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# Participatory Democracy in Action

Practices of the Zapatistas and the Movimiento Sem  
Terra

Amory Starr, María Elena Martínez-Torres and  
Peter Rosset

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*Participatory democracy has been studied as an auxiliary to state processes and as an institutional and cultural part of social movements. Studies of the use of participatory democracy by the Zapatistas of Mexico and the Movimento Sem Terra (Landless Movement (MST) of Brazil show a shared concern with autonomy, in particular avoidance of demobilization through the clientelism and paternalism induced by government programs and political parties. Both movements stress training in democracy (the experience of "being government") and the obligation to participate. Detailed examination of their governance practices may be helpful to communities building democratic movements in other places.*

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Antiglobalization or "alterglobalization"<sup>1</sup> movements insist on finding other ways of achieving power than elections, parties, and unions; "they are not fundamentally organized to seize state power" (Stahler-Sholk, Vanden, and Kuecker, 2007: 6). In various contexts, these movements have created new institutions and practices. Critics argue that because they so often refuse to "address the question of the state," they can only be trivial and marginal. And yet, around the world, although their struggles and tactics and ideologies vary dramatically, these movements recognize each other in their passion and commitment to create democratic power here and now. Their claim, compelling and controversial, is that an intensely personal participatory democracy is a response to the deprivations of globalization. (Meanwhile, as Stahler-Sholk et al. point out, these movements' effects include dramatic change in states and parties, but that is not our interest here.) They have also have inspired political practice all over the world by changing the discourse about the sources and structures of social justice.

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<sup>1</sup> "Alterglobalization" expresses the generation of alternatives that accompanies these movements' rejection of corporate/capitalist globalization (see Starr, 2005).

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

One would expect political scientists to have provided a rich literature on various approaches to democracy. Disappointingly, this is not the case. The bulk of political science research regarding democracy is devoted to the study of political parties, elections, and representative/parliamentary systems. Indeed, despite considerable anthropological evidence of their frequency, no compendium of world-historic democratic practices exists (see Clastres, 1987). Indigenous communities, in a valiant attempt to save the world from their conquerors, have increasingly argued that their ways contain the social and political technologies required for ecologically sound, diverse, and dignified societies (Indigenous Peoples, 1999; Indigenous Peoples Kyoto Water Declaration, 2003; Indigenous Peoples Council on Biocolonialism, n.d.).

Works that do seek a more inclusive view almost always understand “participatory democracy” as a kind of advisory process to state decision making (Barber, 1983; Wainwright, 2003; Mutz, 2006; Goodin, 2003; Fung and Wright, 2001) Similarly, in Latin America “decentralization” has referred not to a localization of political power but to a way of responding simultaneously to cost-cutting pressures from international financial institutions and local pressures for more accountable social services (Garcia-Guadilla and Perez, 2002; Fox, 1994; Barczak, 2001; Forero-Pineda, 2001). The forms of “direct,” “deliberative,”

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and "decentralized" democracy discussed in these works are all ways of participating in the state. Participatory democracy as a viable political practice independent of the state has seldom been a serious object of scholarly attention. Any investigation has been discouraged by Robert Dahl's (1970) influential pronouncement that participatory democracy is simply infeasible and therefore an indulgence (or, at best, a resource) for social movements. There has been widespread pessimism among academics about the capacity of participatory forms to work on a large scale or be sustained on any scale.

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

These movements have been written about extensively. Regarding the Zapatistas, scholars have examined their construction of a response to neo liberalism (De Angelis, 2005; Collier and Collier, 2005; Ross, 2002; 2006), their contribution to the emergence of transnational networks (Midnight Notes Collective and Autonomedia, 2001; Rosset, Martinez-Torres, and Hernandez Navarro, 2005; Olesen, 2005; Khasnabish, 2007), their participation in post-modern forms of politics (Martinez-Torres, 2001; Langman, 2005; Callahan, 2005; Cleaver, 1998; 1994; Tormey, 2006), and their contributions to politics in Mexico (Swords, 2007; Weinberg, 2000) and elsewhere (Swords, 2006; Holloway, 2005; Zugman, 2005; 2009), and they have also

contributed extensive texts of their own to public discourse (EZLN, n.d.; Marcos et al., 1995; 2004; Mora, 2007) Scholars have attended to the theological-political origins of the MST (L?wy, 2001), the political economy of its land-reform strategy, (Wright and Wolford, 2003; Houtzager, 2005), its role in the emergence of a solidarity economy (Eid and Pimental, 2001), its cooperativism (Scopinho, 2007), the social contexts in which it organizes (Wolford, 2006), its leadership (Veltmeyer and Petras, 2002), its development of subjectivity (Leite and Dimenstein, 2006), its spatial creativity (Castells, 2002), and its *mística* (Issa, 2007). Yet little of this work addresses democratic practices in great detail. Dias Martins (2006) has studied the development of participation in the MST, and Ross (2005) has studied part of the Zapatista governance structure.

Drawing on extensive fieldwork with these movements,<sup>2</sup> we focus here on their practices of participatory democracy with an eye to identifying lessons for other movements that seek to use their techniques. We first describe each movement's structure of participatory democracy in some detail and conclude with a comparative analysis.

## ZAPATISMO

Since appearing as a guerrilla army in January 1994, the Zapatistas have worked to elaborate the practice of autonomy as a response and an alternative to globalization. When the Mexican government betrayed the 1996 San Andres Agreement, which would have granted limited autonomy to indigenous re-

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<sup>2</sup> The following sections are based on extensive fieldwork (see DeWalt and DeWalt, 2002) by Martinez-Torres and Rosset with the Zapatistas (since 1995) and the MST (since 1998). This research has involved participation in and/or observation of workshops, training sessions, meetings, public forums, site visits, etc., and, in the case of the MST, substantial collaborative work. For reasons related to the nature of these movements, we have chosen not to share details such as interview subjects, dates, and specific locations.

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periment. For example, when one community did not want to contribute money to a region-wide program, the regional junta agreed that that community should experiment with its own methods while self-financing the program in its area. Similarly, the MST experiments with different ways of laying out settlements (clustering the houses or dispersing them with the farmland) in an effort to promote political consciousness.

A major concern of leftist observers is these movements' commitment to social diversity. The Zapatistas and the MST hold themselves accountable for fully integrating those who are an organic part of their base community. Thus the Zapatistas provide representative positions to all of the ethnic groups in their territory and the mestizos. The MST does not perform land occupations in areas claimed by indigenous people. This solidarity extends back to its origins (Wright and Wolford, 2003). Both movements are committed to the full participation and equal power of women and are self-critical of their having failed to conquer the plague of machismo. Moreover, in their political dialogue beyond their own communities, the Zapatistas express solidarity with people who are politically marginalized and oppressed in many ways in many places, calling for a broad alliance of solidarity.

The anthropologist David Graeber (2007) reminds us that modern civic representative systems were based on an "interstitial cosmopolitan" proletarian and multicultural history of "democratic improvisation," owing little to ancient Greece and possibly something to pirate ships. We hope that this detailed view of these movements practices will be helpful to communities building democratic movements in other places.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> For diametrically opposed views on participatory democracy among the Zapatistas, see Estrada Saavedra (2007; 2020); on the MST see Navarro (2010). Our extensive personal experiences provide no support for the versions described by these authors, who are both linked to officialist circles. See Baschet (2010) for a critique of Estrada Saavedra and this type of anti movement work in general.

gions of Mexico, the Zapatistas decided to construct political autonomy unilaterally. As of 2007 they have been implementing participatory democracy in six dimensions, each of which has a specific democratic method suited to its responsibilities

1. *Political and military leadership.* The Comité Clandestino Revolucionario Indígena (Clandestine Revolutionary Indigenous Committee?CCRI) is composed of mostly civilian comandantes, at least one male and one female representing each of the 11 indigenous ethnic groups in the area, plus mestizos. It directs the military operations of the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (Zapatista Army of National Liberation-EZLN) and until 2003 was also responsible for matters of civilian affairs. It functions as the ultimate authority in Zapatista territories.
2. *Consultations and assemblies.* All major CCRI decisions go through a consultation process involving all of the more than 1,111 Zapatista communities.<sup>3</sup> No major strategic or policy decision is made until it has been considered and approved by consensus in every community's assembly. Major decisions about six months. The community assemblies also make political decisions regarding community matters, including elections to the Zapatista government. Assemblies are held at the community, municipal, and regional level. Communities choose representatives to attend municipal and regional assemblies. On certain matters of general concern, such as health, people from all levels may attend a special regional assembly. Attendance at community assemblies is generally considered mandatory for Zapatistas older than 12 or 15 except in the case of illness or conflicting

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<sup>3</sup> In September 1997, representatives from 1,111 communities traveled in a caravan to Mexico City. This is the most recent official count of Zapatista communities.

work obligations. Assemblies may involve from 50 to 200 people, depending on the size of the community. The decision-making process begins with the coordinator (who is not necessarily a political leader) explaining the issue and continues with discussion among members in their respective languages. There is little imposed order or structure to the discussion; it proceeds organically until eventually two or three ideas or positions emerge and the coordinator summarizes them. The process continues in the same lively, chaotic manner until eventually someone asks, “¿Acuerdo ya?” (Do we have agreement?).

3. *Good-government juntas and councils.* In July 2003 the EZLN relinquished its civilian governance function to the municipal and regional juntas described in detail by Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos in the “Treceava Estela” (Marcos, 2003). The CCRI remains responsible for military and political functions (strategy), but the juntas manage economic and civic affairs for the municipalities and provide services that people need from government. There are some 38 municipal councils/juntas (the number changes from time to time) and 5 regional juntas de buen gobierno (good-government juntas), which function in centers called caracoles. Being autonomous, they all have slightly different rules and methods of rotation. The regional juntas provide coordination among the assemblies of the autonomous municipalities. While only Zapatistas can serve on them, the juntas provide essential government services for Zapatistas and non-Zapatistas alike who live in the Zapatista region, estimated to be about 300,000 people. Zapatista municipalities actually cross the territories of two governments (the former/official government and the Zapatista one), and

of short, efficient meetings, in which it is important to speak succinctly and to the point. Militants’ training includes how to conduct meetings, and they teach by example. These styles are different from the ones Polletta identified in U.S. movements. The Zapatistas and the MST have a revolutionary party style based on allegiance to an ideology that is internally defined and held together with communal social control. Trust is determined by membership. Having survived the years of commitment in the encampments is the basis of trust for the MST. To be in the Zapatistas requires commitment and hardship. When a family demonstrates commitment through practice (quitting the government programs, not sending its children to the government school, etc.), it is a trusted member. When it abandons this practice, it is trusted no longer; it is no longer Zapatista.<sup>6</sup>

Polletta found that deliberative talk and experimentation help participatory democracy to overcome limitations of associational style. Both these movements use these two practices extensively. The Zapatista “culture of listening” and the MST culture of ascending and descending democracy are both methods of empowering deliberation while preventing domination. Both movements use rotation to avoid a few persons’ gaining too much authority. In addition, the Zapatistas prepare internal reports, and one issue of self-criticism has been too much intervention by the more experienced cadres. Openness, information flow, and genuine deliberation are protected by Zapatistas through the use of community consultations with no time limits and in the MST by the regular meetings of the base nuclei and ascending democracy.

The Zapatistas’ view of autonomy is that things can be done differently at different levels in the context of consensus. It is easy to get authorized to do something differently as an ex-

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<sup>6</sup> Commitment to the Zapatista cause is, of course, not just a matter of family practice but involves indigenous community identity and campesino customs such as collective labor and assembly decision making.

ing the community. We were also struck by the concept of the obligation to participate. The Zapatistas require attendance at community consultations and rotate participation in community government. The MST requires participation in the base nucleus, in rotating governance, in sectors, and in education. For both the Zapatistas and the MST, people are obligated to contribute to the support of community members who are serving as representatives or militants. Moreover, ideological formation is an obligation in the MST. As Dias Martins points out, members of the MST also “observe their individual attitudes... to make changes from inside themselves” (2006:273). Stahler-Sholk, Vanden, and Kuecker (2007:10) ask “whether ... autonomy yields more horizontal and participatory and transparent processes.” Both movements seek autonomy from what they describe as the old politics, creating new, more accountable and participatory forms of politics and a more equitable material situation as a result.

One of the things learned in the school of democracy is a political culture. For the MST, the struggle is not only to gain land but to change the culture?to produce Che Guevara’s “new man and new woman.” The Zapatistas are also constantly trying to raise consciousness. Migration is seen as devastating to the fabric of communities. Zapatistas may not migrate for work without the permission of the junta, and this is given only upon demonstration of family need. One of the goals of the schools is to link children to their communities instead of depreciating life in the countryside and glorifying the city. Zapatista schools educate children in local history in a national and global context and in skills for use in their communities (see Baronnet, 2008).

Political culture also includes the way people relate to each other. (Polletta [2002] found that associational style was both the strength and the Achilles’ heel of social movements.) Zapatista political culture involves listening to whatever people want to share with the group. MST political culture is a matter

communities may have two separate sets of institutions (schools, health, festivals).

Service in the juntas is designed to give every Zapatista the experience of government. The idea is that everyone should serve eventually so that people will no longer be mystified by the process of government. Representatives to municipal councils are elected in community assemblies by open ballot and form a rotational pool for the regional juntas, from which 8–16 members govern the region at any one time. People serve from one to three years, periodically rotating into the junta for periods of seven to ten days so that they can maintain their other responsibilities, usually on their home farms. Each community supports the representatives, using collective projects such as pig raising to pay for their transportation, taking care of their fields when they are away, providing their food, etc. Nobody is paid for service on a junta or in any other position of authority or service.

The municipal and regional juntas have no staff. There are some volunteers who serve occasionally in secretarial or other staff roles. The juntas have commissions that report to them; these involve more people than the elected representatives, and they are not required to rotate on a fixed schedule. They do much of the ongoing work in areas such as health, education, and production; the number of commissions varies with the level of organization and development of that area. The juntas make the major decisions; the commissions handle the details. Each commission has *promotores* (volunteers from the community) who do the actual work. The juntas address problems and issues on a first come, first-served basis. They have no bank accounts. Enlace Civil is a nongovernmental organization that handles donations to the Zapatistas, but the juntas make the decisions about expenditures.

The municipal juntas provide conflict resolution and criminal justice through the 3 *comisiones de honor y justicia*,

conducting careful investigations and balanced deliberations. They have worked hard to prove that they are not biased against non-Zapatistas and provide them good services. Since the juntas have established a reputation for impartial resolution of conflicts, they are often preferred and chosen even by non-Zapatistas over the regular government justice system (in the latter it is often the case that the person with more money or political influence wins, regardless of the facts of the case). These commissions offer several benefits: their services are free and nonbureaucratic, they are conducted in indigenous languages, and they are impartial. On one occasion a taxi drivers' union outside of Zapatista territory traveled to a Zapatista junta seeking dispute resolution. In matters of criminality, even for very serious crimes, community service is required as restitution (planting 1,000 trees, building a school, opening a road), after which the person is pardoned and accepted fully back into the community. In most cases punishment is temporary (there is no permanent criminal record attached to a person); in the most extreme cases the maximum penalty is permanent expulsion. This system of justice is based on the traditional methods of indigenous communities.

The regional juntas govern the activities of foreign charitable/solidarity projects, ensuring that the projects are directed by the Zapatistas and that they provide benefits to communities equally rather than only to the more accessible ones or the ones where outsiders have already established contacts (Marcos, 2003). Foreign projects now have to work through the regional junta, which knows the priorities. The junta will change or adapt proposed projects. For basic goods that come from outside the territory, the juntas organize cooperative purchasing for Zapatista territories, making sure to get good prices and to avoid corruption. These goods are provided to the Zapatista stores in the communities.

grams (such as agricultural subsidies or the subsidy to families called Oportunidades). Since some people have had to leave the Zapatistas in order to receive this support, the Other Campaign is a way for them to continue to participate in the Zapatista process. The MST accepts and powerfully expresses entitlement to government money and relations with elected officials but defends itself from electoral politics ideologically and culturally.

Members of electoral parties cannot be Zapatistas, nor can they be members of the Other Campaign. (Members of revolutionary parties that are not electoral can be part of the Other Campaign.) The MST has at times been loosely allied with an electoral party, the Partido dos Trabalhadores (Workers' Party?PT), but it maintains autonomy structurally by endorsing a cross-party slate of candidates. It supports some PT candidates and also candidates from other parties who have signed a pledge that they will be loyal to peasant interests over party interests whenever these conflict. MST militants cannot be members of political parties, but grassroots members of the communities may be and may also run for election to local municipal councils.

The MST focuses intense efforts on inoculating members against clientelism and paternalism through ideology (see Dias Martins, 2006). The Zapatistas are not as organized on this point, but in their communities they do work to call attention to the contradictions between the old and the new politics. People are pressured to choose a side. While the MST insists that only mass struggle can produce real change, the Zapatistas emphasize the need to create another form of politics.

We were most impressed by the movements' emphasis on the "school of democracy." For the Zapatistas, once everyone has had the experience of "being government," no one can be fooled by it. In the MST, democratic decision making is pervasive and immediate. Each base nucleus has democratic meetings and participates, through rotating representatives, in shap-

central concern of participatory democracy is autonomy. Unfortunately, many social-movements scholars and political scientists and much of the traditional left are, as one Zapatista supporter put it, “illiterate in terms of autonomy” (Mora, 2007: 66). Mora points out that the neoliberal state attempts to construct a concept of multicultural autonomy that is universalistic, individualistic, and ultimately another form of the “consumer choice” touted by globalization. Zapatista autonomy is collective, relational, “intercultural,” and centrally concerned with territory, self governance, and control over resources. The Zapatistas establish their own systems of governance, manage provisioning (including health and education) for communities, control the activities of outside organizations (including both the Mexican military and foreign charities), and establish policy (such as the ban on alcohol use). The MST establishes autonomy by creating self-governed, self-provisioning communities committed to liberation at every level from the family to the economy. These communities trade internally (to a lesser extent than the Zapatistas) and produce much of their own essentials (seeds, food, education).

In contrast to many other social movements, these two have a sense of space and place that they defend militantly, though the Zapatistas have more of a sense of “territory.” In the core of their territory, Zapatistas have authority to bar pesticide salesmen. At the outskirts, Zapatistas live in mixed communities with two systems of government. Between is a zone of communities some of which are 100 percent Zapatista, some non-Zapatista, and some mixed. The MST still think mostly in terms of “land” rather than “territory,” but this is changing as they increasingly examine issues regarding contiguity and permeability.

For the MST and the Zapatistas the biggest issue of autonomy is how to avoid demobilization through clientelism and paternalism induced by government programs and political parties. Zapatistas cannot accept any funds from government pro-

The regional juntas have two additional commissions with which they work side by side. The Information Commission is the unelected “political” dimension of the junta and is staffed by long-term Zapatista leaders/cadres who live in the region. These people are the product of the history of the movement. The Vigilance Commission, which is elected, is responsible for informing the communities of what is going on with the junta? basically a “public audit” or watchdog function. It has a separate space from the junta. Anyone who takes an issue to the junta also has to go to this commission.

In its first public evaluation of the juntas in August 2004, the CCRI acknowledged that it needed to control its impulse to make suggestions and to intervene in the civilian process. Typically only a quarter to (rarely) half of the junta representatives are women, short of the intended gender equity. The CCRI has on various occasions recognized the need to work harder to confront issues at the family level that make it hard for women to be away from home to serve in the juntas.

4. *Local economy and autonomy.* The Zapatistas are attempting to reconstruct a vibrant local rural economy after the devastating effects of free trade and neo liberalism in recent decades. These effects included the inundation of the local maize market with cheap imports that local farmers could not compete with, the privatization and cutback of credit for farmers, the privatization of parastatal marketing agencies that had helped farmers bring crops to market, cutbacks in essential services, the deepening of rural poverty, and increasing migration. Reconstruction of the local economy involves organizing cooperatives and collectives that produce agricultural products, handicrafts, and even clothing and boots; transportation cooperatives move these products (as well as people) regionally, and community shops facilitate regional trade. It also

involves creating training opportunities for youth who would otherwise have to migrate in search of paid work. This training may include learning how to cut hair, design clothes, repair machinery, bake bread, or fix computers, along with carpentry, electrical work, masonry, bricklaying, and plumbing, encouraging the development of small businesses that strengthen the village economy. At the same time, the Zapatistas have established programs to promote agroecological farming practices in order to reduce dependency on purchased imported farm chemicals and establish agricultural independence. These programs typically connect agroecology with the indigenous cosmovision (worldview).

5. *The Other Campaign*. As a key social movement in Mexico, the Zapatistas have (reluctantly on occasion) accepted responsibility for assisting in the transformation of the political framework of the country as a whole. The Other Campaign (launched with the Zapatistas' Sixth Declaration in 2005) is a project with Mexican civil society in which the Zapatistas and their sympathizers are constructing a different form of politics. In the old politics, dominated by corporativism and clientelism, the same people always dominate, discuss, and decide, and women, indigenous people, and others are marginalized. The Other Campaign is composed of those who are "below and on the left" in the structure of society. In December 2006 the Other Campaign became explicitly anticapitalist and antipatriarchal. The Zapatistas have reached out to all sectors, especially the indigenous peasant sector, even including communities who continue to accept financial support from the government. Anyone willing to sign on to the Sixth Declaration (which can be done through the web site at

national level, this has meant trying to strengthen allied rural movements through the Via Campesina-Brazil. As the "strongest sibling" among the rural movements, with an established training infrastructure, the MST has begun to open half of its training and political opportunities to cadres from Via Campesina-Brazil's five other member organizations. Because change in Brazil also requires change in global economic governance structures, the MST has begun to devote substantial resources to strengthening the Via Campesina International. As a result of the movement's participation in this global peasant alliance in which the issue of farming technology has become politicized as a historic clash between ecologically destructive industrialized agribusiness and a re-discovered peasant model of farming, the MST has developed internal programs to promote agroecological farming.

Finally, in a move similar to and indeed influenced by the Zapatistas' Other Campaign, the MST is building a national political movement allying the rural and urban lefts that is called the Consulta Popular (Popular Consultation), an open political space in which different movements seek to negotiate consensus positions for a new "national project" for Brazil. Within the Consulta Popular, the MST promotes a smaller, more tightly controlled space called the Asamblea Popular (People's Assembly), which functions as a sort of steering committee for the mass-based social movements and allied trade-union sectors. Similar to the methods of the Other Campaign, in 1998 there were discussions across the country (Dias Martins, 2006).

## COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Although these two movements operate in very different contexts and with very different kinds of power, for both the

ticipated in land occupations were happy working together in farming collectives, peasants who had recently become landless dreamed of recovering their individual family farms. To make room for this range of expectations, the MST changed the name of the “cooperatives sector” to the “sector of cooperation” in order to allow for a broader set of activities. Production co-ops are established within a settlement. Some families work land collectively, while others work separately but have a co-op for the purposes of credit and marketing. The families involved decide what they want to do, the point being that they should be cooperative rather than competitive with one another. There are regional cooperatives for marketing, transportation, storage, processing, technical assistance, and collective purchasing of inputs, as well as credit. There are national cooperatives for agriculture and education that manage very large amounts of money in an accountable way. The federal education money goes through one of these. The cooperatives are represented in the MST governance structure as part of the production sector.

There is some internal debate about whether the big bureaucracies of the co-ops and the tasks of administering money and organizational resources are compatible with the social-movement functions of the MST. The more administrative functions are seen as possibly depoliticizing. There is therefore a lot of discussion about what degree of bureaucratization is useful and how it affects mass mobilization and political action for land occupations and massive protest marches. Looking for the right structures to do these things well is an ongoing process.

6. *Engagement with other social movements.* The MST has come to the conclusion that it needs strong alliances to achieve the structural changes it desires in Brazil. At the

enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx) and is not a member of a political party may become part of the Other Campaign.

In the first phase of the campaign, “getting to know you,” Subcomandante Marcos himself traveled around the country for six months modeling the way to listen to voices in the community. With him, everybody listened to everybody else’s stories of resistance. In the second phase, a commission of coman dantes toured the country in an effort to come up with a consensus national platform and create a national network of local resistances to government and corporate actions, gas stations, dams, World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank actions, the repression of sex workers, etc. When local struggles and resistances all over Mexico are linked, they all become more powerful. If the police repress one, then the others can undertake solidarity actions. Through this process local resistances can grow into a national movement for national transformation. It is worth noting, however, that this mutual assistance is not yet powerful enough to stop government repression, as the cases of San Salvador Atenco and Oaxaca, among others, attest.

So far the Other Campaign does not have a clearly defined structure. Despite the cultural diversity of indigenous peoples, they generally have similar processes for decision making a mixture of consensus of the whole community plus a council of elders. Indigenous people seem to envision that the Other Campaign will take on some structure similar to that of the juntas. Those in the Other Campaign who come from the traditional left, however, anticipate that it will take on the structure of a hierarchical party. The alternative collectives in the campaign are opposed to the idea of structure because they are worried that it will bring back the “old” politics (and in fact those politics are apparent in some cases already).

6. *International meetings.* As part of a global social movement, the Zapatistas have periodically invited allies

from the rest of the world to meet in “intergalactics” or international meetings. The first intergalactic was in 1996, when the Zapatistas invited anti-neoliberal activists from all over the world to gather together and exchange ideas and experiences. Comandantes were present at every roundtable, but only to listen. When people said, “We came all the way around the world to hear the Zapatistas speak,” they answered, “We are here to listen and to facilitate the emergence of collective positions.” There were two more meetings in Spain in August 1997, but the Zapatistas themselves were unable to travel and did not participate. The next international meeting was in Chiapas in December 2006 and was the first meeting between Zapatista communities and the peoples of the world. At this meeting the various juntas and sectors reported on the progress that they had made with their new form of organization. Subsequent meetings in July and December 2007 followed similar formats. The meeting at the end of 2007 was also the first meeting of Zapatista women with the women of the world.

One of the things that the Zapatistas and Marcos have stressed is that to create a truly democratic structure one must demonstrate the ability and willingness to listen. They demonstrated this ability and willingness in their first intergalactic, and Marcos did so in his six-month tour for the Other Campaign. In meetings running for 12–16 hours in which hundreds of people would get up and tell their stories, he would listen patiently for hours and speak only at the end. In effect the pedagogy of the meeting was, “If you want to work with us, you have to be able to listen.” Indigenous communities in Mexico typically have general assemblies in which members speak for as long as they want to (though in some cases only once per person). Each speaker finishes

for a year and a half to two years at a time to work as a part- or full-time activist for the movement. The families in the base nucleus commit to covering that person’s labor by contributing work or farm products to the person’s family. The person who has thus been liberated attends a political training school that moves around the country. Militants go to areas where landless people are not yet organized and organize them to undertake land occupations and create settlements. They then accompany the settlements until they are self sustaining. The presence of more than 15,000 militants at any given time makes it possible for the movement to organize dozens of new land occupations, accompany dozens of encampments, mobilize large marches and sit-ins at government offices, and administer regional and national cooperatives.

4. *Resources.* “We are very Cartesian,” said one MST member. “Everything has coordinates.” Getting resources from the state without becoming contaminated ideologically or co-opted is managed not by refusing all state funding and support programs (as the Zapatistas do) but through ideology and confrontation. Powerful actions are employed to “hit the state hard and take the resources.” MST members obtain funding for education and agricultural credit by demanding their proportional share of the state and federal budgets. They use the laws on cooperatives to establish and legally register production and consumption cooperatives. They get capital through the federal programs for credit unions. Their relative success at obtaining public resources has been used against them by the Right on numerous occasions.
5. *Production.* Originally, one of the sectors was “cooperatives,” which really meant “collectives.” It soon became apparent, however, that while slum dwellers who par-



plan for the next as well as to address any problems of the gathering itself, such as food or housing. At the June 2007 congress of the MST in Brasilia, this method was used with 17,000 participants. The nuclei were a little bigger, about 50 people, organized in terms of which bus they traveled in, and each one began its discussions as it set out on its journey to the congress.

3. *Education.* The MST holds that knowledge is power. Its ideology is clear that this is a movement to change the system. Domination occurs by keeping people in ignorance. The MST runs its own schools on a Freirean model blended with the ideas of other noted pedagogues such as Anton Makarenko from the early days of the Russian Revolution. The teachers and students in the schools participate in the MST governance structure by electing one male and one female to represent each base nucleus (10 students or 10 teachers). In addition to the schools, members of the MST are obligated to continue learning. Each member spends two months a year studying. Those who are illiterate learn to read and write, and those who have finished college must go to graduate school.

In addition, the base nucleus meets regularly for ideological study and criticism/self-criticism. The MST ideology is strengthened and reinforced through the creation and practice of rituals called *mistica* that help build peasant-worker identity and unity. No MST meeting begins without a *mistica*. (*Mistica* is also common in peasant organizations that belong to the Via Campesina [Martinez Torres and Rosset, 2010], but the MST seems most committed to using them [see Issa, 2007].)

One of the features of the MST that makes it such a powerful force in Brazil is its large numbers of trained militants or cadres, who serve as community organizers or outreach workers. In principle, each base nucleus is expected to free one member

by saying, “*Esto es mi palabra*” (This is my word). All the meetings of the Other Campaign are conducted in this way. Listening is a key element in building a democratic structure.

## THE MST

Adopting a strict ideological and structural plan growing out of liberation theology, Leninism, and Marxism, among other sources, the MST has organized 1.5 million landless workers in 23 of Brazil’s 27 states (see CONCRAB/MST, 2004; Harnecker, 2002). Since 1985 it has legalized 2,000 settlements housing 350,000 families, and another 180,000 families are currently encamped awaiting land. The settlement communities range in size from fewer than 100 to 5,000 people and involve a land area larger than Italy. The communities include multiple productive cooperatives. The MST structure of participatory democracy also has six components:

1. *Encampments.* Before an occupation, MST organizers (*militantes*) encourage landless workers to gather the necessary materials, such as boots, plastic for tents, sacks of grain, etc., to form an encampment.<sup>4</sup> Once the materials have been gathered (which may take up to a year), an encampment is set up on land along a road. Many of the people are extremely poor and also have problems such as alcohol, drugs, violence, abusive behavior, and lack of trust. Many of these problems are faced and dealt with effectively in the encampment, partly because of their rules and partly because of the intimacy of the encampment, in which it is impossible to hide these behaviors. When there is a discipline

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<sup>4</sup> At first the MST donated the materials for the encampments, but it discovered that with donated materials people would flee if the police attacked. If they had had to gather their own materials, they stayed to defend them.

problem, the person goes before the discipline sector of the camp and may be required to perform community service. Expulsion is a last resort. Immediately, everyone is participating in governance and building trust and community. Every adult immediately chooses or is assigned a “sector” (e.g., education, health, gender, discipline, production, cooperation, mis tied). After some years in the encampment, the community occupies a legally expropriable piece of land, typically entering into a protracted conflict with private security guards and police. Finally, the lawyers go to work negotiating with the government for permanent land title (though this may be on yet another piece of land). Once the permanent land is acquired, participation becomes more challenging, as the movement must struggle against a tendency toward relative demobilization and declining interest in politics once land has been obtained and other concerns such as prices and credit come to the fore. (This is always a difficulty for land reform movements [see Anderson, 1994].) Nevertheless, the MST’s participatory process results in a far lower rate of abandonment than in other land-reform settlements (see Rosset, Courville, and Patel, 2006: Pt. 2, introduction and Ch. 15).

2. *Decision making.* The MST operates according to democratic centralism. Each group of 10 families is called a núcleo de base (base nucleus) and elects one man and one woman to the council of its settlement/community. Each settlement then elects one man and one woman to the regional council; each regional council elects one man and one woman to the state- or province-level council and to the national council (which meets for 2 days every 45 days). About a third of the members of any council rotate off and are replaced at the national congress, which is held every three years. The reelection of some

incumbents ensures that the congress retains the benefit of more experienced representatives.<sup>5</sup>

The MST decision-making process strives for consensus, but when disagreements arise that cannot be resolved by consensus the elected leader makes the decision. This means that people must place their faith in their representatives to higher levels. The MST uses the concepts of “ascending” and “descending” democracy (McCowan, 2003). All issues are debated in the base nuclei, which instruct their representatives how to vote at the higher levels. Once the final decision is made at the higher level, its implementation returns to the level of the base nucleus. Criticism of or resistance to the descending decisions is generally expressed through the ascending process, which begins with a debate in the base nucleus and is transmitted upward if the nucleus as a collective decides to do so.

In the MST, people are in meetings much of the time. The base nuclei meet at least once a week. The meetings are coordinated by the people who know the most. In the MST culture of meetings, the emphasis is on being brief and efficient. Speakers are obliged to be efficient in making their points. If someone speaks for more than five minutes without coming to the point, someone will inevitably say, “*Companheiro*, be more synthetic, please. What is the point you are trying to make?”

At larger regional and national meetings, people are still organized into nuclei. If there are 500 people at the meeting, they are divided into 50 groups of 10. Each group reads the preparatory documents, debates, decides its position, and prepares comments to present to the plenary. Afterward the groups discuss what everyone said in the plenary and decide what they want to say at the next plenary. Each group also has a representative on the coordinating team for the meeting that meets every night to discuss how the day went and

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<sup>5</sup> For recent changes in this representation scheme, to make it even more democratic, see Bogo, 2010.