservation programs (Hernandez et al, 2022). In a rejection of the neoliberal push towards industrialized agriculture, the Zapatista commitment to agroecology simultaneously elevates and protects Indigenous practices. One key component of agroecology is the rehabilitation of the soil, long degraded by overuse and chemical inputs, to a level of health that can support subsistence farming (Hernandez et al, 2022). Not only does a mandated rejection of industrialized practices help the soil and reflect a commitment to agroecology, but so too does the traditional milpa system itself (Nigh & Diemont, 2013). The milpa system provides a complete diet while also

acting as an adaptive management system, designed to preserve soil health through emphasizing the natural capacity of plants and human support of their life cycles (Nigh & Diemont, 2013). Maize plants provide the structure for squash vines to climb up towards the sun, while the leaves of the squash plants shade the ground and keep moisture in, providing the perfect environment for beans to grow and fix nitrogen in the soil, replenishing the soil and removing the need for fertilizing inputs (Nigh & Diemont, 2013). The knowledge and logic of the neoliberal farming system are environmentally detrimental and unsustainable, limiting the futures of farmers while also damaging their present experiences. Indigenous systems of farming pioneered by the Mayans and continued in places like Chiapas, however, are intimately tied to and beneficial for the land and those who work it (Nigh & Diemont, 2013). Zapatista resistance, on the whole, often translated into the written word by Subcomandante Marcos, is centered around a connection to the land and a commitment to environmental health as the health of the people (Marcos et al, 2004).

Another key component of the agroecological farming system of the Zapatistas is education, a connection that reveals the intimate ties between growing food, local knowledge, and cultural practice and identity. The Zapatistas see their immediate environment as a classroom, and many Zapatista schools have a special educator of agroecological practices (Gahman, 2017). Students participate in experiential learning to understand the practices that sustain both their Indigenous and Zapatista ways of life, with a focus on conservation (Gahman, 2017). The educational aspect of Zapatista agricultural policy preserves local knowledge in order to sustain the struggle itself. This is in itself another form of resistance to neoliberal hegemony, which attempts to rationalize the world and all experience into market factors that can be understood by anyone, anywhere. The assertion of the importance of ecological and cultural

specificity for properly working and caring for the land is an additional example of Zapatista sovereignty over both place and practice.

V. Seed sovereignty as food sovereignty

Beyond the structure of the milpa system that made maize so central to Indigenous livelihoods and works to preserve it today, and the commitments of Zapatista discourse and farmers to protecting and preserving their food sources and cultural practices through education, one agricultural practice in particular represents the EZLN's rejection of neoliberal logic and practices of autonomy: seed sovereignty.

Seed sovereignty is important to the Zapatista movement for several reasons, and as a case study of Zapatista practice, reflects the centrality of food sovereignty in general to the movement's expression of its views and possibilities for its future. Seed sovereignty over maize in particular has always been a practice of Indigenous peoples in Central America, simply because of the way maize must be farmed and propagated (Hernandez et al, 2022). Cultivated over thousands of years with human support, modern maize strains do not reproduce on their own (Mullaney, 2014). Each season, a farmer must select the cream of the crop, preserve its seeds, and plant those seeds next year. This represents a form of sovereignty over the means of production— each year, farmers grow the inputs they need for the next season (Mullaney, 2014). This also allows for a very careful selection of desired traits that can be tailored to immediate and particular environmental conditions and community needs, making the system incredibly adaptable (Hernandez et al, 2022; Nigh & Diemont, 2013). This process has resulted, over time, in the creation of more than 250 varieties of native maize that were each carefully bred by multiple generations of invested Indigenous farmers (Hernandez et al, 2022). In this way, seeds

also perform a cultural function of tying generations of Indigenous peoples together, as the maize plant can preserve and carry identity and local knowledge through time. This practice was and is severely threatened by the introduction of neoliberal agricultural policies. The introduction of NAFTA reemerges in this story at the site and scale of seeds to illustrate not just the deleterious economic impacts of the trade deal on Indigenous peoples but to also reveal the cultural and environmental impacts of this economic logic, represented by one plant in particular. Zapatista commitments to seed sovereignty are a wholehearted rejection of neoliberalism, as well as an attempt to preserve autonomy and Indigenous-designed solutions to issues of the health of food, environment, and people.

Beginning in 2002 and 2003, the Zapatista seed sovereignty program, *Semillas Madre en Resistencia*, was a direct response to the importation of genetically modified corn seeds into Mexico as part of trade liberalization under NAFTA (Hernandez et al, 2022). The reason for this importation was that industrialized agriculture is often accompanied by capitalist logic that seeks to increase income for large agricultural corporations. Under the claim of food security— that genetically modified seeds are more productive and can produce more food per hectare than traditional seeds— agricultural corporations engineered new seeds that were also sterile or patented, and therefore single-use (Mullaney, 2014). This commodification of the seed directly contrasts the Indigenous system of seed-saving, threatening Indigenous communities in several ways. One, farmers would need money they did not have to plant their crop each year, creating debt and dependence on the industrial system and foreign corporations. Second, genetically modified seeds often require chemical inputs that represent another cost barrier while also degrading the environment. Third, the replacement of native maize with genetically modified (GM) seeds would eliminate local knowledge of maize biodiversity and reduce the adaptability

and success of local maize systems. This would therefore challenge cultural heritage as well as the bodily and economic wellbeing of native communities. A rejection of genetically modified seeds in favor of Indigenous seed sovereignty would protect Indigenous ways of life both ideologically and physically.

Although the Mexican government did engage in some protectionist measures related to the issue of seed contamination from accidental GM and maize crossbreeding, the Zapatistas were so fearful of the impacts of these new seeds on their native varieties that they declared their own territories as GMO-free (Hernandez et al, 2022). They even elevated their commitments to the global level by sending 20+ varieties of maize seeds around the world to contribute to the international anti-GMO movement (Hernandez et al, 2022). Envisioning native seeds as a protected commons, the Zapatista program for seed sovereignty tied larger agricultural practices of communal work, collective lands, and radical education to resist neoliberal practices. In emphasizing the active role of native peoples in the protection and reproduction of seeds, the program became a fight to prevent contamination and displacement of seeds, and by extension, native culture. It does this through the creation of native seed inventories and seed banks, promoting the diversification of maize in the milpa, and the establishment of experimental parcels of land to work on adapting maize to climate change (Hernandez et al, 2022).

This vision of food sovereignty based around seeds has widespread importance when put into practice. Protecting native seeds allows farmers to plant exactly what their families and communities need from season to season, which makes harvests more reliable under changing environmental conditions and provides crops with the nutritional or functional aspects that communities desire in the current moment (Mullaney, 2014). The commitment of the EZLN to the milpa system and native seeds has allowed these incredibly useful and intelligent systems to

expand as the organization has expanded (Hernandez et al, 2022). Current commitments to climate change adaptation highlight the importance of the milpa's historic and future environmental sustainability to the issue of food security (Hernandez et al, 2022). The seed sovereignty program represents food security based not on the production of more economically efficient food distributed to more people alienated from their environments, as neoliberalism imagines it, but rather an expansion of self-sufficiency from intimate knowledge of and reverence for the land. Protection of seeds by the Zapatistas is a rejection of neoliberal logic in another way as well because it recognizes the non-market value of a plant that has been so commodified as to become unrecognizable from its biological roots (Nisivaco, 2017). The popularity of the program, and commitments to seed sovereignty across Chiapas long before 1994, work to unify Indigenous and non-Indigenous rural peasants through an emphasis on cooperation amongst maize growers– the seeds transcend political affiliation (Hernandez et al, 2022). Most importantly, however, the Zapatista use of seeds as a tool of resistance against the state and foreign corporations turns ancestral practice into political practice. Seed sovereignty ensures the sustainability of the land, Indigenous knowledge and cultural practice, and of the movement itself. Threats to maize were at the root of the resistance to begin with and a commitment to protecting it remains central to its continuing success.

VI. Conclusion

The Zapatista push for land reform and subsequent commitment to traditional agriculture, particularly programs of seed sovereignty, reflect an autonomy over space itself and the use of space that privileges Indigenous knowledge and ways of life over neoliberal logic and praxis. Agricultural policies in EZLN territories are a direct response to the detrimental impacts of

NAFTA in Mexico and Mexican state policies. An analysis of Zapatista laws and communications reveals the centrality of this mission to the movement as a whole, supplying evidence for the reasons for resistance and alternative visions of life in Chiapas. Commitments to and realizations of food sovereignty attempt to preserve native cultures of the past and present, current livelihoods of Indigenous and rural peasant subsistence farmers, and the possibility and potential of political resistance in the future. Food sovereignty is, in this case, the core of political sovereignty. The educational and agroecological facets of Zapatista life do more than just elevate, concretize, and commit to Indigenous ways of tending the land, but they preserve environmentally beneficial practices that can be applied to political and ecological movements for justice and sustainability across the globe. In protecting what is dear to the native people of Chiapas, the Zapatistas provide something dear to all of us: the health and wellbeing of the Earth.

Appendix A - Photos from Dave Strom, 2018









Appendix B

A note on methods & sources

This project began primarily with a literature review of ethnographic and statistical research in the disciplines of anthropology, geography, food studies, political science, and economics. Analyzing online articles, journal articles, books, and institutional and government reports was supplemented by a direct primary source analysis of Zapatista communications, posters, murals, and legal documents. Incorporated into this paper were sources and ideas from the course material, namely the work of Mariana Mora and Shannon Speed. Most research was done through the UCLA Library online databases, general search engine inquiries, and with some support from the UCLA Library Special Collections.

Appendix C

A note on positionality

As a white woman from the United States, my educational and economic advantages give me access to the perspectives of academics and researchers from formal institutions, yet I am far removed from the lived experience and voices of Indigenous people, farmers, and Zapatistas in Chiapas. My research was also greatly limited by the fact that I am not fluent in Spanish. With the help of translating services I was able to access a few Spanish language sources, particularly those directly from the Zapatistas, but it is very likely that some relevant meaning was lost in the process of translation. Furthermore, my upbringing in a highly industrialized, neoliberal capitalist society that is greatly removed from nature and Indigenous practices could lead me to over romanticize the realities of life in the communities I am writing about. Acknowledging that, I am still of the opinion that this material represents interesting and valuable visions for how to live life outside of the neoliberal hegemony.

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