Zapatismo's Otra Campaña: Its Efforts for Autonomy and the Construction of an Anti-Capitalist Social Coalition in Mexico

George J. Williams

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Zapatismo’s Otra Campaña: Its Efforts for Autonomy and the Construction of an Anti-Capitalist Social Coalition in Mexico

A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Renée Crown University Honors Program at Syracuse University

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Abstract

This paper examines the extent to which La Otra Campaña (The Other Campaign) has succeeded in constructing anti-capitalist social coalitions in Mexico. Through a social movement theoretical lens, I analyze the dynamics of three distinct movements within La Otra: (1) the indigenous Zapatistas of Chiapas, (2) the CNUC, a campesino group from Tlaxcala, and (3) the Pancho Villas, an urban housing organization from Mexico City. Based on personal interviews, field notes, and participant observation, this paper compares the tactics and organizing techniques employed by each movement. It explores the ways in which the Zapatista project of “autonomy” has been appropriated in unique ways by the movements in Tlaxcala and Mexico City. Overall, I argue that although alliances have been built and allegiances strengthened, there remain various structural and ideological differences impeding La Otra’s progress and its ultimate goal to transform Mexico through the development of genuine grassroots democracy.
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George J. Williams
Syracuse University
Spring 2010

I. Introduction

And so the EZLN has resisted 12 years of war, of military, political, ideological and economic attacks, of siege, of harassment, of persecution, and they have not vanquished us. We have not sold out nor surrendered, and we have made progress. ... But there are things, the most important ones, such as our demands for which we struggle, which have not been fully achieved. To our way of thinking, and what we see in our heart, we have reached a point where we cannot go any further, and, in addition, it is possible that we could lose everything we have if we remain as we are and do nothing more in order to move forward. The hour has come to take a risk once again and to take a step which is dangerous but which is worthwhile. Because, perhaps united with other social sectors who suffer from the same wants as we do, it will be possible to achieve what we need and what we deserve. A new step forward in the indigenous struggle is only possible if the indigenous join together with workers, campesinos, students, teachers, employees ... the workers of the city and the countryside.

—The Sixth Declaration of the Lacandona Jungle, June 2005

In June of 2005, with the release of its Sixth Declaration of the Lacandona Jungle (La Sexta), the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) began La Otra Campaña, the newest phase in its global resistance movement against neoliberalism. La Otra called for a broad alliance between civil organizations and actors united by a common goal: creating a democracy of the people (Higgins

\[1\] La Otra Campaña translates as “The Other Campaign.” From herein, it will be referred to simply as, La Otra.
2004). Twelve years earlier, on New Year’s Day of 1994, the same day the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) came into effect, the EZLN had emerged from the Lacandona Jungle in Chiapas to declare war on the Mexican state, seizing four municipalities in Chiapas, including the important colonial city, San Cristóbal de las Casas. An insurgent group composed of mostly indigenous Mexicans, the EZLN fought for economic, social, and cultural justice for the indigenous peoples of Mexico, themselves the victims of over 500 years of racial discrimination and economic exploitation. The Zapatistas rejected the NAFTA treaty on the premise that indigenous farmers would lose their lands to large agro-businesses subsidized by the Mexican and U.S. governments. In the years following the rebellion, the Zapatistas would become a major political force in Mexico, seizing an estimated 250,000 hectares of land and declaring autonomy from the Mexican government (Rus 2005, 1).

The Zapatistas are credited with helping lead to the PRI’s defeat in the 2000 presidential election (Collier 2005, 450). That year, Vicente Fox became the first opposition candidate to win the Mexican presidency in 70 years, crumbling the PRI’s corporatist
Still, 16 years after the Zapatista Rebellion, Mexico remains a far cry from achieving democratic stability. Fox brought a renewed sense of hope to many Mexicans, including the Zapatistas, whose dispute he promised to resolve in “15 minutes” (Ramonet 2001, 134). But such optimism soon waned, as Zapatistas and Mexicans alike lost faith in policies failing to produce substantive social change. Under Fox, Mexico’s economy grew to become the ninth largest in the world, but employment figures within the country fell (Camp 2007, 285). Between 2000 and 2005, more than four million Mexicans traveled to the U.S. searching for work (Gibler 2009, 14). Drug violence worsened under Fox’s presidency, and Mexican authorities met giant protest waves in San Salvador Atenco and Oaxaca City with brutal repression, committing numerous human rights violations. Three years into Fox’s presidency, only 40 percent of the nation, compared to 67 percent when he first took office, believed the country was on the right path (Camp 2007, 223). By 2005, 83 percent of Mexicans were dissatisfied with democracy and viewed the country as pursuing the wrong path (239).

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2 Three main political parties currently govern Mexico: the PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional), the PAN (Partido Acción Nacional), and the PRD (Partido de la Revolución Democrática). Camp identifies the PRI as a far-right party, the PAN as center-right, and the PRD as leaning to the left. The Zapatistas wouldn’t necessarily agree with these classifications. They believe all to be corrupt, and, in terms of policy-making, usually associate the PAN with the U.S. Republican Party and the PRD with the U.S. Democratic Party. They consider the PRI to be a non-ideological party interested only in money and power.
This is the climate under which the Zapatista’s Otra Campaña burst onto the political stage four and a half years ago with the release of La Sexta. In September of 2005, more than 2,000 individuals gathered in the Zapatista civilian center of Francisco Gómez, located in the Lacandona Jungle, for La Otra’s first assembly. For two days, activists from urban youth groups, feminist collectives, trade unions, NGOs, and indigenous movements met to discuss the organizational, structural, and political makeup of La Otra (Mora 2007, 66). Through this meeting came the decision to organize a six-month speaking and listening tour through Mexico—an effort to recruit new members to the 181 indigenous associations, 68 leftist groups, 197 social organizations, 474 NGOs and collectives, and 2,000 individuals already subscribed to La Otra (Ross 2005, 2). On January 1, 2006, Subcomandante Marcos (the masked, pipe-smoking spokesman of the EZLN), the 16 members of La Sexta Commission,3 a caravan of Otra adherents, and independent journalists began their journey through Mexico’s 31 states to discuss La Otra’s plans for an alternative project, from below and to the left, to the Mexican political system. “‘Below’ implies bottom-up, grassroots self-organization among the rural and urban working class and poor. … ‘To the left’ signifies that the Other is both

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3 La Sexta Commission included 16 of the EZLN commanders responsible for helping draft La Sexta document during a month-long meeting in La Realidad in June of 2005.
theoretically and practically anti-capitalist" (Cuninghame 2007, 86). The tour consisted of public speeches and meetings where Marcos and the others sat listening to peoples’ concerns and to descriptions of their distinct forms of struggle. Time limits to these platicas were rarely set, and no subject remained off limits (Gibler 2009, 209-210). Out of the tour came an attempt to unify Mexico’s oppressed populations into forming an anti-capitalist coalition.

The standard elements associated with democracy include having open and fair elections, “legitimizing the legal system, maintaining supremacy over the military, protecting human rights, and achieving social justice” (Camp 2007, 10). Since 2006, Mexico has fallen short on each of these fronts. That summer, Fox’s fellow PAN party member, Felipe Calderón, won an election many believed to be marred by electoral fraud (Cuninghame 2007, 80). The majority of the population—58.2 percent—did not vote, producing Mexico’s highest absentee rate since 1946 (Camp 2007, 223). Two-thirds of the non-voters said they were disillusioned with Mexican politics (223). Since being elected, Calderón has relied heavily on the armed forces, from both the police and military branches, to combat the country’s growing problems of drug-related violence and organized crime. As of December 2009, an estimated 45,000 troops were deployed throughout the country
In some places, as is the case in the violent border region of Ciudad Juárez, the military has taken over outright control of the police, amounting to what those on the far left call a situation of undeclared martial law.

More than 14,000 people, many with little or no connection to the drug trade or other illegal operations, have been killed since Calderón mobilized the army three years ago to fight Mexico’s drug cartels (Caputo 2009, 63). While the President continues to insist that these deaths are collateral damage in the “War on Drugs,” it is becoming increasingly clear that it is a war perpetrated by the state itself. “It’s murder,” Mexican journalist Lydia Cacho⁴ says (public lecture 2010). Militarization has affected not only those living in and around the country’s drug rings. The military’s presence has spread across Mexico, from Chiapas to Juárez, serving as a tool of the Mexican government to silence a growing resistance movement in opposition to the state’s corrupt and quasi-dictatorial methods. Put simply, post-PRI Mexico is a country without a rule of law, where 93 percent of the people convicted of a crime never face a judge or see an arrest warrant; ninety-two percent are convicted without physical evidence (Bowden 2010). According to

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⁴ Cacho is an award-winning journalist who has reported extensively on child pornography and female sex trafficking in Mexico. Her work has linked Mexican politicians, businessmen, and police to both of these. In 2005, she was abducted and tortured by state police with authorization from Puebla’s governor. She lived to write about it (public lecture 2010).
an April 2009 report by Human Rights Watch, thousands have been victims of human rights abuses by the Mexican military and police, including enforced disappearance, killings, torture, rapes, and arbitrary detentions. Virtually none of these homicides and abuses have gone thoroughly investigated by the Mexican judiciary system. The perpetrators of the crimes, i.e., police and military officials, are rarely subjected to prosecution. And when cases do reach the appropriate courts, victims’ rights to fair trials and due process are often denied (“Uniform Impunity” 2009, 2).

In terms of social justice, a vast gap remains between Mexico’s rich and poor. The United Nations Development Program estimates that 53 million Mexicans (49.3 percent of the population) live in poverty, on less than $4 a day, while another 15 million live in extreme poverty, on less than $1 a day (Gibler 2009, 99). At the same time, Mexico boasts 24 billionaires and 85,000 millionaires. Mexican businessman Carlos Slim Helú topped *Forbes* magazine’s 2010 list of the richest people in the world, with an estimated net worth of $53.5 billion. Nine Mexicans made the list of the world’s

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5 In Mexico, violations committed by military officials, even those as egregious as rape and murder, are often investigated and prosecuted by the military itself. Not surprisingly, this creates favorable conditions for military officials charged with the crimes. In its report, HRW documents 17 cases of abuses committed by soldiers, for which not a single soldier was convicted of his alleged crime. Under international law, military courts do not have jurisdiction to try cases involving serious human rights abuses committed against civilians. According to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, “Everyone shall be entitled to a fair and public hearing by a competent, independent and impartial tribunal established by law” (“Uniform Impunity” 2009, 68).
thousand richest, and four were in the top hundred (Bloomberg News 2010, 1). What explains such uneven economic growth? Harvey attributes this disparity to the broad neoliberal reforms implemented in Mexico during the 1980s and 1990s. In sum, these policies reduced government funding for public works and agriculture, privatized key state businesses, and created interest rates more appealing to foreign capital. In Mexico City in 1985, for instance, government expenditures for social services fell 12 percent for transportation, 25 percent for potable water, 18 percent for health services, and 26 percent for trash collection (Harvey 2005, 100) (see sections regarding Theoretical Basis, La Sexta, and the CNUC for an analysis of the impact of neoliberal policies, particularly NAFTA, on Mexico’s agrarian populations). The concentration of wealth into the hands of the world’s elite (i.e., the CEOs of large pharmaceutical, insurance, and arms companies, as well as the heads of financial institutions) have led Harvey and

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6 As defined by Harvey, "Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. … Deregulation, privatization, and withdrawal of the state from many areas of social provision have … entailed much ‘creative destruction’, not only of prior institutional frameworks and powers but also of divisions of labor, social relations, welfare provisions, technological mixes, ways of life and thought, reproductive activities, attachments to the land, and habits of the heart” (2005, 2-3).
others to conclude that neoliberalism was “from the very beginning a project to achieve the restoration of class power” (16).  

In Mexico, businessmen profited handsomely from the privatization programs associated with neoliberalism. In 1994, of the 24 Mexicans who made *Forbes* list of the world’s richest, 17 took part in privatization, “buying banks, steel mills, sugar refineries, hotels and restaurants, chemical plants, and a telecommunications firm as well as concessions to operate firms within newly privatized sectors of the economy, such as ports, private toll highways, and cellular and long distance telephony” (Harvey 2005, 103). Carlos Slim, of course, became the chief beneficiary of these pro-business policies. He accumulated most of his wealth from the privatization of the country’s national telephone company under President Carlos Salinas, to which Slim bought the rights to run a seven-year monopoly over Mexico’s phone services (Gibler 2009, 7). Today, Slim’s telecommunications empire extends into Latin American and U.S. retail stores, including Circuit City and Barnes and Noble. His strategy for cell-phone service is simple: “capture and monopolize

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7 The uneven results of neoliberal reform are equally as striking in the U.S., where, “since 1980, the year Ronald Reagan was elected president, the incomes of people at the top have doubled while those in the middle and at the bottom have remained flat. … In the 1950’s and 60’s, the CEO’s of major American companies took home about 25 to 30 times the wages of the typical worker. In 1980 the big company CEO took home roughly 40 times the worker’s wage. By 1990, it was 100 times. And by 2007, executives at the largest American companies received about 350 times the pay of the average employee. In many of the top corporations, the chief executive earns more every day than the average worker gets paid in a year” (Moyers 2010).
the high-density and affluent markets and leave the low-density and poorer markets without service” (Harvey, 104). So while neoliberal “free-trade” policies have made Mexico’s version of the American dream possible for businessmen like Slim, the poorest of Mexico—lacking the resources and funds to compete with transnational corporations—have fallen more deeply into poverty, like that inside the refugee camps of Pohlo, Chiapas, where hundreds of families have been displaced from their homes by state-sponsored paramilitary groups, forced to resettle in the mountains, with literally nothing to their name (Hayden 2002, 93). “The invisible Mexico of beneath is full of Pohlos,”8 one Zapatista told me (personal correspondence 2009).

And so, amidst this environment of corruption, drug wars, impunity, human rights violations, repression, and social inequality, La Otra Campaña is calling for a “national campaign for building another way of doing politics, for a program of national struggle of the left,” in which all those oppressed in Mexico and the world—indigenous people, workers, campesinos, students, teachers, sex workers, women, children, among others—are invited to participate in a global resistance movement against the capitalistic system.

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8 I have personally translated all quotes borrowed from interviews and conversations conducted while in Mexico (i.e., with activists from the Zapatistas, the CNUC, the Panchos, and others) from Spanish to English.
Obviously, capitalism functions within a construct of power. The Mexican political class drives the capitalistic system, the Zapatistas say, which is why La Otra Campaña is, in both theory and practice, anti-political and anti-capitalist. But what differentiates La Otra from other social movements seeking radical change? Certainly this isn’t the first time in Latin American history that populations have mobilized against neoliberalism and the elite political establishment propelling such policy. What does La Otra coalition look like, what are its governing principles and organizational strategies, and how does it propose to form this network? What potential obstacles does it face?

This paper aims to answer these broad questions, and to analyze, in particular, the extent to which La Otra has succeeded in forming anti-capitalist social coalitions in Mexico. This essay has four components. The first section will explain the theoretical framework for La Otra, both in the context of Latin American indigenous movements and, more specifically, that of Zapatismo. The second section will analyze La Sexta and its anti-capitalist, anti-political postures. In the third, I will look at the concept of Zapatista

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9 My research is based off personal interviews and conversations, field notes, and participant observation carried out in Mexico during the summer of 2009. I spent three weeks living in Oventic with the Zapatistas, three weeks in Tlaxcala living with CNUC organizers, and two weeks in Mexico City living with the Panchos. I also rely on relevant literature dealing with the Zapatistas, indigenous protest movements, and social movement theory.
autonomy, describing my personal experience in one of the Zapatista autonomous communities, Oventic, and the lessons it provides to two other movements that I have analyzed. Finally, the fourth section will explore the ways in which two organizations within La Otra—one a largely peasant group from Tlaxcala, another an urban movement from the outskirts of Mexico City—have sought to articulate the lessons of the Zapatista communities and form their own programs of autonomy. I argue that education has proved vital to the construction of anti-hegemonic projects within their autonomous spaces. I will also discuss their organizational strategies and how effective these efforts have been in forming movement coalitions. Overall, my research suggests that although coalitions have been built and resistance networks strengthened, the challenge persists of bringing together distinct groups—some with divergent goals and ideologies—under a unified front. This is perhaps the inevitable dilemma in a movement framed as a struggle for autonomy, in which each community has its own way of defining and implementing democratic processes. This paper does not serve to prognosticate either the success or doom of La Otra Campaña. Doing so just five years into its creation would be unrealistic. Rather, it reflects on La Otra’s emergence in the context of modern Mexico, then assesses the ways and extent to which La
Otra’s ideas and concepts have manifested themselves in other Mexican social movements.

Before delving too deeply into La Otra’s core components, we need first to understand how such a broad group of movements and actors fused together to form La Otra. Owing to the fact that La Otra is an extension of the indigenous Zapatista movement, the theoretical underpinnings for its emergence onto Mexico’s political scene lie first in an explanation of the EZLN’s own surfacing. Such an examination warrants a look at the factors responsible for the increase in the mobilization of Latin America’s indigenous populations during the 1980s and 1990s. In other words, under what political and economic circumstances did Latin America’s indigenous movements arise, and how did this climate help shape the Zapatistas’ call for the broader, more inclusive, anti-capitalist struggle of La Otra Campaña?

II. Theoretical Basis

In the decades leading up to the 1980s, Latin America saw very little in the way of successful mobilization from its indigenous populations. Historically, argues Deborah Yashar, this can be attributed in part to the dually repressive and assimilationist policies of the Latin American governments. Today, indigenous peoples make up the
majority of the population in Bolivia and Guatemala, while constituting significant percentages in Ecuador, Mexico, and Peru. Mexico has the most indigenous people, with over 16 million (Cuninghame 2007, 82). From the Spanish conquest to the modern day, states have openly encouraged miscegenation in order to “whiten” the Latin American population into a single mestizo\textsuperscript{10} class (Yashar 1996, 89). In his book, México Profundo: Reclaiming a Civilization, Mexican anthropologist Guillermo Bonfil Batalla argues that since the conquest, the Mexican people have been dominated by an “imaginary México” imposed by the West. It is imaginary not because it does not exist, but because it denies the cultural reality lived daily by most Mexicans.

The recent history of Mexico, that of the last five hundred years, is the story of permanent confrontation between those attempting to direct the country toward the path of Western civilization and those, rooted in Mesoamerican ways of life, who resist. The first plan arrived with the European invaders but was not abandoned with independence. The new groups in power, first the creoles and later the mestizos, never renounced the westernization plan. They still have not renounced it. Their differences and the struggles that divide them express only disagreement over the best way of carrying out the same program. The adoption of that model has meant the creation within Mexican society of a minority country organized according to the norms, aspirations, and goals of Western civilization. They are not shared, or are shared from a different perspective, by the rest of the national population. To the sector that represents and gives impetus to our country’s dominant civilizational program, I have given the name ‘the imaginary Mexico.’ (1996, xv-xvi)

\textsuperscript{10} Mestizo refers to people of mixed racial ancestry, in Mexico, of mixed indigenous and Spanish ancestry.
For Bonfil, Mexico’s indigenous population constitutes “the México profundo.” Quite notably, he places blame on Mexico’s mestizo class for its complicit role in the “folklorization” of indigenous culture and for moving the nation down a Western path—in an economic, political, and cultural sense. Bonfil’s thesis offers one plausible explanation for the indigenous revolts of the 1980s—that their rise was, in fact, a calculated response to over five centuries of oppression, discrimination, and exclusion of Latin America’s indigenous populations. But this alone does not explain the timing of indigenous organization. Why did indigenous populations suddenly begin to organize collectively, and with relative success, in the 1980s, unlike at any other time in history?

Yashar posits that Latin America’s recent indigenous movements result from a combination of three factors: political liberalization, changes in state reform policies, and pre-existing networks of social organization. The shift in the 1980s towards political liberalization in Ecuador, Bolivia, Guatemala, and Mexico provided a new platform for indigenous actors to express their ethnic identities and demands (1998, 38), one which previously had been silenced under repressive state and federal regimes. Yet, as Yashar points out, political liberalization did not, by itself, cause the politicization of indigenous identity nor the development of social
movements. Such phenomena occurred due to the adverse effects political liberalization had on the indigenous populations. Prior to the 1980s, Latin American states were structured around populist and/or corporatist models (1998, 32).

In Mexico, for instance, dating back to the 1930s, Chiapan peasants had relied on federal and state-sponsored peasant organizations for virtually all their resources, including land and subsidies, in exchange for PRI-party loyalty (Washbrook 2005, 427). Within such a system, indigenous peasants became reliant on the state for access to land, credit, and services. The state actually encouraged participation in campesino groups, insofar as the indigenous peoples joined state-sponsored organizations and identified themselves as peasants, thus playing into the state’s assimilationist policies encouraging a mestizo identity. If indigenous people formed independent peasant organizations, as occurred in 1970s Chiapas—when indigenous peoples began challenging the PRI landowners for spots in the municipal government—federal and state authorities often responded with co-optation and selective repression (Washbrook 2005, 427). Ironically, though, these pre-1980 policies also granted the indigenous greater political and economic

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11 Corporatism implies “a formal relationship between selected groups or institutions and the government and state.” Within Mexico, corporatism functioned together with “presidencialismo—where all political power lies in the President’s hands” (Camp 2007, 10).
independence from the state. “Greater state penetration, land reforms, and freedom of movement often increased indigenous peasant independence from local landlords and enabled indigenous communities to strengthen and (re)construct local public spaces for community authority structures and customary law” (Yashar 1998, 33). In other words, an unwritten deal existed between the state apparatus and its indigenous populations, one in which the state—in return for “cooperation” from indigenous peasants—would agree to interfere sparingly with local indigenous practice and law. In Mexico, such “cooperation” implied voting for the PRI, joining state-sponsored peasant organizations, and not questioning or protesting PRI authority. This “hands-off” approach pursued by the state, though perhaps unintentionally, both allowed for and led to greater indigenous autonomy (Rus 1994, 284).

Since the 1980s, state reforms in Ecuador, Bolivia, and Mexico have witnessed a substitution of neoliberal economic policies for the corporatist agrarian ones of decades past. Consequently, budgets for agriculture, social services, and economic programs have plummeted, and the traditional protections for peasant land, such as for Mexico’s ejidos (legally protected communally owned lands), have been eliminated (1998, 34). In the case of Mexico, President Miguel de la Madrid ushered in the neoliberal era in the
early 1980s by privatising and selling off Mexico’s national industries. Upon taking office in 1988, President Salinas accelerated Mexico’s economic liberalization, increasing the influence of the private sector and advocating for an internationalization of the economy with the U.S. and Canada (Camp 2007, 3). The economic restructuring exacerbated the gap between rich and poor peasants in Chiapas (Collier 2005, 453). For Latin America as a whole, from 1980 to 1992, real agricultural wages fell by 30 percent (Yashar 1998, 34). Hence, from an economic perspective, indigenous protest movements were a response to the deteriorating economic situation created by neoliberalism, coupled with changes in state reform policies that no longer provided the material rewards associated with the corporatist and populist models.

Even more ominous for the indigenous peoples, however, was the threat that such policies, particularly those related to land ownership, posed to their local autonomies (Yashar 1998, 35). Salinas’ 1992 decision to reform Article 27 of the Mexican constitution, taking away peasants’ right to petition for unused land or land held by the state, is the clearest example of this. Indeed, Salinas’ reversal would provide the final impetus for the Zapatista Rebellion. According to Yashar, “Land demands are the symbolic
glue that enables communities with diverse needs to mobilize behind a common cause. ... (They) do not just refer to land as a productive resource but increasingly refer to the state’s obligation to respect the jurisdiction of indigenous authorities and customary law over geographic space” (1998, 36). In short, political liberalization both enabled and propelled the indigenous revolts of the 1980s. First, by freeing up important channels previously censored and closed off by authoritarian leadership, liberalization opened the floodgates for indigenous expression and independent organization. At the same time, the new laissez-faire approach reversed years of corporatist policy, under which peasants had become dependent upon state governments for resources and land. Fearful that their economic situation would continue to deteriorate, and in the absence of democratic institutions to negotiate and resolve their land disputes, the indigenous turned to collective action.

Lastly, Yashar considers the importance of pre-existing organizational networks to the proliferation of Latin America’s indigenous movements, arguing that such networks were and remain critical to effective mobilization. For example, churches played prominent roles in building and strengthening indigenous peasant networks in Mexico, Guatemala, Bolivia, and Ecuador,
often providing the necessary means of communication and literacy skills connecting one community to another (1998, 37). In Chiapas, Bishop Samuel Ruiz was instrumental to the Zapatista uprising. He helped organize indigenous meetings, contributed resources to the people, and pushed for local organizing.

**From the EZLN to La Otra**

Yashar’s argument provides a sound theoretical basis for understanding the Zapatista movement. In the following discussion, I will briefly analyse the historical antecedents of the EZLN thus far undiscussed, afterwards moving through a synopsis of the events since 1994 that led to the development of La Otra Campaña. The EZLN takes its name from Emiliano Zapata, the heroic peasant leader of the Mexican Revolution.\(^\text{12}\) The Zapatista movement can be traced back to a Marxist group from the late 1970s called the Forces of National Liberation (FLN), an urban guerrilla group which formed, along with dozens of political-military organizations during this contentious era, as a reaction to the Mexican government’s repression of student movements in 1968 and the early 1970s.

\(^{12}\) Zapata was the leader of the southern front of the Mexican Revolution. He is known especially for his *Plan de Ayala* which called for the return of 1/3 of all Mexico’s *hacienda* lands to *campesinos*. This helped lead to the overriding legacy from the Revolution—the creation of Article 27 in the Mexican constitution, which committed the Mexican government to *ejido* land redistribution. Such land reforms were first implemented during the 1930s under the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas (Jung 2008, 87).
The FLN was forced underground to the Lacandona Jungle, where, as Subcomandante Marcos explains, the FLN forged relationships with independent peasant organizations composed of mostly indigenous farmers. In 1983, amidst state-sponsored repression, the FLN joined with the indigenous peasants to create the EZLN. The EZLN, then, was born primarily through a fusion of two distinct groups: indigenous peasants with a history of revolt and militant leftists inspired by the revolutionary tales of Che Guevara and Fidel Castro. According to Harvey, the leaders of the FLN did not impose their Marxist ideology on the indigenous communities. Instead, they “attracted recruits because many of these communities were tired of failure, manipulation, leadership rivalries, and ideological disputes. More important they were tired of living in the same poverty and of facing the same repression as had existed prior to their organizational efforts of the 1970s” (Harvey 1998, 164).

Marcos’s Marxist beliefs changed after his “encounter with indigenous culture.” The organization’s top-down structure also evolved after exposure to the indigenous communities’ practices of

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13 In October of 1968, 10 days prior to the opening of the summer Olympic games in Mexico City, police officers and military troops shot into a crowd of unarmed students at Tlatelolco Plaza. Thousands of students were beaten, jailed, and disappeared. Forty years later, official death tolls remain a mystery. The authoritarian regime at the time of the massacre launched no formal investigation, hiding video footage of its own security forces arbitrarily shooting into the mass. It was not until 2001 that an investigation was finally initiated. Still, no charges to date have been pressed, and only 40 of an estimated 3,000 deaths have been documented (“Mexico’s 1968 Massacre” 2008).
collective decision-making (Harvey 1998, 165-167). Still, verticalism remained ingrained within the EZLN for years, at least until 2003, when the EZLN began separating itself from the decision-making processes of the Zapatista communities, leaving such matters up to the democratically-elected Juntas de Buen Gobierno—Good Government Councils (a later section will elaborate further upon this transition in the context of Zapatista autonomy) (EZLN 2005, 5). Still, the Marxist roots of the Zapatista movement are significant because, although the Zapatistas did not declare themselves as anti-capitalists in 1994 (a fact critics still point to), the ideological seeds of their anti-capitalist movement were already planted within the EZLN ranks. Its leaders, Marcos especially, knew that neoliberal policies would not bode well for rural indigenous peasants, the base of the Zapatista movement.

And so, on New Year’s Day 1994, the Zapatistas launched their rebellion in demand of “work, land, housing, food, health care, education, independence, liberty, democracy, justice, and peace” (Bob 2005, 118). Within 12 days, amidst international pressure, and embarrassed by documented human rights abuses and national, as well as international, media coverage, the Mexican government ended the violence by signing a unilateral peace accord. In the years following the rebellion, the Zapatistas gained international
recognition, attracting hundreds of NGOs, forming the world’s first Internet solidarity network, and becoming a global force for anti-neoliberalism movements. Bob argues that the Zapatistas owe their success to the movement’s willingness to modify their goals and tactics in order to appeal to broader audiences (2005, 119). From the start, the decision not to classify Zapatismo as strictly indigenous proved important because it provided a “mirror in which oppressed groups everywhere could see themselves” (2005, 152). In other words, the Zapatistas’ ability to frame themselves as an inclusive, non-violent, non-hierarchical, and grassroots “new social movement,” fighting for the rights not just of indigenous peoples, but of women, children, and peasants alike, resonated and garnered sympathy within national and international circles. Years later, these diverse networks of support would prove crucial to the formation of La Otra.

Despite the strongly inclusive nature of the EZLN, in the years following the 1994 uprising, Zapatista political efforts focused predominantly on securing rights and land for Chiapas’ indigenous populations, the origin and base of its support. As I will suggest, the EZLN’s transformation into La Otra can be construed partly as recognition of its failure to achieve significant and lasting political, economic, and social change for Chiapas’ indigenous peoples. In
fact, the 1994 rebellion did nothing to change the structure or economy of Chiapas, nor did it improve residents’ standard of living (Solís 2005, 463). Instead, the Chiapan countryside remained in “terminal crisis. … The reason for this is not difficult to discern: the entrenched structural poverty has been compounded by neoliberal policies imposed by the Mexican state, a consequence of which have been reductions in real levels of public expenditure and investment” (Solís 2005, 462). In 2004, the World Bank estimated that 67 percent of the Chiapan population lived below the poverty line (462).

In what appeared to be a giant step towards realizing the Zapatista goals for autonomous self-government, the San Andrés Accords on Indigenous Culture and Rights were signed by the EZLN and the federal government on February 16, 1996. The following is a synthesis of the agreements laid out in the treaty:

Rights of the peoples: A claim to the right of recognition of indigenous peoples as such, and therefore to their right to free determination. This right is not proposed as a claim to sovereignty but to autonomy, and this implies the following:

a) The recognition of the communities as bodies of public law and of the right of communities and municipalities to associate freely to concert and coordinate their actions.

b) The recognition of the territories and of the jurisdiction of the indigenous peoples. As far as jurisdiction is concerned, there is a claim to the recognition and respect of: their internal normative systems; their own forms of government, which implies the delegation of faculties and competence to their organizations, including their own procedures for the election of local authorities; and specific norms and institutions, in order to give attention to their needs, agreed upon between the indigenous peoples themselves and the
In the months following the accord, the Zedillo government backed out on verbal commitments to fulfill its conditions, instead ordering police and military actions against the Zapatistas. Throughout 1997, the EZLN pursued a series of unsuccessful initiatives trying to reopen talks with the state, including a march of over 1,000 men and women to Mexico City in September. Meanwhile, paramilitary groups, financially backed and euphemistically referred to as “armed civil groups” by federal and state authorities, flourished throughout Chiapas (Esteva 2001, 257). In December of 1997, in what became known as the Acteal Massacre,14 PRI-sponsored paramilitaries murdered 45 indigenous men and women praying inside a church (Rus 2003, 18-20). Refusing to settle for anything less than what the San Andrés Accords had initially promised, the Zapatistas moved to self-implement the accords, threatening the legitimacy of the federal government by creating 38 “autonomous municipalities—spaces in which local people exercise a radical democracy amid constant harassment” (Esteva 2001, 258).

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14 According to Hayden, the Acteal massacre was “carried out through a counterinsurgency technique as old as the Conquest itself—the arming of paramilitary units composed of Indians willing to kill other Indians for advantage” (2002, 91). Forty-three of the 45 victims were shot in the back, 20 were women, including four who were pregnant, and 18 of those killed were children. Although the shooting continued for nine hours, Mexican troops, stationed just minutes away, failed to respond. The community members of Acteal of the Bees are extremely religious peoples who practice strict non-violence (91-93).
In the spring of 2001, following Fox’s landmark victory in 2000 and his campaign promise to fix the Zapatista conflict in “15 minutes,” the Congreso Nacional Indígena (CNI) and the Zapatistas organized a seventeen-city, 3,000 km march for Indian rights. Coined la Marcha del Color de la Tierra—the March of the Color of the Earth—hundreds of thousands of indigenous and non-indigenous actors gathered in Mexico City’s Zócalo to support the Zapatista claims for autonomy. In the end, the Mexican Senate delivered a watered-down version of the conditions agreed upon in the 1996 San Andrés Accords, limiting indigenous autonomy and treating Indians as subjects of “public interest.” Territory still belonged to the Mexican state. Both the CNI and the EZLN outright rejected the proposal. Nevertheless, on August 14, 2001, the constitutional reforms on indigenous rights and culture became law (Rus 2003, 22).

The Zapatistas’ 2001 failure to reach a bilateral agreement for indigenous autonomy with the Mexican government effectively ended their relationship with the state. In 2003, in an act of further defiance of the state, they moved to strengthen their local

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15 The Zócalo is the main plaza or square in the heart of Mexico City.
autonomy through the establishment of regional representative
Good Government Councils based in centers called Caracoles
(Stahler-Sholk 2007, 55). Two years later, they released La Sexta
Declaración and called for La Otra Campaña. What explains this
turn of events? Put simply, the Zapatistas had exhausted all
institutional and diplomatic paths. Negotiating through the Mexican
political system no longer seemed a viable option. La Otra’s firm
rejection of any association with political parties differentiates it
from Latin America’s other indigenous movements, particularly
Bolivia, where in 2006 Evo Morales became the first indigenous
president in the country’s history.17 The Zapatistas looked at their
communities and saw progress with the successful implementation
of self-government, the development of methods for self-
sufficiency, and the construction of primary and secondary schools.
And yet, it remained unclear how substantive and sustainable such
gains would prove to be over the long haul. Within these same
communities, poverty and the threats of repression from
paramilitary groups persisted. Meanwhile, at the state and federal
levels, the Zapatistas saw few signs of social change or reform. The
defeat of the PRI had not revolutionized Mexican politics. Be it PRI,
PAN, or PRD—in the eyes of the Zapatistas, each political party

17 Morales handily won a second presidential term in December of 2009, with 63 percent of
the Bolivian vote.
preached the same corrupt, neoliberal agenda. As a result, Mexico’s poor had grown more impoverished, more desperate for some type of change.

The Zapatistas’ call for La Otra, then, was recognition of the fact that they were not strong enough—that they lacked the internal capacity and manpower necessary to transform Mexico by themselves. After years of struggling for indigenous rights, it was time to fight for the rights of other exploited Mexicans, too. In this vein, La Otra aimed to rekindle and build upon the relationships the EZLN had established since 1994. As EZLN advisers remarked after signing the San Andrés Accords in 1996,

> The importance of San Andrés is as a starting point, not by any means as an end point or final goal. It is part of the autonomization of civil society as a whole. The EZLN understands perfectly well that with only indigenous autonomy the old regime will not fall and that this will be possible only with the autonomy and liberty of all the Mexican people. (Aubry 2003, 227)

To frame this from a theoretical standpoint, La Otra is an example of an upward scale shift—“when collective action moves to a higher level, moves contention beyond its local origins, and touches on the interests and values of new actors” (Tilly & Tarrow 2006, 94). Facing a languishing movement, perhaps foreseeing future demobilization, the Zapatistas looked to expand upon and radicalize their indigenous base. In short, La Otra’s plan to form a broad alliance of
actors, from beneath and to the left, sought to reinvigorate mobilization.

III. La Sexta and the Zapatista “Left”

La Sexta document is divided into six parts. The first two, “What We Are” and “Where We Are Now,” review much of what we have already covered in detail, laying out the historical foundations and evolution of the Zapatista movement since the 1994 uprising. The subsequent two sections, “How We See the World” and “How We See Our Country Which is Mexico,” explain the anti-capitalist and anti-political postures of La Otra in the context of the modern-day political and economic landscape of Mexico. Capitalism is defined as a social system, a way in which a society goes about organizing things and people, and who has and has not, and who gives orders and obeys. … Capitalism means that there are a few who have great wealth … obtained by exploiting the work of the many. … Capitalism turns everything into merchandise, it makes merchandise of people, of nature, of culture, of history, of conscience. According to capitalism, everything must be able to be bought and sold. And it hides everything behind the merchandise, so we don’t see the exploitation that exists. (EZLN 2005, 8-9)

The EZLN’s description of capitalism is very much a re-articulation of Marxist views. In particular, the above excerpt draws on Marx’s labor theory of value, the idea that the worker, despite producing the surplus value, i.e., the profit that makes the capitalistic system
function, receives none of this extra money. Instead, the individuals and/or the investors in charge, pocket the money. According to Marx, such hidden exploitation amounts to robbery, since the capitalist, in effect, steals the value produced by the worker. We also see reference to what Marx called the “fetishism of commodities” (Harvey 1990, 100), which describes the tendency to reify everything, overlooking the social conditions, often exploitative, behind the production of a given item. For instance, we understand a pen as something that writes, not as something with a whole series of social relationships and processes behind it. The Zapatistas then frame neoliberalism according to Lenin’s theory of colonialism and Gramsci’s\textsuperscript{18} essays on cultural hegemony:

> And then capitalism needs many markets – or a very large market, a world market. And so the capitalism of today is not the same as before, when the rich were content with exploiting the workers in their own countries, but now they are on a path which is called Neoliberal Globalization. This globalization means that they no longer control the workers in one or several countries, but the capitalists are trying to dominate everything all over the world. ... They respect nothing, and they meddle wherever they wish. As if they were conquering other countries. That is why we Zapatistas say that neoliberal globalization is a war of conquest of the entire world, a world war, a war being waged by capitalism for global domination ... does as it wants, it destroys and changes what it does not like and eliminates what gets in its way ... destroys their culture, their language, their economic system, their political system, and it also destroys the ways in which those who live in that country relate to each other. So everything that makes a country a country is destroyed. (EZLN 2005, 9-10)

\textsuperscript{18} Antonio Gramsci was a revolutionary Marxist born in Ales, on the island of Sardinia in 1891. He grew up in poverty, won a scholarship to the University of Turin in 1911, and joined the Socialist Party of Italy around 1913. In 1921, he joined the Communist Party of Italy, before being elected to the Roman parliament in 1924. Two years later, he was arrested by Mussolini’s Fascist regime and sentenced to 20 years of prison, where he wrote about hegemony and his theoretical approach to educative politics (Coben 1998, 9-13).
Lenin predicted that the capitalistic order, in order to sustain and accelerate its accumulation of wealth, would develop monopolies and expand globally, marking a new imperial phase to capitalism.

In the Zapatista framework, neoliberalism is the modern-day form of this imperialism. For Gramsci, hegemony referred to the ideas structuring a society that help maintain the power of its leading class. Western capitalism, then, has become the hegemonic discourse dominating Mexico. In the minds of the Zapatistas, it has infiltrated all levels of Mexican society, causing, among other things, the de-Indianization of national identity. That’s why indigenous languages have disappeared from schools and Mayan culture has been minimized to museum artifacts.

La Sexta argues that the Mexican political class drives the capitalistic system, destroying the social fabric of the Mexican people (EZLN 2005, 11). It describes the negative effects that capitalistic policies, like NAFTA, have on most Mexicans. In the countryside, agricultural jobs are lost to large transnationals, including over one million from 1994-2002 (Gibler 2009, 127). Between 1995 and 2005, employment in Mexican maquiladoras—giant export-oriented assembly plants with sweatshop conditions—increased from 648,300 to 1.16 million (Delgado-Wise & Covarrubias
According to Martha Ojeda, director of the Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladoras, “Most maquiladora workers are very young, between 16 and 25, because their eyes, backs, and hands haven’t given out yet. Their hours are so long that their youth passes without seeing the sun” (Mekay 2003, 2). In the absence of jobs, many Mexicans leave their families and migrate north of the border—not out of want, but necessity. From 1980 to 2002, Mexican migration to the U.S. soared by 452 percent (Gibler 2009, 127). Meanwhile, Mexican businessmen and politicians continued to prosper. “Are we saying that politics serves no purpose? No, what we mean is that THAT politics serves no purpose. And it is useless because it does not take the people into account” (EZLN 2005, 13).

La Otra, on the other hand, vows to take the people into account—at least those sharing its ideals, that is. Among Zapatismo’s governing values is un mundo donde quepan muchos mundos, a world in which many worlds fit. Of course, not all worlds fit under La Otra’s framework. La Otra’s counter hegemonic project calls for a new way of doing politics in which civil society,\(^\text{19}\) not elected officials from the three main political parties—the PRI, PAN, and PRD—govern the country. La Sexta declares that “the EZLN will

\(^{19}\) In the Zapatista context, civil society is defined as “the sphere of autonomously organized society, in opposition to that established by the state or directly controlled by it or associated to it” (Dinerstein 2009, 9).
establish a policy of having alliances with non-electoral movements and organizations that define themselves, in theory and practice, as of the left” (EZLN 2005, 20). But what does this “left” signify? To begin with, the PRD, the so-called leftist party of Mexico, does not fall within La Otra’s construct of the left. In fact, much of the PRD today is comprised of PRI dissidents (Camp 2007, 233). In 2001, the PRD betrayed the Zapatistas by helping sign into law the PAN government’s diluted version of the San Andrés Accords on Indigenous Autonomy. Adolfo Gilly, a former advisor to Cuauhtémoc Cardenas, the PRD presidential candidate who lost the infamously fraudulent 1988 election to the PRI-ista Salinas, says the PRD has become a mere replica of the PRI. Andrés Manuel López Obrador, the PRD’s 2006 presidential candidate, who lost to Calderón in another allegedly fraudulent election (Cuninghame 2007, 80), ran on the slogan: “For the good of all us, the poor are first.” But Obrador evaded such issues as NAFTA during the campaign trail, leading Gilly to conclude that he and the PRD party promote little more than a “developmentalist project to stabilize the neoliberal reforms already in place. It is a proposal to be applied through public policies from the top, without any participation whatsoever of independent, autonomous organizations within society itself” (Gilly 2006, 81).
Still, La Otra’s definition of the left remains nebulous. It sends an open invitation to anyone willing to assume the charge of “another way of doing politics.” But what does this constitute? If not THAT politics, what kind of politics does La Otra “Left” practice? The answer to this question continues to be a highly contested issue among social scientists. Zapatista sympathizers, such as Holloway, insist that La Otra abides by the underlying principle governing the autonomous Zapatista communities, the *mandar obedeciendo*—lead by obeying—a concept that the leaders of the movement must obey the members, and that all major decisions should be taken through a process of collective decision-making. Thus, the Zapatista plan is horizontal, both in theory and practice. While it respects and learns from the texts of Marx, Lenin, and Engels, it rejects the vertical structures of traditional Marxist-Vanguardism. Further, it disagrees with their definition of revolution as something that must be achieved by means of the state. In the words of Holloway:

> *Zapatismo is the project of changing the world without taking power. … Zapatismo moves us decisively beyond the state illusion. By the state illusion I mean the paradigm that has dominated left-wing thought for at least a century. The state illusion puts the state at the center of the concept of radical change. The state illusion understands revolution as the winning of state power and the transformation of society through the state. … If the state illusion was the vehicle of hope for much of the century, it became more and more assassin of hope as the century progressed. The failure of revolution was in reality the historical failure of a particular concept of revolution, the concept that identified revolution with control of the state.* (2005, 5-6)
La Otra’s revolution claims to have no intention of seizing state power. For the Zapatistas, social transformation, i.e., radical change, cannot be achieved via the state, but only through the willpower of ordinary citizens. It is a revolution based not on power, but on human dignity, defined by the Zapatistas as the idea that “one is somebody simply to the extent he or she is involved in the human endeavor, in actively claiming one’s place within a human community, in reclaiming direct links with other human beings” (De Angelis 2007, 5). Historically, revolution has been treated as a means to an end, for example, the idea that a socialist state will overthrow and take the place of a capitalist one. But in the Zapatista context, revolution is neither so concrete nor static. “Revolution,” as one Zapatista describes it, “is like going to take lessons in a school that has not even been built” (Holloway 2005, 8). Critics characterize such rhetoric as vague, one lacking any real solution or plan of action. Yet, according to Holloway, this is precisely the point. The Zapatistas “walk, not in order to arrive at a promised land, but because the walking itself is the revolution” (2005, 8). This abstract way of thinking also bears resemblance to Marx’s notion of true democracy as “a democratic political practice that does not yet exist or, more precisely, has not yet been recognized—and cannot
yet be ‘named’—rather than a stable concept awaiting its systematic presentation” (Williams 2007, 148).

Utopian or not, this is the program La Otra calls for in La Sexta. In the document’s final two sections, “What We Want To Do” and “How Are We Are Going To Do It,” the EZLN outlines its proposals for carrying out its national and global agenda:

In Mexico...
1. We will continue fighting for the Indian peoples of Mexico but not only for them nor only with them, but, rather, for all the exploited and dispossessed in Mexico. And when we speak of all the exploited of Mexico we are also speaking of the brothers and sisters who have had to go to the United States to seek work in order to survive.

2. We are going to listen to and speak directly, without middlemen nor mediations, to the simple and humble Mexican people, and depending on what we hear and learn, we will construct, together with these people who are like us, humble and simple, a national plan for struggle, but a plan that will, clearly, be of the left, which is to say anti-capitalist, or antineoliberal, or which is also to say in favor of justice, democracy and freedom for the Mexican people.

3. We will try to construct or reconstruct another way of practicing politics, in the spirit of serving others, without material interests, with sacrifice, with dedication, with honesty, a way that keeps it word, or, that is to say, in the same way that militants of the left – who were not stopped by violence, jail or death, and much less with offers of dollar bills – have done so.

4. We will also keep looking at ways to rise up; a fight to demand that we create a new Constitution, new laws that take our demands, those of the Mexican people, into account, which are: housing, land, work, food, health, education, information, culture, independence, democracy, justice, freedom and peace. A new Constitution that recognizes the rights and liberties of the people, and that defends the weak against the powerful. (EZLN 2005, 5)

Point four seems to run in contradiction to the non-state, anti-power approach articulated by Holloway. Does not re-writing the constitution necessarily imply navigating through the traditional
institutional channels of government? This is a fair question and one of the main criticisms brought against La Sexta. In fact, constitutional reform has been one of the Zapatistas’ principle demands since the January 1994 rebellion. However, according to Tom Hansen, founder of the Chicago-based Mexico Solidarity Network, which has close ties to the Zapatistas, the demand for a constitution has been removed from the table. My personal conversations with Otra adherents seemed to indicate this much as well, as none of them were cognizant of plans to rewrite the constitution. Within Mexico, La Otra officially began its 12-month listening tour on January 1, 2006, through which it would compose its “national plan for struggle.” The tour, however, was halted in early May after the sudden events in San Salvador Atenco, Mexico State when state police met large street protests with repression.20 The human rights abuses and subsequent arrests at Atenco became an immediate rallying point for La Otra, as Marcos vowed

20 On May 3, 200 police officers arrived at a market in San Salvador Atenco, a municipality of Texcoco, with orders to evict street vendors for illegally selling flower seeds. The vendors, many peasants from the organization El Frente de Pueblos en Defensa de La Tierra (FPDT), protested by blocking entire streets and clashing violently with police. The police responded with tear gas and their own violence, ultimately arresting at least 211 people. Many were members of La Otra who had come to support the worker movement’s cause. Two individuals, 14-year-old Francisco Javier Cortés Santiago and 19-year-old Alexis Benhumea Hernández, were killed during the incident. Witnesses say Cortés was shot and killed by a police officer, while Hernández reportedly died after sustaining head injuries from a tear gas grenade fired by police (“Mexico: Violence Against Women” 2006, 2-3). The police drove most of those arrested to state prison, during which time they sexually abused and raped many of the women (3). Most of those arrested were later released, but 27 remained imprisoned on charges of obstructing the highway and kidnapping police officers. Eight officers had been kidnapped during the initial confrontation, but were found unharmed the next day.
to suspend the caravan until all those imprisoned were freed. The release of these prisoners, as well as other political detainees in Mexico, has grown into a chief organizing effort of La Otra’s urban movements in Mexico City.

The final section of La Sexta seeks to connect La Otra to other movements of its kind around the globe:

In the world…
1. We will build more relationships of respect and mutual aid with people and organizations that resist and fight against neoliberalism and for humankind.

2. In accordance with our abilities we will send material support such as food and crafts to those brothers and sisters who struggle throughout the world …

3. And to everyone throughout the world who resists we say that there have to be other intercontinental gatherings … this is about making horizontal agreements among us all. But we don’t want it with a stage from where just a few speak and everyone else listens, but, rather, that there not be a stage, that it all be at ground-level, but well ordered because if not well organized there will just be a lot of noise and no one will understand the word. And with a good organization, everyone can listen, and they can write down in their notebooks the words of resistance that others tell so that later each participant can talk it over with their colleagues in their worlds. (EZLN 2005, 4-5)

Since June of 2005, the Zapatistas have held several international conferences, including the “Encuentro Intergaláctico” (Intergalactic Meeting) in December of 2006 and the “Encuentro Continental Americano contra la Impunidad” (Continental American Meeting Against Impunity) in the summer of 2009. Both were held in Chiapas and drew audiences from over 30 countries.

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21 La Otra’s tour through Mexico continued in 2007, this time covering all of Mexico.
In summary, La Sexta document provides both the ideological basis for La Otra Campaña and its preliminary proposal for the formation of a broad network of anti-capitalist and leftist organizations. As the founding document of La Otra, La Sexta served as a way to begin the national discussion, not to impose it according to a Zapatista ideology. La Sexta, therefore, does not offer a precise blueprint for the form that this coalition will ultimately take. Moreover, nothing implicitly states nor suggests how these various movements should go about organizing.

We don’t come to you to tell you what you should do nor to give you orders. … Nor are we going to tell you to do what we do, nor that you should rise up in arms. What we are going to do is ask you how your lives are going, your struggles, your thoughts about how our country is doing and about what we can do so that they don’t defeat us. … And maybe together, we will come up with a plan about how we will continue with this program that includes what we all want, and a plan for how we are going to achieve this program, that is named ‘the national plan for struggle.’ (EZLN 2005, 2-3)

Thus, rather than arrogate a master plan for Mexico to follow, La Sexta acts as a starting point.

Zapatismo offers vital lessons for other social movements within La Otra seeking autonomy. In the remainder of this paper, I will discuss three distinct movements within La Otra. First, I will look at the dynamics of one of the Zapatista autonomous communities, Oventic. From an outsider’s perspective, La Otra often speaks in generalities. Self-characterized as anti-political, it proclaims its
ultimate goal as one for achieving “absolute autonomy,” that is, a
de-legitimization of state power, along with a permanent
politicization of the populace. In the next section, I will analyze what
the Zapatistas actually mean by this. Doing so will help us transition
into the subsequent part of this paper, which will have two main
focuses: (1) a discussion of how two non-indigenous organizations
within La Otra have articulated the lessons of Zapatista autonomy in
their own projects of self-government and (2) a critique of the
strengths and weaknesses of the social coalitions built with these
two movements.

IV. Lessons from Zapatista Autonomy

During a morning class inside the autonomous Zapatista community
of Oventic, one of the Zapatista teachers, dressed in the traditional
hand-knit skirt and red-striped blouse worn by the women of her
Tzotzil tribe, took out a piece of paper and with her pencil drew
over it a large circle. Around the circle she wrote the words,
*despojo, explotación, represión, and discriminación*,22 which
translate literally as robbery (of one’s land), exploitation, repression,
and discrimination. “These are the four things that drive the

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22 All Zapatista “promoters” are fluent in Spanish—a by-product of bilingual schooling in
Oventic.
capitalistic system,” Nubia said. Under such a system, she explained, all work simultaneously together, and one doesn’t function without the others. “Here,” she said, referring to Oventic, “there is no system. The system is inside each one of you. It’s not in the United States or Europe. It lives in each one of you” (personal correspondence 2009). Nubia was just 8-years-old when her family joined with the EZLN to fight in the Zapatista rebellion. Now she is a “promoter,” the term used to describe Zapatista teachers, for foreigners visiting Oventic. In an effort to build solidarity, she teaches them about the Zapatista struggle.

Oventic is located in the highlands of Chiapas about an hour outside San Cristóbal de Las Casas. Arriving there often proves a challenge, since not all taxi drivers are familiar with the location, and colectivos leave only sparingly from San Cristóbal. The trip itself involves an hour drive through the mountains on windy, bumpy, and mostly dirt roads. When one reaches the community, one sees a sign that reads, “You are now entering autonomous, rebel territory.”

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23 Zapatista names have been changed in order to protect individual identities.
24 Zapatistas say the term “teacher” implies an unequal relationship between teacher and pupil, one in which the teacher knows more than his student. As one promoter told me, “I don’t want to say that we (teachers) know more. We are equal” (personal correspondence 2009). Zapatista promoters are young, typically no older than 30. “In order to be named an education, health, communication, or agroecological promoter, an individual must fulfill a number of requirements, among them moral irreproachability, availability, a political background, and the ability to communicate efficiently in two or more languages” (Baronnet 2008, 117).
25 However, this is changing quickly as more tourists come to visit Oventic. During my stay, tourists visited every day.
Entering the gated community takes time. Zapatistas guarding the entrance check passports and then escort visitors to meet with three other Zapatistas inside a small wood building, who ask basic questions about your intentions for visiting, your knowledge about the Zapatista movement, etc. The Zapatistas claim such steps are taken to prevent against infiltration from government spies, particularly paramilitary groups. The Center for Political Analysis and Social and Economic Investigation (CAPISE), based in San Cristóbal, reports that since 2007 paramilitary aggressions have affected 800 families and threatened takeover of over 12,000 hectares of Zapatista-controlled land. “The Mexican state has reactivated paramilitary groups,” says CAPISE director Ernesto Ledesma. “They are dispossessing the indigenous peoples once again from their lands, from their territory” (Gibler 2009, 215). During my three-week stay in Oventic, I was prohibited from entering the forests unless accompanied by a Zapatista. That’s because orejas (ears)—the word used by Zapatistas to describe spies—patrol the mountains surrounding Oventic, Nubia says. Paramilitary soldiers include some former Zapatistas, bought off or coerced into changing sides. In addition to paramilitaries, the Mexican army maintains 79 military bases throughout Chiapas, including 56 in Zapatista territory (216); I passed one on my way from San Cristóbal to Oventic. As recently
as January 2010, federal and state authorities burned homes and removed families from two indigenous communities in the Montes Azules region of the Lacandona Jungle. Other communities are also at risk of dislocation from this area, where local powerbrokers have plans to construct eco-tourist facilities ("Mexican News Analysis" 2010).

All Zapatista guards wear ski masks. In a 1995 interview, Marcos defended their use: “I will take off my ski mask when Mexican society takes off its own mask, the one it uses to cover up the real Mexico. ... And once they (Mexicans) have seen the real Mexico—as we have seen it—they will be more determined to change it” (Benjamin 1995, 70). Aside from concealing one’s identity, the ski mask serves as an important symbol of the Zapatista movement.

Figure 1. Photo of the Zapatista Caracol Oventic
Figure 2. Office of the Good Government Council in Oventic
Over the years, the Indian rebel hiding behind a ski mask has become a major popular icon, emblematic of Zapatista resistance. Ironically, the anti-neoliberal Zapatistas have capitalized on globalization, commodifying their image through the production of merchandise, including ski masks, t-shirts, buttons, refrigerator magnets, posters, and key chains, to name a few items (McCowan 2003, 29). As McCowan postulates: “Like the tourist destination that markets itself to the expectations and preconceived understandings of the tourist, the popular culture industry has created and designed the essential and authentic Zapatista for consumption in the public mind” (2003, 32).

Oventic is one of the five Caracoles (conches) established in 2003 when the EZLN began a new phase in its struggle with the creation of autonomous municipalities and new forms of self-government. The move separated the EZLN leadership from Zapatista civil society, taking away its decision-making capacity within the communities. Marcos explains the change:

The military structure of the EZLN “contaminated” in some ways a democratic and self-governing tradition. The EZLN, was, shall we say, one of the “antidemocratic” elements in a relation of direct community democracy. … Since the EZLN, on principle, is not fighting to take power, none of the military leadership … can

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26 The Caracol is “a large and cavernous seashell, pointed and spiral, which can amplify sounds—both what one hears and what one emits. The indigenous peoples of Chiapas, writes Subcomandante Marcos, ‘held the figure of the conch in great esteem.’ It was, for them, a symbol of knowledge and of life. They used it ‘to summon the community’ and as ‘an aid to hear the most distant words’” (González Casanova 2005, 1).
occupy positions of authority in the community or in the autonomous municipalities. (Stahler-Sholk 2007, 58)

There are currently 38 “Autonomous Rebel Zapatista Councils” throughout Chiapas. These autonomous spaces cover almost 40 percent of the state’s territory and include approximately 1,100 communities of 300 to 400 inhabitants each (Dinerstein 2009, 6). Depending on proximity, each of these communities corresponds to one of the five Caracoles, all of which have their own Good Government Council (GGC).

Figure 3. Map of EZLN Caracoles in Chiapas.

27 These communities are not legally recognized as autonomous by the Mexican state.
Decision-making is divided into three levels: (1) At the local level, communities in each town elect authorities called communal agents, as well as representatives to the Autonomous Councils, the decision making body; (2) at the municipal level, delegates from each town meet in frequent assemblies to discuss important issues and community projects. Representatives to the GGCs and permanent representatives to the Caracoles are also elected; (3) the state level comprises the five Caracoles: Oventic, Roberto Barrios, Morelia, La Realidad, and La Garrucha. Two representatives from each local autonomous council participate in these regional GGCs, in charge of administering justice, mediating conflicts between autonomous councils and government councils, issuing identity cards, discussing goals related to welfare provision (health, education), promoting and supervising projects and community programs, denouncing violations to human rights, and guaranteeing bi-cultural education and health. (Dinerstein 2009, 7)

What does “autonomy” look like in a typical Zapatista community? The GGC of Oventic has 23 members who hold monthly meetings, in addition to occasional ad hoc gatherings.

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28 These descriptions serve as general guidelines for Zapatista self-government. They are by no means the limit or the rule. No two Zapatista villages are expected to govern in the exact same way.
Representatives stay in their posts for short periods of time, approximately two weeks. There is no formal division of power and, as just explained, anyone, regardless of gender, can be elected to these posts. Thus, by rotating positions frequently and enabling all individuals to participate, the practice of democracy becomes direct rather than representative. In a nutshell, autonomy means that communities organized with horizontal relations of power assume responsibility for the decisions that affect their lives. Para todos todo, para nosotros nada—for everyone everything, nothing for us—signifies that wealth and power are distributed equally within society and that work is done for the collective good, not for self-gain. Zapatista communities do not have salaries. In theory, all positions are done in service to the larger community. The downside to this type of structure, of course, is its proclivity for inefficiency. The Zapatistas understand this, but insist that such a model remains the best way for their communities to ensure accountability and avoid non-hierarchical decision-making. They do not suggest, however, that other communities seeking self-governance, including those within La Otra, follow this same system. As Nubia told me, “We don’t try to impose our ideas on other places. We understand that democracy means distinct things in different places” (personal correspondence 2009). Put differently, the type and form of
democracy ultimately practiced depends on the social conditions and historic cultural processes characteristic of each community. In the Zapatista case, democracy is modeled after the collective communities that already exist and on direct democratic procedures that have been in place for centuries— if not always in practice, at least in theory. In contrast, the two social movements that I will analyze in the next section share neither of these characteristics. Not surprisingly, then, democracy has taken different shapes in Tlaxcala and Mexico City. The underlying principles and goals associated with the Zapatismo lexicon—desde abajo, mandar obedeciendo, and para todos todo, para nosotros nada—remain, but, as we will see, they reveal themselves through diverse channels and structures, depending on particular social, economic, political, and cultural contexts.

In Oventic, the people have cut themselves off from governmental aid, including the Oportunidades program, have built their own primary and secondary schools and hospital, and have developed economic alternatives to capitalism, such as boot-making and textile-weaving cooperatives. Zapatista

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29 Oportunidades (formerly Progreso) was established in 1997 to provide financial assistance to Mexicans, particularly women, living under conditions of extreme poverty. It imposes a western ideology, thus mirroring the poverty reduction programs practiced by international development agencies. For example, human freedom is associated with the attainment of capital. The program is "divorced from any resource distribution initiatives and even more so from any analysis of the persistence of structural inequalities" (Mora 2007, 68-69).
cooperatives, of course, do not fully escape capitalistic conditions. Profit is still made off customers, mostly foreign tourists, who buy Zapatista products. The difference, though, is that the middlemen are eliminated and profits are shared collectively within the community—not pocketed by the capitalist. In Oventic, for example, the money (i.e., the surplus value) generated from the artisan cooperative *Mujeres por la Dignidad Rebelde*, which has stores in Oventic and San Cristóbal, is used to help offset the costs of the school and hospital. Not surprisingly, funding remains one of the main problems confronting the Zapatistas. Like most Zapatista communities, Oventic depends on international solidarity (e.g., the Mexico Solidarity Network) for the funding of its projects. Beginning in 2003, the GGCs began reviewing NGO programs to make sure that the Zapatistas, not the NGOs, were driving the development process:

There is a more sophisticated kind of handout which is practiced by some NGOs and international organizations. It consists more or less in their deciding what the communities need and, without even consulting them, imposing not just particular projects but also the timing and form of their execution. Imagine the desperation of a community that needs potable water and instead is given a library or needs a school for children and is given a course on herbiculture. (Marcos 2003)

In some instances, the Zapatistas charge a 10 percent tax to NGOs with projects in specific communities, helping to “counterbalance the uneven development that reflected the convenience and preferences of NGO funders, reaffirming the concept of community
empowerment” and to “escape from the autonomy without resources trap” (Stahler-Sholk 2007, 57). In a few Zapatista villages, NGOs, using fair-trade practices, have assisted in linking coffee and honey cooperatives with export markets (Nash 2008, 15).

Ironically, people in Oventic drink Coca-Cola. Apparent inconsistencies like this in a movement so profoundly anti-capitalist are worth examining. Are not the Zapatistas contradicting themselves by commercializing their image via the Internet and selling their products to national and international markets? The answer is twofold. On the one hand, yes, the Zapatistas are undeniably engaging and benefiting off capitalistic relations. They do so, however, not with capitalism’s primary goal—the accumulation of wealth—in mind. Remember, we are still talking about impoverished communities without access to clean drinking water and sewage systems. The economic base of highland Chiapas, concentrated on *milpa* (small plot) farming of corn, cattle herding, and coffee “can scarcely guarantee subsistence, let alone generate enough cash to stabilize subsistence production” (Nash 2008, 15). Furthermore, the vast majority of production is created for use, not exchange, value. The vegetables and fruit grown in the

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30 The “autonomy without resources trap” is the assumption that because an autonomous community becomes self-sufficient (i.e., cutting itself off from state aid and services), that it will, over time, struggle to provide enough resources for its population.
Oventic garden rarely leave Oventic; instead, they are used for self-consumption or consumption of the family or extended community. If people in Oventic do want to buy or trade produce, they can travel to small Zapatista markets, located about 15 minutes away, in San Andrés. As demonstrated by the example of the Oventic artisan cooperative, the money left over from sales at Zapatista cooperatives goes towards education, healthcare, and other autonomous projects. Along these lines, Coca-Cola has a high use-value as a source of caffeine, calories, and clean drinking water. In a region where clean water is sparse, Coke is both accessible and inexpensive. It is bought collectively at wholesale prices and then sold exclusively at Zapatista-run grocery cooperatives. The Zapatistas say that someday they will produce Coke under non-capitalist conditions, but until that day, they will continue to consume Coke.

Interestingly, Oventic does rely on the government for electricity, but like over 70 percent of the Chiapan population with electricity, they don’t pay for it—not at the current prices offered. Although Chiapas produces over 50 percent of Mexico’s hydroelectric power and 20 percent of the country’s total electricity, one-third of the state’s population lives without
electricity, including the majority of Zapatista communities (Hansen, personal correspondence 2010).³¹

Education is central to the construction of Zapatista autonomy. Both Brazilian educationalist Paulo Freire³² and Gramsci point to the importance of popular education as a way of confronting hegemony. Zapatista education resembles the model emphasized by Freire, in which learning allows for dialogic discussion based on mutual respect. Reflection is used as a means of arriving to new realities. Instead of passively listening, students are converted into active participants in the educational process and knowledge becomes meaningful to their everyday lives. Freire wrote that in the absence of such meaning, a false consciousness is created, inhibiting one’s ability to act and change one’s reality.

³¹ Since 2000, energy prices in Mexico have increased by 54 percent. In Chiapas, citizens have accrued a combined 300 million pesos (approximately $24.6 million USD) in debt, as a result of loans taken out to afford electricity from 1994 to 2009 (Pérez Silva 2009). In response to high costs, many Mexicans, especially in Chiapas, have protested against the Federal Commission of Electricity (CFE) by organizing marches, blocking highways, and refusing to pay their energy bills. In some instances, the CFE has responded by cutting off the electricity of those who don’t pay. In others, like Oventic, people remain with electricity—at least for now (Rodriguez 2009). It will be interesting to see how this energy crisis plays out. In November of 2009, Chiapa’s governor, Juan Sabines Guerrero, promised to cut the energy bill by 50 percent for 40 municipalities of Chiapas living under conditions of “high marginalization.” He also said the government and CFE would “cover the historic debt” left by the high energy prices (Pérez Silva 2009). It is unclear, though, whether such concessions will apply to Zapatista communities.

³² Freire, author of the Pedagogy of the Oppressed, designed literary programs for poor non-literate Brazilians before the military coup of April 1, 1964, ultimately leading to his exile from Brazil. These programs ran counter to the traditional educational models practiced in Brazil, which, according to Freire, were so “disconnected from life, centered on words emptied of the reality they are meant to represent, lacking in concrete activity” that they “could never develop a critical consciousness. Indeed, its own naïve dependence on high-sounding phrases, reliance on rote, and tendency toward abstractness actually intensified our naïveté” (Freire 2008, 33).
Practiced like this, education turns into a vehicle to liberate oneself from oppression.

The secondary school in Oventic, with approximately 120 students and 24 promoters, strives to instill the “critical consciousness”—the “things and facts as they exist empirically, in their causal and circumstantial correlations”—absent from the state schools (Freire 2008, 39). “What (the state schools) imposed on us was the other history” (Nubia, personal correspondence 2009).

According to the coordinator of the education center in Francisco Villa, an autonomous

Figure 4: Zapatista Classroom at Oventic Secondary School

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33 Students and promoters are housed within Oventic during the school year. Oventic is currently the only Zapatista secondary school, which is our equivalent of a middle school. There are many Zapatista primary schools.
municipality in the Lacandona Jungle, the goal of Zapatista promoters is to “open the eyes of our children.” He explains:

Our elders like it because we are reviving the culture; we are reconstructing that which was lost. The people do not want to lose their traditions, their language. ... We teach many things about the beginning of the struggle, because the struggle is not something new: it goes back 500 years, and we are looking into the reasons for this suffering, since we don’t want it to happen again. ... Children should know all kinds of things so that they are aware of how things used to be. (Baronnet 2008, 117)

The Oventic school is bilingual and bicultural. Subjects include social studies, science, math, humanism, indigenous language, and
Spanish. History is taught from the perspective of the Zapatistas, not from that of the “imaginary Mexico” Nubia alludes to. The school day lasts from 8 until 2 p.m. At 4 o’clock there is usually an additional activity, such as dance class or basketball, and the evenings are left free for homework. When foreigners are taking classes, activities are specially designed so that Zapatista students and visitors can work together on a project. Facilities include standard classrooms with desks and chalkboards, as well as a library for research and reading. Student progress is assessed through evaluations, but grades are not issued as they are in American classrooms. Apart from studying, students are responsible for helping to run the school. For example, groups of students alternate between cooking meals and cleaning classrooms and bathrooms.

The federal government does not recognize or accredit Zapatista schools, so students forfeit their chances at high school or university educations. Long-term plans to construct a Zapatista high school

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The one exception to this is an indigenous university located in an isolated neighborhood of San Cristóbal. The university, unaffiliated with the state, is funded by the Catholic Church. Its resources and facilities, including cabin dorms, furnished classrooms, an extensive library, and bathrooms with sewage systems, are impressive, to say the least. Classes on virtually all topics, from music to politics, are offered. Unfortunately, I discovered the university during my final days in Chiapas, and therefore did not have the opportunity to conduct thorough research or interviews. According to Hansen, only a few Zapatistas from the Oventic Secondary School have attended the university, most choosing to take jobs in their local communities instead.
and university remain in the preliminary stages of discussion, still far from being realized.

Upon completing their secondary education, students typically find jobs serving the Zapatista communities in education, health, ecology, and so forth. Obviously, these jobs are limited in scope and depend upon the capacities and needs of the Zapatista villages. Ultimately, though, this is the price of autonomous education done in defiance of the state. Like other social movements, the Zapatistas have made concerted efforts to develop their knowledge base by inviting experts from various academic fields into their communities. In Oventic, an Italian doctor spends six months each year training prospective Zapatista doctors in Western medicine and medical procedures. University professors from Mexico City travel to Oventic to offer pedagogical workshops for young promoters, and two university educated men live year round in Oventic; one serves as a librarian, and the other as a Spanish language instructor for the promoters. In the Zapatista autonomous municipality of Libertad de los Pueblos Mayas, located in the Lacandona Jungle, community members receive training in agroecology from an NGO in San Cristóbal; NGOs have also come to the community to offer workshops on sustainable agriculture (Baronnet 2008, 117). Despite these examples, it is clear that
Zapatista villages are struggling to extend their knowledge base beyond simple literacy and mathematics. In Oventic, it is a legitimate concern that students cannot study beyond the U.S. equivalent of eighth grade. The clinic, while a positive step, still lacks the resources and knowledge necessary to train doctors as specialists and to deal with serious illnesses. These potential pitfalls will need to be addressed at some point in the future.

Zapatista schools are clearly linked to the “Indianization” of the communities—the rescuing of cultural traditions and the valorization of indigenous identity. At the same time, schools serve to reject some of the cultural injustices built into that tradition. Nubia, for example, grew up watching discrimination against indigenous women. Her mother never went to school. Like countless other indigenous women, she existed only to bear children, cook meals, and serve her husband. The Zapatistas attempted to change that by enacting the Women’s Revolutionary Law in 1992. Nubia later became the first woman in her family to attend school. By traditional Mayan standards, Nubia, now 23, would have been married off in her early teens. “Now why would I want to get married?” she asks. “I’m not even sure I want children” (personal

36 “This law enumerates women’s right to employment, education, wages, healthcare and basic services, as well as recognizing women’s capacity for political work and leadership, both in the community and in the insurgent movement, and also as part of the rebel organization. Very clearly it pointed out the sphere of women’s self-determination regarding marriage and motherhood” (Millán 2005, 3).
correspondence 2009). Today, 40 percent of the active participants in the EZLN are women, and in Zapatista national appearances, men and women are always equally represented (Nash 2008, 13-14). Within the Zapatista communities and EZLN, many women hold the same posts as men, including comandanta, the highest rank in the army, and they serve on the GGCs. In schools, the law has helped raise the percentage of girl students to equal that of boys. The law also banned alcohol, which was identified as a leading cause for male physical violence towards women. The Zapatistas admit, however, that they still have a long way to go towards fully overcoming sexism and deeply embedded traditions that excluded women from local councils.\(^{37}\) Still, the empowerment of women is one of the more egalitarian and appealing elements of the Zapatista movement. In challenging the imbedded machista features of both the indigenous and dominant multiculturalist ideologies, Zapatista women are helping to destabilize the gendered ordering of Mexican society.

In summary, the Zapatista practices of indigenous autonomy offer important alternatives to the cultural and economic logics of assimilationalist and neoliberal projects of the Mexican elite. Overall,

\(^{37}\) According to Nash, Zapatista women still suffer physical and sexual abuse. One woman was killed by her husband after attending a community meeting. Some villages have lifted the ban on alcohol, leading to more incidents of wife and child abuse (2008, 14).
their emphases on self-government, community, participatory education, and women’s rights foster the construction of a critical consciousness within the movement’s participants. In their analysis of protest movements in the U.S. during and after the Great Depression, Piven and Cloward identify three ways in which consciousness is developed:

First, “the system,”—or those aspects of the system that people experience and perceive—loses legitimacy. Large numbers of men and women who ordinarily accept the authority of their rulers and the legitimacy of institutional arrangements come to believe in some measure that these rulers and these arrangements are unjust and wrong. Second, people who are ordinarily fatalistic, who believe existing arrangements are inevitable begin to assert “rights” that imply demands for change. Third, there is a new sense of efficacy; people who ordinarily consider themselves helpless come to believe that they have some capacity to change their lot. (1979, 4)

In Mexico, we have seen all three of these elements play out within the Zapatista movement. Among Zapatistas, the Mexican government has lost all legitimacy at the federal, state, and local levels. Over time, the Zapatistas, after being denied certain rights, have cut ties with the state and self-implemented territorial and cultural autonomy. All along, the self-efficacy of the Zapatistas has gone fortifying itself. Piven and Cloward posit that along with a transformation of consciousness comes a change in behavior. This behavior most often takes the form of defiance, in which people “violate the traditions and laws to which they ordinarily acquiesce,
and they flaunt the authorities to whom they ordinarily defer. …
Their defiance is acted out collectively, as members of a group, and not as isolated individuals” (1979, 4) In essence, Piven and Cloward are describing the Freirian concept that knowledge (more precisely, the formation of a critical consciousness) leads to direct action. And in the Zapatista communities, this theory has been put into practice. Through education, community members, especially youth, are becoming aware of their own realities. That is, they are beginning to grasp the political, economic, and social constructs that generate poverty and inequality. Greater knowledge and understanding of the Zapatista struggle strengthens the broader movement because it builds collective identity and empowers and encourages the masses to join together in popular resistance. In short, knowledge becomes power. La Otra hopes to apply and extend the lessons of Zapatista autonomy to a national scale. As Mora suggests, La Otra “represents an opportunity to draw from multiple forms of cultural knowledge and experiences of historically marginalized political actors in constructing anticapitalist alternatives that transform the hierarchical positioning of ethnic-racialized groups in society” (2007, 65).
V. Towards Autonomy and a National Coalition

Zapatismo is not a dogma. It’s not a religion. What we have learned from La Otra is that Zapatismo is not only this world in which many worlds fit, but also the form in which you develop these worlds. We cannot make a copy of what is happening in Chiapas because the conditions are different. Zapatismo has planted precisely this, that we’re not a dogma, but a reality that builds itself from the conscience of the people.

—Luz Rivera, leader of Tlaxcala’s Consejo Nacional Urbana y Campesina

On a late summer morning in July, I sat talking with Luz Rivera inside the Tlaxcala city office of the Consejo Nacional Urbana Campesina (CNUC), a community-based movement that addresses the needs of local campesino families. Quite unexpectedly, a young man, about 25 years old, walked into the room, accompanied by another member of the CNUC’s staff. Luz didn’t recognize him. Judging by the look on his face, though, something was definitely wrong. “It’s my friend,” he told Luz. “He’s been in the hospital for two weeks, and the doctors have done nothing.” As the man shared the rest of his story—how his friend had injured his arm in a car accident, then had been sent to the hospital where he’d gone untreated for two weeks—Luz nodded, seemingly not the least bit surprised. She swore under her breath several times over, “Pinche gobierno,” with emphasis on the pinche, (translated as “damn government”). The wound was deep enough to see the bone, and yet the hospital hadn’t even taken an x-ray, the man said. Five
minutes later, Luz was on the phone with a nurse from the hospital. She got straight to the point: “If this man doesn’t have surgery, he will lose his arm, and that’s the hospital’s fault.” “We don’t have the facilities or equipment to perform the surgery,” the nurse explained. “Then get him to a hospital that does,” Luz demanded (personal correspondence 2009). Afterwards, Luz called Tlaxcala’s Secretary of Health. Sure enough, later that day, the patient was on his way to Mexico City (about a 2-hour drive west from Tlaxcala) for surgery.

These are the types of issues that Luz, the leader of the CNUC for almost 20 years, deals with on a daily basis. The CNUC is a community organization based out of Tlaxcala, the smallest state in the republic of Mexico; it works closely with campesino communities throughout the state to help provide such basic necessities as clean running water, housing, and milk. In addition, the CNUC puts pressure on the government for better streets and schools, improved healthcare, childcare centers, and funding for the construction of community centers. In terms of structure, the CNUC has a statewide committee, housed in the Tlaxcala city office, with five permanent staff members. The 25 communities associated with the CNUC in Tlaxcala each has its own representative responsible for attending a weekly meeting in Tlaxcala and then reporting back to their local community assemblies on the items discussed.
The CNUC formed in 1992 out of a rupture in the political party, the PRT (Partido Revolucionario de Trabajadores), which was bought off by politicians from President Salinas’ camp seeking support for the reform of Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution. Far from achieving so-called “liberty and justice for the countryside,” as initially promised, the reform’s privatization of ejido lands and the elimination of land redistribution had quite the opposite effect. It paved the way for the signing of NAFTA in 1994, threatening and, in some cases, destroying subsistence agriculture in Mexico’s peasant-driven areas, including in Tlaxcala, where campesinos had been dependent on subsidies and state-financed credit dating back to the 1930s. As a woman from Toluca de Guadalupe, one of the largest communities within the CNUC, notes:

We have been affected a lot because our seed is not worth anything. It does not have the value that it did before. For example, when I was left a widow with my (nine) young children, the corn was my principal (economic) base because I sold corn and got back beans, soap, sugar, and all that. And now to get a kilo of beans you need to sell 20 kilos of corn. Now it is not enough. … We on this side cannot compete with the United States. It is very difficult for us because we do not have subsidies. We do not have the ability to buy machinery. … For this, I say that the Free Trade Agreement is what destroyed our structures of life. (Duffly & Ferrara 2006)

Figure 5. Photo of Tlaxcala Plantations
In accordance with the 1992 reform, Salinas implemented a program through which campesinos could obtain individual certificates of their land rights if they signed up for the government’s PROCEDE plan. The legislation’s vague language stated: “The decision to participate in the certification program may or may not lead to a future decision to privatize or disband the ejido” (Assies 2008, 51). In reality, PROCEDE both encouraged and facilitated the sale of communal land into private hands. While many poor campesinos have since joined the program out of financial necessity, the CNUC’s members have continued to resist. “The organization (the CNUC) has helped us defend ourselves, in not
giving ourselves up and letting them (the state and its politicians) take land from us ... (it) taught us that we have to defend the land. It is our principal base. It is the only patrimony that we have, the land” (Duffly & Ferrara 2006). The CNUC’s push for governmental subsidies, particularly for fertilizer, has enabled many campesinos to maintain their farms. This is true in San Simeon, where all the town’s land remains under the ownership of a single ejido.

But the CNUC’s support alone has not been enough to ward off other consequences of neoliberalism. People in Tlaxcala refer to San Simeon as “un pueblito de fantasmas”—a ghost town. Beautiful new houses line the streets, but no one lives in them. That’s because more than half the town has migrated north to the U.S. Most of those left are children and grandparents. During my week-stay in San Simeon, I lived with an elderly couple whose seven children have all migrated north. I taught English to their eight-year-old granddaughter, Yusalin, a shy girl whose single mom works seven months of the year in Idaho as a hotel clerk. All CNUC communities struggle with the issue of migration, and while San Simeon is the most extreme case, there is worry that similar depopulation patterns could soon befall other communities.
The CNUC defines its politics as anti-capitalist and anti-electoral. Tlaxcaltecan politics are corrupt at the state and local levels. One day, inside the State Congress building in Tlaxcala, I asked a librarian named Paola about the upcoming elections for the state’s five federal diplomats, which were to take place that weekend. Despite being a government employee, Paola criticized the political parties openly and relentlessly, saying that she expected the PAN to win, even if the votes didn’t add up. The PAN pays $3,000 pesos per vote, she told me. “The PAN are elitist. For them, women are less” (personal correspondence 2009). That
weekend the PRI—not the PAN as she had predicted—swept the competition. No one involved with the CNUC voted. Corruption is equally as problematic in the local governments. According to a man in San Simeon (unaffiliated with the CNUC because he says they cause too much trouble), the local mayor pockets all the money he receives from the state. He signs off that a road has been paved, when it hasn’t been. When parents asked him to replace the broken basketball hoops, the mayor told them: “Send me a memo.” And he did nothing. “After the elections, there is no one left,” Luz says, referring to the politicians who break their promises to the people who vote for them. “But CNUC is still there” (personal correspondence 2009).

The CNUC practices autonomy differently from the Zapatistas. Whereas the Zapatistas have virtually cut themselves off from the state, the CNUC still relies on the government for funding and resources. In addition, no autonomous schools or hospitals have yet been built in Tlaxcala. In fact, as demonstrated by the earlier example of the man involved in the car accident, the CNUC, rather than separate itself from the government, makes demands on its institutions and leaders. Around Tlaxcala, the CNUC has a reputation for being a militant group. “Somos muy peleaneros,” Luz told me that day in her office (this roughly translated as “we like to
What exactly does this mean? Basically, that the CNUC pressures the government into giving it what it wants, when it wants. In other words, it causes disruption, often by organizing protests and marches. Its most effective technique, though, is the occupation of public offices, for which several of the CNUC’s members have been arrested over the years. “We don’t want to go to the meetings of the political parties to fight,” Rivera says. “No, we go to the towns themselves, to fight against the local bosses and mayors, to fight for the freedom of our people. … If you don’t confront the government directly, they’re going to kill you” (personal correspondence 2009).

The CNUC mobilizes around a wide range of issues. In Hueyotlipan, after two children were hit by cars and killed on the town’s main road a few years ago, CNUC organizers met with the mayor and convinced him to provide materials so they could build speed bumps for the road. When the police came in and removed the speed bumps, CNUC members constructed new ones, which remain in place today. In Nanacamilpa, which began organizing through the CNUC about a year and a half ago, the CNUC has helped improve the response time of local ambulances, making sure they arrive promptly at the front door of the sick, rather than an hour and a half late in a distant location. At one of the weekly meetings in Tlaxcala, the CNUC invited the state’s assistant to the
Secretary of Education to talk with the organization’s parents. The parents vented for an hour about the problems with the state’s public school system. Many asked, “Why do we have to pay for books and uniforms, when the law says school is free?”38 In at least three schools, the CNUC has secured funds from the government to help pay for uniforms, which are required attire in most Tlaxcala public schools.

The CNUC’s relations with the Zapatistas began almost immediately following the 1994 uprising, when they declared themselves in solidarity with the movement. Over the years, the CNUC has participated in several events hosted by the Zapatistas, including 1996’s Inter-Continental Encounter against Neoliberalism and for Humanity.39 Luz calls the Zapatistas “the example” for other social movements seeking autonomy and radical change in Mexico. She says the CNUC still lacks the “conscience” of the Zapatistas. Maria Luisa, the CNUC representative for Hueyotlipán, attended the ceremony for the opening of the Zapatista Caracoles, held in Oventic in 2003:

After going to the Zapatista communities, I have learned that it’s not what the television says. The Zapatistas have given us examples of dignity that perhaps we still don’t have. I have realized that sometimes when you say that this isn’t going to

38 Article 3 of the Mexican Constitution of 1917 establishes that education in Mexico is to be free, lay, and universal (Lorey 1995, 1).
39 In this meeting, leftists, anarchists, indigenous peoples, peasant organizations, environmentalists, intellectuals, gays, NGOs, and feminists from six continents, joined together for the first global gathering of the “new-resistance” (Rosset 2005, 36).
change because it’s too difficult, sometimes it isn’t that difficult. When you go to the Zapatista communities, you realize that there really can be a great change, that yes there can be another way to organize yourselves, another system in which there are no political parties. ... If in the Zapatista communities this form has worked it’s because they haven’t been mistaken. They are the example for what we have to do to change this whole system.
(personal correspondence 2009)

For the CNUC, this consciousness-raising starts and ends with education. As Luisa’s husband and CNUC staff member, Alejo, puts it: “If you have an education you’re going to be free. You’re going to think. And this is what the Mexican government, the capitalistic system, the bureaucracy, and those on top don’t want. They want people that they can drive, manipulate, and impose (on)” (personal correspondence 2009). In Hueyotlipan, the CNUC helped fund the construction of a community center where the town’s residents now take classes, free of charge, in areas such as music, dance, and other special topics. In one session, Gabriel, a U.S. college student volunteering with the CNUC, taught a class on immigration rights in the U.S., specifically for those living without documents. “The rights of immigrants were something I didn’t know before,” Luisa says. “Now with this class, I know how to orient someone in my family or out of my family if they have problems, where they can ask or what they can do” (personal correspondence 2009). Everyone in attendance had at least one family-member in the U.S. Gabriel taught them that the only
question an immigrant must legally answer, when stopped by a police officer, is his or her name. He also explained important cultural differences. For instance, unlike in Mexico, where traffic violations are extremely rare, people get pulled over frequently in the U.S., even for seemingly miniscule infractions like broken headlights.

At the state level, the CNUC holds educational workshops throughout the year, often focusing on citizen rights, such as those to education and healthcare. There are also classes on topics like capitalism and Mexican history. At the weekly state meetings, Luz or another staffer usually begins by setting an agenda and making announcements about the upcoming events. The floor is then turned.

Figure 7. Photo from CNUC Office Bulletin Board in Tlaxcala
over to CNUC members, who are all required to participate. Active participation means a willingness to share your thoughts and experiences in front of everyone. For example, after the visit by the assistant to the Secretary of Education, approximately 30 CNUC members sat in a circle to reflect on ways of improving the education of their children. Pancho, a CNUC employee, facilitated the discussion. For over an hour and a half, participants exchanged ideas with each other. Some spoke voluntarily, while others were prompted by Pancho’s questions to speak. At one point in the
meeting, the discussion turned to the role of parents in the education of their children. Since I, too, formed part of the circle, I was asked to participate. Pancho asked me about my experiences with Machismo in Mexico, and how it compared to the U.S. I told them that women generally have more freedoms in the U.S. and are less confined to traditional household duties, such as cooking, cleaning, and childcare, typical for Tlaxcala women. People listened attentively, clearly appreciative of my unique perspective. My comments helped Pancho get his main point across—that fathers, too, need to help in the house and show a vested interest in their children’s educations at home. Otherwise, male-dominant power structures and gendered roles perpetuate themselves. As was true in all the local and state meetings I attended, the women, not the men, dominated the discussion. Before the rupture with the PRT, the CNUC was almost exclusively male, but women now compose over 60 percent of its membership. As more men have left for the U.S., traditional roles have been reversed. In Nanacamilpa, nearly all the organizers are women. As one female organizer from Nanacamilpa told me, “The gain of the CNUC, more than power, is the learning and knowledge of the rights that we have” (personal correspondence 2009).
Several factors have contributed to the success of the CNUC. First, its members live the same brutal realities and share general interests for better healthcare, education for their children, and access to government subsidies. None of these are accessible without exerting pressure on corrupt government channels. The organizational structure allows the CNUC to address both state and local issues. The CNUC’s strong organizational capacity, ability to attract media attention, and persistent performances pose enough of a threat to the government that, rather than resort to repression, it is often forced to negotiate with the organization. The incentive for involvement in the CNUC also extends beyond the tangible. By educating its members, the CNUC empowers its participants, especially women, transforming them from passive into active participants who are willing to challenge state authority. The CNUC has also forged alliances with three other movements in Tlaxcala: UPADE, the Braceros, and Apizaco’s sex workers. All four organizations are adherents to La Sexta and La Otra’s national

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40 UPADE is an urban movement, composed of about 3,000 small business people living on the periphery of Apizaco, that fights for issues like lower property taxes and preventing the privatization of the city’s garbage collection. Apizaco has Tlaxcala’s highest population of sex workers and its largest union. Although sex work is a legalized occupation in Mexico, it is not treated as such. Sex workers, for example, do not have access to any healthcare benefits. The Braceros are Mexican campesinos who worked in the U.S. on 3-6 month contracts during the period of 1942-1964. As a way of ensuring that Braceros would return to Mexico, the Mexican government withheld 10 percent of their wages in a special retirement fund, which the Braceros would receive if, and only if, they returned to Mexico after their visas expired. But 50 years later, the Braceros still haven’t received a cent of their retirement funds.
coalition. In 2006, the CNUC housed Marcos and the other comandantes when they passed through Tlaxcala during La Otra’s initial tour through Mexico. During their stay, all CNUC members read La Sexta, agreeing collectively to subscribe to its national program of struggle. The CNUC has since held educational workshops explaining and discussing the ideas presented in La Sexta. No one can become an official member of the CNUC without first having read and signed La Sexta.

According to Alejo, “La Otra has further opened the possibility of coming together. It’s created a knot of fights. Whatever injustice in whichever place, we feel it. Among everyone, we’ve made a single knot that is difficult to break” (personal correspondence 2009). Rivera pointed to some examples of this, speaking of the relationships the CNUC has formed with organizations in Mexico City, like the Red Nacional Contra la Represión y por la Solidaridad. She says La Otra has created a horizontal network that responds quickly to violence. Amidst police violence and arrests against citizens in Campeche last summer, for example, several Otra organizations, including CNUC, sent representatives to protest. The CNUC also attends national

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41 This organization, its name translated as “The National Network against Repression and for Solidarity,” organizes mainly around the issue of releasing political prisoners in Mexico, particularly those from Atenco.
conferences, such as the 2009 meetings of the Consejo Nacional Indígena in Michoacán and the Zapatista Continental American Meeting Against Impunity in Chiapas. Most of the CNUC’s resources, however, continue to go towards its efforts within Tlaxcala. At least for now, La Otra is, as Rivera describes it, a network of response, of solidarity, and of defense. It is unclear whether it will manifest itself into something more organized in the future. “I don’t think La Otra has a definitive end,” Luz says. “There is so much possibility for transformation. The particular objective of La Otra is to give all the power to those beneath, and they’ll make it (La Otra). That’s what autonomy is, the people taking their destiny in their own hands” (personal correspondence 2009).

The Pancho Villas

La Otra Campaña is a perfect analysis of the national reality. La Otra defines itself as anti-capitalist and with that one has to recognize that there are many positions, even contradictions within this group. La Otra is the worker, the indigenous, the students, young people, anarchists, and socialists. There are many positions. … But we’re all part of the same exploited class.

—Gerardo Meza, organizer with Mexico City’s Frente Popular Francisco Villa Independiente
Comparatively speaking, the Frente Popular Francisco Villa Independiente (the Panchos)\textsuperscript{42} organizes and governs itself quite distinctly from the two other movements I have analyzed thus far. While CNUC members idolize the Zapatistas, the Panchos tend to separate themselves from the EZLN. As one of their leaders, Gerardo, explained, “We are not Zapatistas. We are Villistas with our own project. Of course we coincide with the Zapatista project, but we are not the same” (personal correspondence 2009). The Panchos’ strong sense of self-identity stems from their historical origins. The organization formed in the aftermath of the Mexican City earthquake of 1985, which destroyed the infrastructure and homes of much of the city. In the days and months following the quake, the structural deficiencies and corruption of the Mexican political system were exposed, as the government failed to adequately respond to the needs of those affected, especially in the poor peripheries where the majority of the city’s population lived. The Panchos, led primarily by leftist university students, began organizing these poor communities to demand land and housing from the government. From the outset, the Panchos declared themselves as anti-capitalist and anti-state. Today, the Panchos represent over 6,000 families in Mexico City from 12 different 

\textsuperscript{42} The organization takes its name from Francisco "Pancho" Villa, the leader of the Northern front of the Mexican Revolution.
colonias, most located in the eastern outskirts about an hour from the city’s center. In addition, the Panchos form part of a national organization called UNOPII, which works with similar housing movements in the states of Chiapas and Guanajuato.

The Panchos no longer designate themselves strictly as a housing movement, but rather as a “fight for the projects of life” (Palabras Pendientes 2006, 123). Within the colonias, they have begun various cultural, educational, and health initiatives to move towards autonomy. Like CNUC, they do not identify with a political party and still rely on government funding for the majority of their projects. I spent two weeks living with a family in Acaptzingo, a gated community of about 590 families (more than 2,500 people) built from scratch 12 years ago. The living conditions within Acaptzingo are comparable to those of a lower-class neighborhood in the U.S. Families and couples live in well-furnished one and two-story concrete houses and apartment buildings. According to local residents, safety is the single greatest benefit of belonging to a Pancho colónia. Acaptzingo is located in an impoverished and dangerous sector of Mexico City. In plain sight, just beyond the colónia’s fence, sits an opposite reality—a virtual

43 In Mexico, colónia refers to a residential area or neighborhood.
44 “Unidad Nacional de Organizaciones Populares de Izquierda Independiente” translates as “National Unit of Independent Popular Organizations of the Left.”
shantytown. This community used to form part of the Panchos, but in 1997, about half of the movement split from the Panchos and aligned themselves with the PRD.45 I was told not to venture off alone outside the gates and to return home before 10 p.m. In one of the few times that I left the colonia, a teenager with blood-shot eyes tried to sell drugs to my American friend and me in broad daylight.

My host family told me drugs and gangs were a major problem in

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45 This group aligned with the PRD still identifies itself as part of the Frente Popular Francisco Villa, the original name of the movement. The Panchos I refer to in this essay have added “Independiente” to the end of this name, in order to distinguish between the two organizations.
the surrounding neighborhoods, but not within Acaptzingo. Local law enforcement is not allowed past the gates, which are guarded 24 hours a day, on rotating schedules, by community members. Acaptzingo has its own soccer fields, radio station, and community center. The community center offers a wide range of culture, art, and history classes. In one such class, a student from UNAM\textsuperscript{46} helped five women compile a pictorial and written history of the Acaptzingo colonia. The construction of a small hospital is also underway, and plans for primary and secondary schools have been discussed.

Organizationally, about 90 people compose the various commissions of the Panchos in Acaptzingo, divided into areas such as education, culture, health, vigilance, work, cleaning, and funding. Every two weeks, the people of Acaptzingo gather in a community assembly to discuss the agendas of the commissions. These meetings are optional and attendance has dropped significantly over the years. The Panchos have a central office where eight individuals act as permanent employees. These are the radical militants, responsible first for organizing the Panchos in the mid 1980s. The office is adorned with posters of Latin America’s revolutionary heroes, including Che, Bolivar, and Castro. In contrast

\textsuperscript{46}La Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México is the largest public university in Mexico.
to the Zapatistas, the Panchos do not oppose vertical decision-making.

We are horizontal in the consult of talking to people, but when the assemblies make decisions, they do it in a vertical way. ... In the (Zapatista) Good Government Councils, they nominate new members every 15 days. Structurally, this causes you problems because I’m going to speak with you, but in 15 days I have to talk with another person. (Gerardo, personal correspondence 2009)

Interestingly enough, I found diverging ideologies to be problematic in Acaptzingo as well. Through my conversations, I realized that the Pancho leaders hold one vision of the Pancho movement, while the colonia’s residents clearly

Figure 9. Photo outside Pancho Office in Acaptzingo

Source: Williams 2009

Figure 10. Photo of Posters Hanging inside Pancho Office
hold another. In my interviews with townspeople, most of them expressed concern about the unity of the organization. As one woman told me, “It’s not the way it used to be. People don’t care anymore” (personal correspondence 2009). Specifically, they mentioned how many people no longer participate in the bi-weekly assemblies, nor take advantage of the educational and cultural activities offered by the community center. Some have openly voiced their discontent for having to guard the *colonia*’s gates, urging the movement to hire its own security guards. Gerardo, not surprisingly, disagreed with this assessment. He said this misperception was due to a lack of action, not unity:
Before consolidating this project, of housing, health, and culture, the mobilizations were much more frequent. The people were accustomed to a certain rhythm of mobilization, one or more mobilizations each month. Now we don’t organize a march to demand … materials or chairs or tables for the school. We are going to build it ourselves. … We are in another stage of the process. We have advanced a lot. … This perception that now we aren’t so united as before can be attributed to the fact that what’s lacking is practice, mobilization. (personal correspondence 2009)

To a certain extent, Gerardo’s explanation makes sense. People often stop mobilizing when the incentive to do so no longer exists. But I think he underestimates the legitimacy of the concerns voiced by the people with whom I spoke, who, after all, likely represent the majority opinion of the Pancho movement in Acaptzingo. Gerardo argues that lack of mobilization is an indication of the movement’s progress. This is partly the case. In comparison to the surrounding neighborhoods, the people of Acaptzingo live in luxury. For many, a nice house and safe streets for their children are sufficient. But a lack of demonstrations—“practice,” as Gerardo calls it—does not necessarily correlate to or explain the community members’ feelings of disunity. As both the Zapatistas and the CNUC have demonstrated, claim making and performance do not, by themselves, generate unity. Equally important for both groups has been the process of “framing” their struggle, defined as the “conscious strategic efforts by groups of people to fashion shared understanding of the world and of themselves that legitimate and
motivate collective action” (McAdam 1996, 6). This includes the identification of clear goals and the promotion of a shared ideology. In the Zapatista rhetoric, creation of a critical consciousness—one’s understanding of one’s own reality—is what moves people towards collective action. The Zapatista struggle has been framed as one for human dignity, a dignity threatened by the capitalistic and political order. CNUC has adopted a similar vision of Mexico and the world.

The Panchos of Acaptzingo, on the other hand, seem to lack this collectivity. My discussions indicated that unlike the radical Pancho leaders, the people of Acaptzingo generally show little political interest. Their indifference to the political agenda of the Pancho movement suggests a divide between the leadership and its base. In fact, few of the people I spoke with could articulate why the capitalistic system was hurting Mexico. Several admitted to having voted in the recent elections. Equally as telling, not a single one of the eight individuals that I interviewed had read La Sexta document. Most weren’t familiar with La Otra—this in a colonia that Marcos visited during his 2006 tour. Again, this disconnect can be explained in two ways. First, that the motivation to mobilize has disappeared because the majority of the population has already achieved what it set out to do; they desire a return to normalcy.
And secondly, that most people in Acaptzingo lack the individual
and shared consciousness necessary for constructing a unified front.
In the Zapatista and CNUC communities, the latter has mainly been
accomplished through education. The size of Acaptzingo certainly
puts it at a disadvantage. Its 2,500 residents are more than the
comparable totals in the typical Zapatista and CNUC communities.
But the Zapatistas and CNUC have largely been able to overcome
and neutralize the difficulties often associated with high
membership by creating horizontal structures that allow for local
communities to govern and educate their autonomous spaces
according to their own practices. Not surprisingly, due to effective
framing techniques that help generate a shared identity, these
practices usually reflect and coincide with the methods and
agendas of the national movements. I cannot speak for other
Pancho colonias within Mexico City, but at least within Acaptzingo,
there are clear signs of disillusionment among the community
members. Gerardo says the Panchos want to be “autonomous like
the Zapatistas. … This project corresponds to the needs of the
population. … We believe the people make history, not the leaders”
(personal correspondence 2009). If this is indeed the case, then he
and the Pancho leaders need to start taking such signs of disunity
more seriously. Autonomy is only possible through the will of the
people, and if the people become convinced that collective action is neither necessary nor beneficial, then demobilization could be imminent.

Like Acapatzingo, La Otra faces similar obstacles—particularly, that its lack of specific ideology and the resulting myriad people and groups that make up the movement, many with distinct views on how to govern, could ultimately hurt the union and success of the broader social movement. Outside of Chiapas, Mexico City remains the backbone of La Otra. The events at Atenco in 2006 proved this, as dozens of social movements and grassroots social organizations, including the Panchos, traveled to protest police brutality and arrests.

**Figure 11.** Photo of Sign Displayed during Atenco Rally in the Zócalo

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47 The Panchos had previously mobilized with Atenco’s Peoples Front in Defense of the Land in protest of a new Mexico City airport in 2002.
According to Gerardo, if Otra activists had not penetrated and broken the fence established by the military, the “terror would have remained for more time in Atenco” (personal correspondence 2009). La Otra also helped draw media attention to the repression. On May 30, 2006, 15,000 marched through Mexico City to demonstrate for the release of the Atenco prisoners. Smaller marches, pickets, and protests were held throughout Mexico, the U.S., and internationally during May and June (Cuninghame 2007, 17). Nearly four years later, the release of the prisoners continues to be La Otra’s primary organizing effort in Mexico City.
In July, I attended a meeting in Mexico City where about 100 activists gathered from various organizations—the Panchos, La Red Nacional Contra la Represión y por La Solidaridad, as well as representatives from student, women, sex worker, and other groups—to discuss this issue of prisoners. At the front of the room sat five individuals, each from a different organization. A young woman from a student movement began by explaining the meeting’s agenda. She proposed a new phase in the movement for the release of prisoners, one in which La Otra would organize to demand the release of all of Mexico’s political prisoners, not just those from Atenco. For the next hour or so, people at the front table and in the audience went back and forth exchanging their ideas for ways in which to effectively carry out this new plantón, to begin officially on August 31, 2009. Should we hold another protest in the Zócalo, perhaps another march? How do we get the government’s attention? With no one facilitating, little was decided by the end of the meeting. It was thus agreed that each organization should draft a preliminary plan and email it to a general listserv, so that everyone could come to a meeting in two weeks having read and critiqued the proposals.

Despite his spot at the front table, Gerardo was silent throughout the meeting. Later that night, I spoke with him back in
the Acaptzingo office. He seemed frustrated, though not at all surprised, by the meeting’s results. La Otra has no structure, he told me. After witnessing that night’s meeting, I understood the Panchos’ incredulous attitude towards horizontal decision making and their insistence upon using vertical structures. In other words, when there are 100 people in a room, decision-making responsibilities need to be delegated. This is especially true when dealing with distinct groups somewhat unfamiliar with each other. In a 2006 interview, Gerardo said: “Essentially, La Otra Campaña has to go consolidating itself. It has to go fortifying its form of doing things. It has to generate an adequate structure. We don’t say that it has to be a particular structure. But we do say that we have to structure the way we can change society” (Palabras Pendientes 2006, 126). Four years later, La Otra is no closer to achieving the structure Gerardo had envisioned. “In the future, La Otra has to change into something different,” Gerardo says. “… Within a few years I see myself being active in a political organization, not a social organization like this (La Otra), but in a political organization in which the task will be the transformation of society. What does La Otra lack? Political organization” (personal correspondence 2009). Gerardo provided no specific insight into what this political
organization would look like, or how it might function, only that it would be, like La Otra, anti-capitalist and anti-electoral.

VI. Conclusions and Last Reflections

In this paper, I have reflected on the strengths and weaknesses of La Otra Campaña by comparing the dynamics of three movements: the Zapatistas, the CNUC, and the Panchos, each with its own program of autonomy. No longer reliant on the state, the Zapatista community of Oventic practices a type of self-government and horizontal decision-making that transcends the ethnic-racial boundaries of traditional mestizo and indigenous Mexico. With the CNUC, a rural peasant organization modeled after the Zapatistas, we see a similar movement towards autonomy. Education has empowered its members, especially women, into taking leadership roles to challenge inefficient political models.

Finally, I have analyzed the Panchos, an urban movement living a distinct reality. Here, two potential issues have been identified: (1) the ideological differences (i.e., horizontalism versus verticalism) impeding or threatening the construction of alliances in Mexico City, and (2) the seeming disconnect between the leaders and community members in the Panchos’ Acaptzingo colonia.
The Panchos remind us just how broad La Otra truly is, and that within it are a number of smaller movements with their own problems and ways of solving these problems. On the one hand, this is the beauty of La Otra, that is, its openness to many paths, to no one way of doing things—Zapatismo’s idea for a “world in which many worlds fit.” But this is also the main structural challenge confronting La Otra. If one puts Marxist-Leninists in a room together with Zapatistas, ideologies are bound to clash. La Otra is banking that certain commonalities—mainly a shared resentment for capitalism and Mexico’s political system—will prove enough to overcome these differences in order to unite in struggle.

Clearly the principles of Zapatismo are beginning to filter down to a broader coalition, but overcoming generations of Mexican paternalism and corporatism is not easy. As Mexican journalist Lydia Cacho sees it, “To understand Mexico, you have to understand that corruption is not a political issue, but a cultural one” (public lecture 2010). Corruption has become so ingrained in Mexican society that most Mexicans do not perceive political reform as a realistic expectation. Corruption, in other words, has bred cynicism throughout Mexico—so much so, in fact, that the vast majority of Mexicans do not participate in political organizing. As of 2000, only seven percent of Mexicans were affiliated with a political
organization, six percent had signed a petition, seven percent had
joined a boycott, and eight percent had attended a demonstration
(Camp 2007, 66-67). Partly for this reason, of the 50 million Mexicans
living in poverty, many remain indifferent to La Otra. Others
disagree with its politically radical program. As history teaches us,
social commonality and linked fate neither fully erase tension nor
necessarily imply cooperation and collective action.

Near the end of my research, I visited San Juan de Chamula,
an indigenous municipality on the outskirts of San Cristóbal that
attracts hundreds of tourists each day to its markets and unique
Catholic Church.\textsuperscript{48} The poverty in this part of Chamula equals, if not
exceeds, that which I saw in most Zapatista communities. The
majority of houses—wooden shacks built over dirt—double as
storefront businesses. Tzotzil women, dressed in long fur skirts, wool-
woven vests, and purple and green-embroidered blouses, stand
outside their homes waiting for foreign customers. Meanwhile,
Chamulan children mingle near the town center in front of the
church, competing with each other for pesos from the horde of
tourists. Despite apparent cultural, social, and economic similarities,

\textsuperscript{48} Here there is an interesting syncretism between Catholicism and traditional Mayan
practices. Inside the “Catholic” church, pine needles, covered in candles, take the place
of pews. Shamans chant in Tzotzil and worshippers carry bottles of Coke. “In indigenous
tradition, it is believed that one must burp in order to expel evil spirits when praying.
Originally, a fermented maize drink was used in this custom, but it has since been all but
replaced, thanks to the divine efficiency of Coca-Cola” (Evans 2006, 16). When I visited
the church, other soda beverages, such as Sprite and Mountain Dew, were also used.
Chamulans and the Zapatistas remain bitter rivals. “Zapatistas are criminals,” one Chamulan man told me. “They are flojos (lazy people) who don’t like to work” (personal correspondence 2009).

Nubia mirrored this resentment, calling Chamula “a tourist town” whose people remain corrupted by the state (personal correspondence 2009). What explains this tension? One reason is Chamula’s political allegiance to the PRI, which, not unlike the corporatist model of decades past, continues to exert authority over the population through the allocation of land and resources.

Not surprisingly, state intervention—be it through paramilitary groups, government assistance programs like Oportunidades, or just old-style corporatist politics—continues to be one of the roadblocks to Otra unity.

Despite these obstacles, four years into its global project, La Otra has built a social movement campaign. Around Mexico, it has established social networks that respond collectively to issues like state repression. In 2007, the EZLN called for adherents of La Sexta to organize a peace camp to Cucupá, a small indigenous community in Baja California that had lost its ancestral right to fish. Several Otra groups, including the Panchos and California community-based movements, organized caravans to the peace camp. As one participant from Los Angeles described it, “We were there to not
only support the rights of the indigenous people of Baja (California) but to show our collective power. Members of our small community center in East L.A. felt that it was necessary to share our experiences of struggle here as well as learn what is going on in Mexico first hand” (Zugman 2008, 352). Solidarity is being constructed among previously unconnected actors and organizations through events like the Festival of Digna Rabia (Dignified Rage), held throughout Mexico and the world in December 2008. “The closest thing to La Otra is the Festival of Digna Rabia,” the CNUC’s Luz says. “It’s when we all saw each other, when we realized the fortitude of what we were building” (personal correspondence 2009). In Mexico City, organizations set up tables in the Zócalo and participated in various forums. The CNUC, for example, took part in a panel titled “The Other Paths: Other Social Movements.” Left-leaning academics gave presentations on the politics of Mexico and La Otra alternative. Beyond Mexico are a variety of organizations adhering to La Otra, like the Movement for Justice in el Barrio, an immigrant rights group in East Harlem, New York City, where members practice collective decision making and direct democracy at leadership meetings, and participate in educational workshops about the causes of social injustice. The creation of these networks is an accomplishment in itself. Such broad oppositional networks often
serve as the building blocks for social movements (Tilly & Tarrow 2007, 117).

But are these networks sustainable? Are they closer to resembling the coalition formed with CNUC—where membership in La Otra seems to truly mean something—or that with the Panchos of Acapatzingo, where membership seems to imply little more than loose, verbal commitment? In the end, the success of La Otra hinges on its ability to fortify alliances and strengthen allegiances. This is not difficult to discern. The tougher question, of course, is how to go about building these relationships. The Panchos’ Gerardo has suggested that the key lies in developing strong organizational structures. Adopting this type of strategy to a movement as large, heterogeneous, and full of competing interests as La Otra might seem like the perfect fix. And yet, arriving at such a conclusion, without also considering the drawbacks to formal organization, would be foolish. As Piven and Cloward argue quite convincingly, it was mass defiance, not developed organization, which ultimately led to the gains made by the unemployed during the Great Depression and blacks during the civil rights movement. In fact, as occurred with the unemployed workers, efforts to form organizations with a mass membership tend to divert resources and attention “away from the streets and into the meeting rooms” (1977, xxii).
Instead of mobilizing, movement leaders begin to negotiate with elites (i.e., the state or organizations with close connections to the state) for concessions, which the elites are pleased to offer in return for less disruption and more organization-building. Over time, however, the organization grows so dependent on the elite for resources that leaders and organizers of the lower classes act in the end to facilitate the efforts of elites to channel the insurgent masses into normal politics, believing all the while that they are taking the long and arduous but certain path to power. When the tumult is over, these organizations usually fade, no longer useful to those who provided the resources necessary to their survival. Or the organization persists by becoming increasingly subservient to those on whom it depends. (Piven & Cloward 1977, xxii)

In the alternative, a loosely-structured organization, Piven and Cloward claim that movements are far less susceptible to institutionalization, that is, the state trap—often a precursor to demobilization. For social movements, being dissolved into the bureaucracy implies a return to political normalcy. As a result, power struggles between movement leaders are likely to emerge, and semi-vertical structures, such as the electoral system associated

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One of the examples they use to explicate this point is the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), which emerged in the early 1960s during the civil rights movement. The organizers of the SNCC, rather than take the legislative and litigation approach practiced by organizations like the NAACP, preferred direct confrontation. Their campaigns and commitment to civil disobedience, although lacking in formal structure and organization, proved extremely effective. As one SNCC participant explained, “Because the students were too busy protesting … No one really needed ‘organization’ because we then had a movement” (222). As Zinn explains, the SNCC “was not … a membership organization. This left the adhesion of individuals to the group fluid and functional, based simply on who was carrying on activity. … The twig was bent, and the tree grew that way” (223).
with representative democracy, will be (re)implemented. Hence, the very mechanisms and structures responsible for perpetuating social inequality, the ones that the masses fought to eliminate in the first place, are reaffirmed. Knowing these consequences, it would seem rather precarious, if not contradictory, for La Otra to pursue the formalized organization approach. After all, La Otra’s plan—“to change the world without taking power”—does not involve a seizure of the state. The CNUC’s Luz prefers the loose model: “There is no structure,” she says, referring to La Otra. “When we have a structure, we’ll be finished. If you put in place a delineated structure, you destroy a horizontal network where everyone is (represented). It’s no one person. It’s no one structure. We are a network” (personal correspondence 2009). Using this strategy, the protests themselves are the focal point of a movement’s organizing efforts. Of course, this approach works only if the majority of the participants stay committed to a common cause that brings with it some clear incentive. Otherwise, as we saw in Acaptzingo, people may become disillusioned with the movement’s goals and desire a return to normal life.

I would argue that the most pressing issue facing La Otra’s movement forward lies precisely in this ability to motivate people towards collective action. Here again, we turn to the importance of
(1) constructing a critical consciousness and (2) framing a collective identity. As Freire asks, “Who better than the oppressed to understand the terrible significance of an oppressive society? Who suffers the effects of oppression more than the oppressed? Who can better understand the necessity of liberation?” (1993, 27). Freire is exactly right: change starts at the grassroots. Of course, as Freire well knew, the existence of oppression, by itself, does not guarantee popular resistance. If it did, then nearly half the world’s population—the over three billion people living on less than $2.50 a day, according to the World Bank—would be rebelling (Anup 2010). That’s why Freire, and Gramsci too, preached the importance of educational and cultural projects to overcoming oppression. For La Otra, this means continuing to stress the education of los de abajo, allowing these historically marginalized and excluded peoples to think independently and critically, so that, eventually, they will join hands with other exploited folk and come to understand that only through action can they change the system driving them into poverty and despair.

Ultimately, the challenge of constructing an autonomous anti-capitalist alternative from beneath remains expansive. Many questions remain: Can La Otra overcome internal division? Will the government repress it? Can a movement based on collectivity,
human dignity, and respect survive in the self-interested, power-driven, twenty-first century? La Otra’s true fate will not be determined for many years to come. This paper acts as merely a starting point, aiming to stimulate discussion and plant seeds for further research on this topic.

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**Capstone Summary**

My paper examines three manifestations of Mexico’s Otra Campaña (Other Campaign), a grassroots political movement that emerged in June of 2005 with the release of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation’s (EZLN) Sixth Declaration of the Lacandona Jungle (La Sexta).

In 1983, the EZLN formed in Chiapas through a fusion of two distinct groups: indigenous peasants and militant leftists. On New Year’s Day 1994, the same day the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) came into effect, the Zapatistas declared war on the Mexican state. They rejected NAFTA on the premise that indigenous farmers would be unable to compete with large agro-businesses subsidized by the U.S. and Mexican governments. On a larger scale, the EZLN fought for economic, political, social, and cultural justice for the indigenous peoples of Mexico, the victims of over 500 years of racial discrimination and economic exploitation.

Twelve years after the Zapatista Rebellion, the EZLN proposed a new phase in its resistance movement:

> And so the EZLN has resisted 12 years of war, of military, political, ideological and economic attacks, of siege, of harassment, of persecution, and they have not vanquished us. We have not sold out nor surrendered, and we have made progress. ... The hour has come to take a risk once again and to take a step which is dangerous but which is worthwhile. Because, perhaps united with other social sectors who suffer from the same wants as we do, it will be possible to achieve what we need and what we deserve. A new step forward in the indigenous struggle is only possible if the
Thus, La Otra called for an extension of the Zapatista movement beyond its primarily indigenous base, proposing a broad alliance among civil organizations and actors, from below and to the left, to represent the exploited populations of Mexico and the world. Ideologically, La Otra defines its politics as anti-capitalist and anti-electoral. Its radical program seeks to de-legitimize state power through the “autonimization” of civil society. My paper explains exactly what Otra adherents mean by this, and analyzes the extent to which La Otra has succeeded in forming anti-capitalist social coalitions in Mexico. Overall, I argue that although alliances have been constructed and allegiances strengthened, certain structural and ideological differences impede La Otra’s goal to transform Mexico by developing genuine grassroots democracy. In what follows, I will summarize the methodology and main points of my paper.

I carried out field research for my project during the summer of 2009 in Mexico. I began by spending three weeks with the Zapatistas in Oventic, an autonomous municipality in the southernmost state of Mexico, Chiapas. Then I traveled to Tlaxcala, located in central Mexico, to study for three weeks with organizers
from a rural farm worker organization called the CNUC. Finally, I lived for two weeks in a residential neighborhood of Mexico City with activists who form part of an urban housing movement, called the Pancho Villas. In each location, I used personal interviews and conversation, participant observation, and field notes to conduct my research. In addition, I supplemented my findings from Mexico with relevant literature on the Zapatistas and social movement theory. Analyzing each movement through a theoretical lens allowed me to understand the various factors driving its mobilization, as well the reasons for which it employed certain organizational tactics and strategies.

In the introductory section, I explain the emergence of La Otra in the context of modern-day Mexico. I argue that La Otra is, in the first instance, a popular response to the neoliberal policies implemented by the elite Mexican political establishment over the last three decades. In short, these policies have widened the gap among the country’s rich and poor populations. Mexican businessmen like Carlos Slim—Forbes magazine’s richest man in 2010, with a net worth of $53.5 billion—have profited handsomely

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50 I use the term “neoliberal” and “neoliberalism” to refer to the economic philosophy that “human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (Harvey 2005). In Mexico, neoliberal policies have reduced government funding for public works and agriculture, privatized key state businesses, and created interest rates more appealing to foreign capital.
off the deregulation of the economy, using privatization to create monopolies based on their interests. Meanwhile, the minimum wage in Mexico is just $7 per day. Fifty-three million Mexicans live in poverty, on less than $4 a day, while 15 million live in extreme poverty, on less than $1 a day. La Otra is also a by-product of today’s corrupt Mexican state, which has waged an unpopular “War on Drugs” and become synonymous with electoral fraud, the suppression of human rights, and military impunity.

In the second section, I explain the theoretical underpinnings for the rise of La Otra. I first analyze the proliferation of indigenous movements in Ecuador, Bolivia, and Mexico during the 1980s and 90s. Yashar argues that they resulted mainly from political liberalization and changes in state reform policies during the 1980s. Political liberalization both allowed for and propelled indigenous revolts because it enabled indigenous peoples to voice their discontent with the very neoliberal policies associated with it. These neoliberal reforms reversed the corporatist models of decades past, in which farmers had become reliant on state governments for land and resources. Such economic restructuring exacerbated the gap between rich and poor peasants. Fearful that their economic

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51 Corporatism implies “a formal relationship between selected groups or institutions and the government and state” (Camp 2007). In Chiapas, this model functioned for decades, through which poor peasants received land, resources, and subsidies from the government in exchange for PRI-party loyalty. The PRI held one-party rule over Mexico for 70 years, until it was defeated in the 2000 national election.
situation would continue to deteriorate, indigenous peasants began to organize themselves. In Chiapas, the EZLN emerged for reasons outlined by Yashar. President Salinas provided the final impetus for 1994’s Zapatista Rebellion when he reformed Article 27 of the Mexican constitution in 1992, taking away peasants’ rights to petition for land from the state. Twelve years later, the Zapatista call for La Otra was, perhaps more than anything else, recognition of its failures to negotiate with the state and bring about substantive social and economic change to Mexico’s indigenous populations. La Otra sought to reinvigorate its anti-neoliberal movement by inviting other oppressed populations to participate.

In the third section, I analyze La Otra’s anti-political, anti-capitalist postures, as described in La Sexta document. I draw connections between Zapatista rhetoric and the texts of leftist revolutionary thinkers, including Marx, Lenin, Engels, and the neo-Marxist Holloway. La Sexta critiques capitalism as “a social system, a way in which a society goes about organizing things and people, and who has and has not, and who gives orders and obeys. … Capitalism turns everything into merchandise, it makes merchandise of people, of nature, of culture, of history, of conscience” (EZLN 2005). The Mexican political system, the Zapatistas say, drives this capitalistic system. La Otra calls for a “new way of doing politics” in
which civil society— not Mexico’s political parties—governs the country. The Zapatistas, interestingly, advocate neither a seizure of state power nor participation in the electoral system, as other revolutionary movements have historically done. Rather, they aim to “autonimize” society—to create self-governing communities modeled along horizontal structures.

The remainder of my paper compares three movements within La Otra: (1) the Zapatistas of Oventic, (2) the CNUC of Tlaxcala, and (3) the Pancho Villas of Mexico City. Certain drawbacks notwithstanding, I suggest that overall the Zapatistas of Oventic serve as a model of autonomy for the two other movements. No longer reliant on the state, Oventic practices a type of self-government and horizontal decision-making that transcends the ethnic-racial boundaries of traditional Mexico. Community members, elected by townspeople, alternate every two weeks governing the autonomous village. Wealth and power are distributed equally within society, and work is done for the collective good; Zapatistas do not receive salaries. In Oventic, the people have built their own primary and secondary schools and hospital. Bicultural and bilingual education rescues important

52 In the Zapatista context, civil society is defined as “the sphere of autonomously organized society, in opposition to that established by the state or directly controlled by it or associated to it” (Dinerstein 2009).
indigenous traditions, empowering and fostering a collective identity among Zapatista students.

In Tlaxcala, the CNUC has appropriated some of the lessons from Oventic for its own program of autonomy. For example, it has focused on the education of its participants, particularly women, by teaching them about the problems associated with capitalism and the rights they have to free health care and education. At the same time, the CNUC practices “autonomy” differently from the Zapatistas. It still relies on the government for aid, and the organizers’ children attend state schools. The CNUC is a militant organization that secures concessions from the state, such as fertilizer subsidies and clean drinking water, by holding protests and marches, organizing sit-ins, and occupying government offices. The CNUC has had a close relationship with the Zapatistas since 1994. In 2005, its members read and signed on to La Sexta. Since that time, the CNUC has participated in several Otra events and formed new ties with Otra organizations around Mexico.

Finally, I examine the Pancho Villa movement of Mexico City. Here, I identify two issues. First, the Pancho leaders, unlike those in the Zapatista and CNUC communities, insist that vertical structures are necessary for effective governance. As one of the Pancho leaders explains,
We are horizontal in the consult of talking to people, but when the assemblies make decisions they do it in a vertical way. In the (Zapatista) Good Government Councils, they nominate new members every 15 days. Structurally, this causes you problems because I’m going to speak with you, but in 15 days I have to talk with another person. (Gerardo 2009, personal correspondence)

Second, I noticed a disconnect between Pancho leaders and community members. Much of the community seems disillusioned. Membership in the Pancho movement has helped people secure nice houses and a safe neighborhood for their children, but now, most of them desire a return to normalcy. Most Pancho participants know little of La Otra, few have read La Sexta, and some vote in state and national elections. The Pancho leaders, on the other hand, have plans to radicalize the organization further into a structured political movement.

In sum, I assert that the Panchos, despite having gained certain material benefits, have failed to educate their community members in the same ways that the Zapatistas and the CNUC have. As a result, their participants lack the collective identity necessary to unite a movement towards popular resistance. Furthermore, I see the Panchos’ ideological differences (i.e., verticalism versus horizontalism) as one example of a potential obstacle hindering La Otra’s future progress and unity.

Although this paper leaves questions unanswered, what I do know is that the success of La Otra hinges on its ability to fortify
alliances and strengthen alliances. While I do not suggest a specific solution, I argue that education and the framing of a collective identity are two crucial elements to this process. La Otra will undoubtedly have to overcome certain internal contradictions. The Zapatistas, for example, still partake in capitalistic practices. The fact that both the CNUC and the Panchos work with the state puts into question the feasibility of autonomy at both the local and national levels. These are criticisms that La Otra will inevitably be forced to address. Ultimately, though, it is simply too early to predict either the success or failure of La Otra Campaña.