

Asking questions with the Zapatistas

Reflections from Greece on our Civilizational Impasse

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2022

Contents

| | |
|--|-----------|
| Introduction | 3 |
| Confronted with a Civilizational Impasse... | 3 |
| ...It is Time to Reinvent Ourselves as Collective Subjects | 4 |
| Zapatismo and its Global Irradiation | 6 |
| The Emergence of the Zapatista Struggle | 6 |
| Zapatismo's Contribution to the Evolution of Social Movements | 7 |
| <i>Pace of the Snail vs. Efficiency</i> | 7 |
| <i>Self-Institution vs. Centralism</i> | 7 |
| <i>Emancipatory Laws vs. Aversion to Institutions</i> | 8 |
| <i>Social Emancipation vs. Economism</i> | 8 |
| <i>Feminism vs. Militarism</i> | 9 |
| <i>Groundedness vs. Globalism</i> | 9 |
| Resonance between Zapatismo and Diverse bottom-up Emancipatory Projects | 10 |
| <i>Autonomy and Direct Democracy</i> | 10 |
| <i>Libertarian Municipalism</i> | 11 |
| <i>Degrowth and the Commons</i> | 11 |
| <i>Climate Justice</i> | 11 |
| The Difficulties of 'Translating' Zapatismo to European Contexts | 12 |
| <i>Urban Geographies</i> | 12 |
| <i>The Material and Symbolic Presence of the State</i> | 13 |
| <i>The Need for Roots</i> | 14 |
| <i>Ecological Thinking</i> | 15 |
| Epilogue | 17 |
| The Arrival of the Zapatistas in Greece: Expectations, Priorities | 17 |
| Reflections on Moving Forward | 18 |
| References | 20 |
| Further Reading | 22 |
| Bios | 23 |

Introduction

Confronted with a Civilizational Impasse...

The Zapatista delegation arrives on the European continent in the midst of extraordinary circumstances. On the one hand, all societies are suffering from a health crisis as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. On the other, the effects of the disastrous human-induced climate crisis are being felt worldwide. Floods, draughts and wildfires are affecting ecosystems and human settlements in the European continent at an unprecedented scale and frequency. These developments come at a time when financialized capitalism runs from one systemic crisis to the next, intensifying the exploitation of humans and nature in order to maintain its profitability, and thus creating an accelerating vicious circle of crisis and degradation.

It is disheartening that amid such a civilizational impasse brought about by a predatory economic system that puts no bounds to wealth hoarding by the few, our capacity to imagine a post-capitalist future is seriously limited. Indeed, the status quo is naturalized to such an extent, that *it is easier today to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism*; an airless mentality Mark Fisher (2009) dubbed “capitalist realism”. Indeed, the most worrying among our multiple global crises is the crisis of the imagination. Commonplace ideas such as the belief in technological domination over nature or unlimited economic growth are proving to be disastrous for the entire human species and the planet. Even in the face of imminent disaster, however, the solutions proposed leave the essential extractive and expanding nature of the economy unquestioned. The concepts of “green growth” or “decoupling” are attempts precisely at mitigating only the most extreme effects of the economy on the climate while keeping in place or even intensifying the operation of a system that generates and recycles the extreme class, race and gender inequalities that lie at the root of ecological imbalances.

In their turn, those ecological imbalances, compounded by the shrinking of time and space, form the substrate on which the pandemic propagates. The Covid-19 pandemic has been a powerful ‘reality check’ for all societies, as it has brought to light the inadequacy of state and market mechanisms of care and welfare. This is particularly so in regard to healthcare, food provision and housing, especially in a country such as Greece, which has experienced a decade of anti-social neoliberal reforms. After decades of deepening atomization, isolation and competition, people are coming to realise that their safety and happiness relies on complex social relationships and collective infrastructures of care. They are becoming aware that the essential tasks for their survival and safety consist to a great extent in the ‘frontline work’ carried out by low-paid, precarious and often racialized workers or the unpaid care work carried out largely by women at home.

At a global level, capital and the state have been exploiting the state of emergency to step up the exploitation of people and nature. The pandemic has led not only to the exacerbation of social inequalities, but also to increased state repression and surveillance. On the one hand, while governments have mobilized complex biopolitical apparatuses to contain the virus, they have allocated protection and vulnerability unequally among different social groups and they

have reasserted existing exclusions, effectively rendering disposable those that are considered unworthy of any kind of protection: migrants and refugees, inmates, the Roma, the homeless, etc. Simultaneously, the restrictive measures implemented have been instrumentalized for purposes other than that of limiting the spread of the virus. The rollback of social and political rights and the curtailing of hard-won democratic liberties are not temporary arrangements, but signify the transition to a new era of authoritarianism.

The time when parts of the population were integrated into the mainstream of social life through redistribution and rising levels of consumption is long gone. Maintaining a high level of profitability for capital through violent cycles of economic boom and bust requires a move away from welfare capitalism and towards an aggressive financialized and extractive mode of accumulation, which ensures the continuing upward wealth transfer from the popular strata to the hands of the few. Even before the health crisis, new modes of integrating the population and keeping it docile were being rehearsed. The pandemic has been an opportunity for stepping up what Isabell Lorey (2015) describes as governance through precarization: Work, housing and healthcare conditions are increasingly precarized even for previously protected parts of the population, while fear and guilt is instilled in each person. The individual becomes the sole bearer of responsibility. New and mutating categories of worthiness and vulnerability and blame are devised, which help in setting different social groups against each other in competition for artificially scarce resources of care and protection. While these mechanisms help sustain the dominant mode of accumulation, they also deepen the structural crisis and increase the instability of the system overall.

Given that the virus and its associated restrictive measures have presented individuals and households with enormous challenges, the widespread desire for a “return to normality” is understandable. However, there is also a growing realization that what has brought about the present crisis is precisely the condition we call ‘normality’: widening inequalities, the rupture of the social fabric, the commodification of ever-wider spheres of social life, the exploitation of humans and nature. More and more people are becoming aware that if the system recovers after Covid-19 and returns to arrogant economic expansion at the expense of nature and people, civilizational collapse will be imminent (Caffo 2020).

...It is Time to Reinvent Ourselves as Collective Subjects

It is in these adverse conditions that the social movements are seeking to reboot their activity in Greece and across Europe, after years of defeat and demobilization. With “social distancing” becoming the new organizing principle of society, we are called to respond to the enormous challenges of our time in an environment of seclusion and retreat to the private sphere, which is uncondusive to the embodied, public collective action we espouse as a means of struggle. We are, thus, tasked with redefining ourselves as collective subjects and inventing new forms of collective resistance (Svolis 2020). The pandemic and the climate crisis are bringing again to the fore important issues regarding emancipatory strategy and practice. How can we reconcile personal freedom with collective co-existence within human societies? How can we overcome the dominant extractive model, fulfilling human needs without depleting our planet? How can we shake off race, gender and class oppression while establishing a new relationship between

humanity and the rest of the natural world? What sort of institutions do we require to achieve the above goals in the context of a self-directed, inclusive and emancipated society?

The answers to those questions cannot be given on paper by technoscientific experts, but through the daily struggle and lived experience of countless socially situated actors. In that respect, the arrival of the Zapatista delegation in Europe couldn't be timelier. In the process of mobilizing the hive mind to overcome our crisis of imagination, our Zapatista comrades can build on several decades of collective grappling with the above issues and experimenting with alternatives.

In this collective text, we will reflect on the arrival of the Zapatista delegation from the point of view of the European, and in particular Greek, grassroots movements that are mobilizing to welcome them. We will ponder the historical and current importance of Zapatismo and its influence on the development of political contestation in Europe and in Greece. We will highlight the aspects of Zapatismo that have contributed to movement theory and praxis and have provided inspiration for generations of activists and collectives. And we will enumerate other political projects that resonate and enmesh with Zapatismo to produce novel emancipatory practices. Next, we will examine the obstacles and pitfalls in 'translating' the Zapatista experience to European urban contexts, and in passing we will mention the movements and moments that have, consciously or not, incarnated Zapatista precepts in the Greek context. Finally, we will reflect on our goals and priorities in our encounter with the Zapatista delegation and we will explore some of the paths that may lead us forward in the pursuit of social emancipation.

Zapatismo and its Global Irradiation

The Emergence of the Zapatista Struggle

The Zapatista uprising in January 1994 came at a global moment of pessimism and crisis for emancipatory movements. An aggressive conservative alliance remained hegemonic in core capitalist countries, and the fall of bureaucratic state socialism in USSR and its satellite states had delegitimized not only Marxist orthodoxy, but also any social movement envisioning a wholesale transformation of sociopolitical reality. The Zapatista struggle for dignity and indigenous rights erupted just as a triumphant global capitalism was celebrating the “end of history” with the prevalence of free markets and liberal democracy throughout the world.

The strength of Zapatismo lies in that it has never aspired to homogenize and hegemonize the struggle, that is, to create a coherent movement guided by a central leadership and a fixed ideology (Aranda Andrade 2016: 37). Rather, it has engaged in what Hernán Ouviaña (2011: 280) evocatively terms *irradiation*:

To irradiate means to dispute hegemony without a vanguardist spirit; to invite others to a conception of the world and, why not, to a modality of struggle, without aiming to lead this process or to proclaim oneself its exclusive reference. It is a kind of potlatch that – through an exercise of translation – offers or shares practices, experiences and knowledge “just like that”, that is, not with a motive of accumulation, but with the aim of multiplying and strengthening spaces of resistance inhabited by multiplicities.

Despite its diverse roots in Marxist, anarchist, indigenous or catholic traditions of struggle, Zapatismo never became a creed, but rather remained a stance, one of collective affirmation of life and resistance to injustice. Moreover, far from postulating a comprehensive model of social organization, Zapatismo remains flexible and adaptable to local conditions, geographies and histories. Precisely for these reasons, since the early steps of its global trajectory, Zapatismo has become a potent tool of (self-)criticism for emancipatory movements that were looking for ways to disentangle themselves from the rigidities of traditional left-wing parties and to offer a hands-on critique of established ideas and practices.

On the one hand, the emerging Zapatistas inadvertently provided a powerful critique of traditional Marxist movements and revolutionary parties, particularly of their insistence on bureaucratic and vertical organization and their top-down, statist approach to social issues. Importantly, they contributed in opening up spaces of participation and inclusion for many different identities and struggles, where previously outbreaks of resistance against multiple forms of oppression were sidelined by the centrality of the capital-labour contradiction and thus deemed derivative or inconsequential.

On the other hand, the Zapatistas also contributed to a critique of anarchist practices. While the anarchist movement has always given special attention to horizontal relations and to combating all types of oppression, various forms of its contemporary incarnations – as we will discuss below – exhibit an aversion towards all forms of institution and tend to conceive all laws as in-

herently oppressive. The Zapatistas have opened our eyes to the fact that laws and institutions can be emancipatory when they are the product of collective deliberation and derive from the lived experiences of self-instituting communities.

The osmosis of Zapatismo with local and international emancipatory traditions in the dismal 1990s was instrumental in the resurgence of social resistance towards the end of the decade and the emergence of the Global Justice Movement, a new, decentralized and diverse global actor that challenged and discredited global capitalist institutions. Its spirit of diversity, multiplicity, horizontal organization, democratic deliberation and direct action was carried over to the next cycle of mobilization, especially in the Square occupations taking place in 2010–2011 in Tunisia, Egypt and Syria, which later spread to Spain, Greece, the UK, the USA, and dozens of more countries.

In continuation, we will examine in more detail Zapatismo's contribution to the resurgence of grassroots resistance, and highlight the Zapatista practices that have come to revitalize and re-signify democratic practice, while providing an inspiration and a point of reference to grassroots movements worldwide.

Zapatismo's Contribution to the Evolution of Social Movements

Pace of the Snail vs. Efficiency

From the very beginning, Zapatismo has challenged our civilizational fascination with high speed and efficiency at any cost. These ideas, prevalent in the social imaginary of late capitalism, have been making their way into contemporary debates on urgent issues, such as the Climate Crisis. Commentators are inclined to propose that the drastic action required to resolve the crisis can best be carried out through the current governmental, fiscal and military structures,¹ or even that the fight against climate change is inherently antithetical to individual freedoms and democracy, leaving us with no other option but some sort of 'green' authoritarianism.²

Zapatista institutions propose a drastically different temporality in decision-making, based on a process of consultation that constantly moves forwards and backwards, exemplified by the imagery of the snail and its spiral shell (Dinerstein 2013). Such institutionality, in which there are no bureaucrats, bosses or profit-motives to exert pressure on the pace of everyday life, is reminiscent of a slogan of the German revolution of 1918–19: “[popular] councils don't dance to the rhythm of the parliament!” (Mühsam 2020: 39). This new, genuinely democratic political architecture allows people to engage in deeper reflection and deliberation, laying the groundwork for the creation of laws and norms collectively drafted by big majorities. Arguably, this is the reason that Zapatista communities are much more inclined to willingly and consciously abide by them, without the need for the police enforcement typical of hierarchical regimes.

Self-Institution vs. Centralism

The Zapatistas have been advancing a project of autonomy based on self-institution, as opposed to the hierarchical and centralized forms of the state and corporate entities. The rebel

¹ see, e.g., Anatol Lieven, *Climate Change and the Nation State*, Penguin Books 2021

² see, e.g. the work of French climatologist François-Marie Bréon (https://www.liberation.fr/planete/2018/07/29/francois-marie-breon-la-lutte-pour-le-climat-est-contraire-aux-libertes-individuelles_1669641/)

territories of Chiapas operate on the principle of bottom-up establishment, control and reform of their institutions. All decision-making and administrative bodies that form society's backbone are a result of popular deliberation, and in turn nurture further participation. As such, they are an inseparable part of the Zapatista communities and directly reflect their desires.

This is in stark contrast to the institutional framework of statecraft, in which bureaucratized and opaque institutions create and reproduce privileged administrative classes. The majority of the population has no genuine access to the decision-making and administrative bodies that manage public affairs, other than through occasional electoral spectacles or plebiscites, which are hardly enough to empower the people.

Emancipatory Laws vs. Aversion to Institutions

A further characteristic of Zapatista self-institution is the role of laws and norms in actually empowering society. Through participatory processes within municipalities, chronically exploited and marginalized people are able to establish or reconfigure the boundaries that open emancipatory spaces for them. One characteristic case is the law that forbids the consumption of alcohol and drugs on Zapatista territory. The law was promoted by women who suffered domestic violence due to substance abuse on the part of men.³ With the passing of this law, the female population regained its dignity and was re-empowered.

The Zapatista understanding of laws and norms differs drastically from dominant perceptions among European anarchist and antiauthoritarian movements. The latter tend to view the setting of boundaries and rules as inherently oppressive and exclusive to hierarchical societies, and therefore such processes are absent from their vision and their agenda.⁴ Such a view comes to suggest that people can somehow coexist outside of any agreed-upon rules and procedures, and that institutions as such are obstacles to freedom and self-determination. In short, it suggests that every institution is, by definition, oppressive.

The practical experience of the Zapatistas comes to challenge this logic, to demonstrate that it is precisely through the bottom-up establishment of laws and boundaries that the preconditions for social emancipation can be created. Such processes of democratic institution are necessary in order to create spaces of equal participation and collective decision making.

Social Emancipation vs. Economism

Furthermore, Zapatista practice has challenged economism, both in its neoliberal and Marxist variants. The social imagination is currently attuned to what Castoriadis calls *economism* – a creed that subjects everything to the economy and its basic doctrine: the paradigm of constant growth. Local communities, nation-states, entire populations and the natural environment are left at the mercy of the will of the markets. Our habitats (cities, homes, etc.) and every aspect of our lifeworld are commodified to conform to the basic principles of economism: market-mediated production and consumption.

Significant segments of the Left worldwide are largely still trapped within this imaginary as well. Karl Marx has been criticized by Castoriadis for placing the economy at the center of politics

³ <https://straightedgemadrid.wordpress.com/2015/04/04/zapatistas-la-prohibicion-del-alcohol-y-otras-drogas-en-territorio-indigena/>

⁴ <https://social-ecology.org/wp/1999/08/thoughts-on-libertarian-municipalism/>

and adopting capitalism's model of *homo economicus* (Papadimitropoulos 2016); in other words, for failing to pierce through capitalist economism. This failure has too often led many on the Left to favour economic policies that would supposedly increase the economic wellbeing of the poor, over the latter's actual political empowerment. This has resulted in keeping the hierarchical and bureaucratic architecture of our societies largely intact. Instead of reclaiming direct popular control over public affairs, emancipatory efforts are reduced to negotiations with the ruling elites over a fairer distribution of the economic 'pie'.

In contrast, the insurgent Zapatista communities have arguably been more successful in overcoming the economism of the Left. They rose up for 'dignity', a notion that reaches beyond economics to denote the capacity of people to negate all that is imposed from without and to collectively promote a social organization based on different values. Rather than aim for narrow economic reforms, they continuously explore new processes and mechanisms to maximize social equality and participation in all spheres. As a result, they have launched one of the most inclusive and feminist revolutions the world has ever seen, surpassing in their inclusivity the liberal oligarchies of the West.

Feminism vs. Militarism

The feminist element in the Zapatista uprising sets it apart from many other movements, and has played a significant role in the longevity of their autonomy. In contrast to the revolutionary Left's infatuation with military might, the Zapatistas have been constantly stressing that it is not the EZLN that drives the revolution, but the local communities through their grassroots democratic structures.

Military power and organization have for a long time held a central place in the Left's revolutionary imagination. In Greece, for instance, in the last decade or so, the figure of the WWII-era National Liberation Front (EAM) and its military wing (ELAS) are increasingly cited as a point of reference for contemporary antifascist activists – even for anarchists – despite the fact that EAM-ELAS were under the influence of the Greek Communist Party. The hidden assumption here is that confronting fascism relies on brute force and military discipline, a view that implicitly reasserts hierarchical and patriarchal values.

The Zapatistas, just like the Kurdish movement, have been promoting the woman as a symbol of resistance (Sáenz 2015). Either in the battlefield, in communal councils, or in agricultural co-ops, the woman is invoked as the driving force behind all revolutionary practice. This provides a more profound conception of antifascism, not as a mere conflict between two geopolitical forces, but as a clash between different sets of values. The dominant macho imaginary of power, domination and authority is challenged by a feminist project of cooperation, participation and solidarity.

Groundedness vs. Globalism

One more aspect of the traditional revolutionary imaginary that was challenged by the Zapatistas was that of the scale of revolution. For too long the idea of a global revolution has dominated most revolutionary projects. This dominance has had problematic effects on at least two levels.

First, it has led many to embrace narrow geopolitical anti-imperialism, where nation-states are the main active agents (Tarinski 2019). The struggles and social movements that arise within

state entities are often reduced by this tendency to mere byproducts of the machinations of rival states. Quite reasonably, if the whole world is reduced to a space where only state structures have an actual impact, it becomes nearly impossible to envision a stateless alternative. As Kristin Ross (2015: 14) suggests, “if we begin with the state, we end with the state”.

Second, such analysis may lead to the renunciation of actual transformative action and the espousal of resistance as the only viable form of action. The perception of revolution as something that will happen simultaneously all around the world and of every local transformative effort as doomed to fail, leads actors to heteronomy and entrapment within the dominant power’s agenda. The only reasonable activity within this logic is that of resistance: the system acts, the opposition reacts. While we deem resistance to be very important, it simply is not enough.

Kristin Ross (2019), drawing on the experience of the ZAD in France, proposes moving beyond resistance, towards forms of defense. She argues that “[R]esisting implies the battle, if there ever was one, is over and done with, and we can only hopelessly try to ward off the overwhelming power we attribute to the other side. Defense, on the other hand, means that *there is something we have already that is ours, that we cherish, and that is worth defending.*”

And the Zapatistas have done just that: they have demonstrated that emancipation is possible in the system’s interstices – or “cracks” as John Holloway (2010) has vividly put it – which allow movements to form space alternative to state power. By inhabiting their struggle, they have successfully managed to defend it from capitalist commodification, to develop alternative forms of social organization, and to prove that bureaucratic and statist entities are not the only possible agents of social change, thus giving hope and inspiration to countless social movements and struggles.

Resonance between Zapatismo and Diverse bottom-up Emancipatory Projects

Zapatismo emerged at a time when many strands of revolutionary thought were moving away from statism and vanguardism, and consequently Zapatista thought and practice have interacted and enmeshed with other political projects from around the world, thus forming a rich and diverse web of emancipatory perspectives.

Autonomy and Direct Democracy

Zapatista precepts have enriched the project of direct democracy and autonomy. The political organization of the Zapatistas is centered on integrating politics – as the art and practice of governing and being governed – into everyday life and identity (Cerullo 2009: 290). This is reminiscent of Cornelius Castoriadis’s understanding of autonomy and democracy: a system in which it is the people themselves, via grassroots institutions, who issue and alter the laws that govern their life in common.

Author Raj Patel posits the Zapatista motto “walking by asking questions” as a fundamental principle of democracy (in Conant 2010). The motto suggests that public deliberation is an integral part of any democratic project and directly corresponds to Castoriadis’s understanding of history as creation: historical events are driven not by mystical or bureaucratic powers, but by human collective decision-making (Castoriadis 1978).

Libertarian Municipalism

Second, on a more practical level, the organizational model advanced by the Zapatistas resembles closely that of Libertarian Municipalism – the political dimension of Social Ecology. Murray Bookchin, the theoretical founder of the latter, describes libertarian municipalism as a revolutionary effort in which freedom is given institutional form in public assemblies as the main decision-making bodies in society, which are linked to each other in democratic confederations.

The Zapatista autonomous governance is based on three levels – the community, the municipality, and the *caracol*. These are levels of coordination rather than of authority. A *caracol* can't tell a community how to do things. Each community has complete control over what is going on within it through the institution of the public assembly (Eldredge Fitzwater 2021).

The other levels, the municipality and the *caracol*, have the task of coordinating projects that require multiple communities coming together. Any project that is decided upon in a municipal assembly or a *caracol* has to be taken back to the communities and reapproved by the assembly in each community. In this way, similarly to what Bookchin envisioned in his municipalist project, the Zapatistas retain decision-making power as closely as possible to all members of society.

Degrowth and the Commons

Third, there is a noticeable resemblance between Zapatistas' slogan, "*para todos todo, para nosotros nada*" ("everything for everyone, nothing for us") and the paradigms of the commons and degrowth that have emerged in the last decade. The demand "nothing for us" runs counter to the desires and expectations of resource-hungry consumerists in the so-called First World. Instead, it suggests that humans can live a dignified life remaining respectful both towards other people and towards nature. The Zapatista emphasis on an equitable and respectful lifestyle resonates with the precepts of the degrowth movement, which renounces the use of the index of economic growth as a measure of human prosperity and advocates social transformation towards convivial societies that live simply, in common and with less (Asara, Otero, Demaria & Corbera 2015).

Climate Justice

Finally, Subcomandante Marcos' claim that the powerful cannot understand the struggle of the Zapatista because its cornerstone is dignity, is indicative of Zapatismo's affinity with the Climate Justice movement. According to social ecologist Brian Tokar (2014: 19), the latter, spearheaded by indigenous and land-based movements, continues the legacy of the civil rights movement, as it resists environmental racism and seeks a transition to a just and sustainable future. Both the Zapatistas and the Climate Justice movement believe in the intrinsic equality of all people, and thus insist that we all have an equal say when it comes to existential threats such as the climate crisis.

The Difficulties of ‘Translating’ Zapatismo to European Contexts

While we have already referred to those characteristics of Zapatismo that we consider crucial on the road to social emancipation, it is equally important to identify the difficulties or misinterpretations in their application in Greece and contemporary Western cultures. By highlighting these difficulties, we explore and suggest ways to address them. At the same time, we enumerate moments, movements and processes in Greece that incarnate these new insights.

Urban Geographies

The particularity of the rainforest territories where Zapatista Autonomy has been developing often puzzles westerners as to how this paradigm can be ‘translated’ into urban spaces. Indeed, in modern megacities that glorify large scale, control, standardization and capitalist monoculture, social bonds are hard to maintain. Alienation and atomization form egotistic subjects. At the same time, the exhaustingly fast pace of life and the perennial lack of free time create unfavorable conditions for engaging in unmediated politics. Sprawling urban wastelands with no trace of public space, and the zoning of entire areas purely for sleep, work or entertainment make things even more difficult.

However, rather than prescribing the ideal conditions for social emancipation, the Zapatistas have always called on each and every one of us to fight in the place where we are located, considering the local characteristics and context. In contrast to calls for a retreat from society or for an orchestrated “return to the countryside”, ideas and practices exist that aim to overcome this predicament. Prominent among them are the theoretical tools of libertarian municipalism, developed by Murray Bookchin to impel a transition towards ecological and democratic cities. Bookchin propounded a return to the ancient Athenian conception of polis, from which he derived his understanding of the city. Today’s extensive urban sprawls can hardly be described as a polis. A polis is defined by the degree to which it can be managed by the citizens themselves, without recourse to bureaucratic structures. The vision of democratized cities and confederated self-managed boroughs presupposes the transformation of the neighbourhood into a social and political entity premised on mutual aid between people living in the same block and on the interrelation between blocks. At the neighborhood and district level, people may come together in democratic face-to-face assemblies.

The struggles for the right to the city are even more necessary today. We require neighborhoods, more squares and public space for assembly and decision making. We also require urban farming infrastructures, to make cities increasingly self-sufficient, especially in terms of food. We require a different relationship between the city and the countryside: a cooperative, non-exploitative relationship, to create links with rural communities of solidarity trade and exchange.

In Greece, the recovery of urban space has been a central practice for social movements in the last decade. A lively squatter movement has reappropriated empty buildings in large and small cities, not only to provide housing for precarious young people excluded from the real estate market, but also to establish critical infrastructure for social life: meeting and entertainment spaces, educational projects and non-profit self-managed sport clubs. At the same time, abandoned land has been occupied and transformed into self-managed urban farms, especially in Thessaloniki and Athens. Squatting, as a practice that violates established property rights, has always had trouble gaining ground in a country like Greece. In the absence of housing welfare policies, the wellbeing and housing security of individuals depends largely on the real estate investment strategies of the extended family, where they exist. Therefore, the proprietary ideology is well ingrained into the collective imagination (Sakali and Karyotis, 2022). Even so, and despite continued persecution and criminalization, in the current cycle of mobilization, squatting has earned a special place in the imaginary of social movements as a practice of collective urban reappropriation.

The Material and Symbolic Presence of the State

Unlike in the Chiapan mountains, where autonomy is constructed on the basis of a relative absence of the state, other than as an external punitive apparatus of repression, in urban contexts – which is largely where Greek and European movements are experimenting with autonomous self-organization – the state has an intense material and symbolic presence (Ouvina 2011: 265). Even if, in times of welfare state retreat and neoliberal restructuring, its legitimacy is rapidly eroding, the state retains a minimum consensus as the mediator and organizer of social life, and thus it unavoidably becomes not only an adversary but also an important interlocutor for any project seeking autonomy. The question of cooperation, infiltration or conflict with public institutions (municipal authorities, public utility companies, state institutions) is permanently present and never satisfactorily resolved. The creation of parallel bottom-up institutions based on citizen participation often comes up against the resistance of established public organisms that retain a strong political and social capital. Moreover, it is evident that any attempt at building counter-power in military terms is counterproductive and doomed to fail in urban contexts.

This specificity of the urban context puts hurdles in what Aranda Andrade (2016) calls the *institutionalization* of social struggles. The Zapatista struggle involved a slow process of institutionalization through which the values, desires and ideas that emerged in the initial moment of *effervescence* – that is, the 1994 uprising and the ensuing years of conflict – are transubstantiated into collective institutions, bodies, laws and modes of coexistence. In recent history we have seen two important moments of collective awakening and social effervescence in Greece: the 2008 uprising and the 2011 movement of the Squares, which brought a multitude of individuals into spontaneous horizontal encounters that bred a new grassroots political ethos and new sets of values around solidarity, equality and mutual recognition. The corresponding process of institutionalization of the significations that emerged in such moments, however, took place in a context materially and symbolically inhabited by statist and capitalist – not to mention nationalist and patriarchal – structures and imaginaries. The resulting bottom-up institutions carry the mark of such contradictions, and therefore often fail to break away from imaginaries of economic growth, national sovereignty or the “return to normality”, thus facilitating the reinstatement of the status quo through electoral means.

Nevertheless, the state's current process of renunciation of its "soft power" (welfare, health-care, education, social services) in favor of its disciplinary "hard power" (surveillance, exclusion, repression and the penal system) constantly opens up opportunities for grassroots movements to step in and confront the state, either by activating civil society to protect and defend the commons or by taking over, through a participatory and horizontal framework, the public functions previously performed by the state. This mode of action, which involves complex processes of institutionalization – in Aranda Andrade's sense – is exemplified by the activity of a rich network of self-managed social clinics which provided free healthcare attention to uninsured locals and immigrants during the crisis years in Greece. Here we may also mention Initiative 136, a citizens' movement that not only opposed the privatization of Thessaloniki's water company, but also, inspired by the Water Wars of Bolivia, devised a plan for its bottom-up management by the citizens themselves through local water cooperatives – a plan which did not come to fruition, but was instrumental in mobilizing the city's population in defending water as a commons. Another area where social forces have taken over aspects of social reproduction in order to overcome both the bureaucratic logic of the state and the profit motive of the market is education. Among the various alternative pedagogical projects, *Mikro Dendro* ("Little Tree") in Thessaloniki stands out, which from an early age cultivates children's autonomy and promotes their involvement in collective life, problem solving and decision making. Despite the obstacles that derive from their lack of funding, resources and legal recognition, alternative educational projects promote a different citizenship, defined as daily participation embodied in common affairs (Pechtelidis and Kioupiolis, 2020).

Beyond their material effects, such initiatives have great prefigurative and pedagogical value, as they help demonstrate the effectiveness of grassroots mobilization around solidarity, and thus help empower citizens towards the collective self-management of their affairs.

The Need for Roots

The Zapatistas have set up their society 'in conversation' with Mayan traditions and local myths, as the manifold stories of "the corn people" reveal. Assuming the identity of the indigenous people and galvanized by the exploitation they have suffered over the centuries, the Zapatistas are starting from a common ground that roots them, connects them and unites them against the dominant powers. Nevertheless, they do not remain uncritically tied to their traditions, since, through the autonomous institutions of governance they have created, they "move forward by asking questions", retaining the possibility of constant reflection on their social coexistence.

A direct 'translation' of such a project into Western culture would entail several challenges and pitfalls. Modern Western people seem to lack evident strong social bonds – on the contrary, individualism is on the rise as a result of the rise of insignificance, economism and unbridled consumerism. While we are supposedly globally connected to each other and despite our increased access to knowledge, science and technology, we remain suspicious of strangers and frightened of the unknown.

At the same time, the sense of uprootedness and lack of meaning felt by westerners is both a product and a pillar of legitimation for the nation-state. National identities dominate over any other possible connecting social bond, homogenize the various cultures and traditions within the state's borders, and establish their authority as the only legitimate one.

But as philosopher Simone Weil (2005) argues, rootedness appears to be one of the most important human needs – if also the most neglected. People are ‘rooted’ not only when they feel secure, but also when they participate actively and organically in the life of their community, thereby keeping alive certain features of the past and expectations for the future. But does rootedness necessarily mean the nation-state? Quite the contrary, against the state’s fictitious sense of belonging, human collectivities with reference to a common territory and the organic bonds of public life exist on a much smaller, decentralized and human scale, such as the demos, the polis, the village or the region.

To put down roots means to restore the sense of belonging one feels in relation to one’s social and cultural environment through mutual responsibility. As André Gorz (1973) suggests, the neighborhood or the community must once again become the microcosm for all human activity; a place for people to work, live, rest, learn, communicate, and which they jointly manage as part of their common life, in order for the irresponsibility cultivated by capitalism to be replaced by responsible participation.

The seeds of this type of organization already exist in contemporary environments. In Greece, the social heat released by the effervescence of the 2011 Squares movement later took the form of dispersed but connected neighborhood assemblies, diverse solidarity associations, no-middlemen markets, and a booming movement of solidarity economy. The abiding characteristic of such structures is that they constitute spaces of participation where public and private lives intersect, where joint action is undertaken, where rules of everyday coexistence are negotiated, and new organic collective identities are forged out of dispersed and atomized individuals. Political activists and organized groups need to encourage and cultivate the political aspects of such settings, if they are to become the seeds of genuine bottom-up social organization.

Important examples of self-managed practices that have endured include the Athens Network of Labour Cooperatives and Viome, a recuperated factory in Thessaloniki. These are economic units that are managed by assemblies of their own workers, with VIOME being the first example of a bankrupt company that has passed into workers’ hands. Collectively balancing the requirements of economic viability and the subsistence of its members with the prefigurative creation of new modalities of cooperation, production and consumption, the labour collectives demonstrate that resistance is a territorial, material and daily process of struggle, negotiation and transformation (Daskalaki and Kokkinidis 2017).

Ecological Thinking

The Zapatistas are an autonomous society in direct relationship and harmony with nature. Their communities are overwhelmingly made up of peasants; it is not an accident that they have been inspired by peasant revolutionary Emiliano Zapata and his revolutionary cry for “land and freedom”. As heirs of the Maya tradition, they maintain various Mayan rituals, ceremonies and customs. Their attunement to “Mother Earth” and their simple way of living close to nature, ‘listening’ to it at every step, may for westerner urbanites erroneously be ‘translated’ into an invitation to some kind of spiritualism. However, it would be a grave mistake to confound the Zapatista example with simplistic trends that have developed within capitalism, such as esotericism, primitivism, mysticism, New Age practices, deep ecology, etc.

As Murray Bookchin (1991: xxx) argues, “permeating these rather simplistic efforts to direct public attention away from the social underpinnings of our ecological problems is that same,

ubiquitous mysticism and theism that, in an era of social disempowerment, foster a proclivity for supernatural escape”. He goes on to assert that, “the tendency of mystical ecologists to speak of the ecological crises that ‘we’ or ‘people’ or ‘humanity’ have created easily plays into the hands of a privileged stratum who are only too eager to blame all the human victims of an exploitative society for the social and ecological ills of our time” (1991: xxxi).

If we are to form an ecological society in the future, it needs to be enriched by the insights, knowledge and data we have acquired through the long history of philosophy, science, technology and rationality. The necessary critique of contemporary capitalist technoscientific domination should in no case imply embracing magic, superstition, pseudoscience or primitivism.

At the same time, the Zapatistas invite us to link the ecological question with the larger political one: we cannot overcome the ecological crisis unless we overcome capitalism itself. All contemporary manifestations of ecological disequilibrium are rooted in social disequilibrium and in hierarchical relations. The social movements today are tasked with moving ecological thought beyond both the mystical and esoteric ecological doctrines, which easily lend themselves to eco-fascist fixes, and the narrow, pragmatic and socially inert environmentalism, which is manifested in every half-hearted attempt at addressing the pressing ecological crisis without disrupting capitalist accumulation – the doctrines of “green growth”, “sustainable development” or “decoupling” are indicative of the latter tendency.

Greece, a country rich in natural resources, has seen an explosion in extractivist investment in the last decade, encouraged by the dismantling of environmental regulations in the framework of austerity policies. Through both continental and offshore hydrocarbon prospecting, mineral extraction, the appropriation of natural resources or the construction of large wind farms which often generate more problems than they are supposed to solve, the rural environment is suffering the invasion of extractive capital. In response, organizing in a democratic face-to-face manner, local societies have been waging a multitude of struggles for land and water. Massive popular movements – to select some examples – have arisen against the disastrous gold mining in Halkidiki, against the diversion of the Acheloos River, against industrial wind farms in protected natural areas such as Agrafa, against oil exploration and against the privatization of public water companies. Decentralized citizens’ initiatives lead Greece’s ecological movement, as can be seen from their joint statement against the extraction of hydrocarbons.¹

¹“Joint press release of initiatives against hydrocarbon extraction” [in Greek] <https://www.greenpeace.org/greece/issues/klima/9404/enantia-stis-eksorykseis-ydrogonathrakon/>

Epilogue

The Arrival of the Zapatistas in Greece: Expectations, Priorities

In Greece, where in the recent past mass social mobilization has emerged against inequality and oligarchic rule – notably the 2008 uprising and the movement of the Squares in 2011 – society has been overwhelmed by the disastrous governance of left-wing Syriza and subsequently the current brutal neoliberal rule. These developments have damaged the morale and extinguished the hope of average people for change, the hope of living and growing peacefully in a social environment that promotes participation and prosperity, rather than barbarism and social cannibalism. In this pre-existing political impasse of the system of representation, the Covid-19 pandemic and its dreadful management have only served to further shrink political thought and action.

It is in this adverse climate that we were unexpectedly informed of the expedition of the Zapatistas to Europe and Greece. The arrival of the Zapatista delegation provides an unanticipated opportunity for individuals and collectives to meet, exchange and reflect on political action, at a time when collective action appears in need of a forceful reignition in order to reemerge center stage.

The Zapatista journey has already sparked the coordination of a multitude of political collectives, social projects and grassroots initiatives that desire to cooperate and exchange thoughts and experiences with the Zapatista communities. In a short time, a number of local, regional and thematic coordination assemblies have spawned, consisting of collectives as well as individuals. One such countrywide thematic coordination assembly is the “Coordination for Autonomy, Self-Institution and Social Ecology”, which poses as a core issue the question of direct democracy as a polity and seeks to learn from the processes of self-institution of the Zapatistas. The assembly, of which the authors of this text are members, approaches autonomy not only as an internal organizational procedure, but as a form of political and communal constitution spanning the entire territory.

Through horizontal processes and consultations – which we aim to extend beyond the boundaries of the social movements and make as open and inclusive as possible – we seek to pick up the thread where we left off in the global Squares of 2011, where we clamored for “direct democracy now”, for a wholesale transformation of decision-making processes in society.

We consider autonomy to be the thread that connects all Zapatista struggles – the feminist, the ecological and all other aspects of the Zapatista Revolution – and a notion that they have emphasized repeatedly, addressing the entire planet. We understand autonomy not by its common-sense definition of “independence”, but, quite the opposite, by its original ancient Greek sense of “creating one’s own laws and institutions” – hence, as a constant movement of inclusion, deliberation, communication and mutual interdependence.

For that reason, in the context of the Zapatista “Journey for Life”, we seek to shed more light on the issue of political organizing: What are the Zapatista laws? How do the *caracoles* operate and in which way are they self-instituted? What is the main set of rules and principles?

What are the processes of reform of laws and institutions? The support bases, the four levels of assemblies and the councils of good governance, are all institutions of a society operating collectively. We endeavor to discuss these issues with the Zapatista delegation, to exchange lived experiences and to present to the wider public the democratic example of their struggle, one of the brightest contemporary examples of self-government. In addition, it will be valuable for domestic grassroots social struggles to learn about the difficulties that may arise when communities self-institute, as well as about the possible practical solutions and process.

Through this process of interaction and exchange we believe that, along with the Zapatistas, we will invent new ways of traversing old paths, we will revisit old methods to solve new problems, and ultimately, we will walk by asking questions of each other and finding answers together, beyond ideological certainties. Our aim is to continue the creative contact with the Zapatistas into the future – even after the delegates have returned to their communities.

Reflections on Moving Forward

Through this encounter it is becoming clear that, regardless of the starting point, we can be united by the journey itself, having the goal of social emancipation as the horizon. Today's social struggles should aspire not to restore the previous 'normality' of the state and capitalist "business as usual", but to create a strong social current and a political movement to overcome this condition altogether. The historic dilemma we are faced with is clear: either we contribute to a move forward, towards social emancipation, or we submit to a new type of barbarism.

The contemporary human is a tragic figure. The narrative of reason, science, justice and progress, which up until recently was used to mask a concerted program of domination and exploitation, has broken down. The disastrous consequences of our mode of sociopolitical organization are evident. Despite this, we seem unable to respond and feel condemned to passively participate in our own destruction.

These are precisely the stakes of our time. Will we break the perpetual cycle of hierarchical rule and violent capitalist domination, which separates us from our means of production, reproduction and subsistence, which steals what we create only to return it to us as a commodity, which destroys our social relations and deprives us of control over our lives? Or will we remain trapped within the existing reality, with all the catastrophic consequences this will have for society and nature?

Our task today is to signal alternative pathways. We deem it necessary to rid ourselves of the dominant imaginary and question the naturalized, 'self-evident' capitalist relations, which imprison people within a vicious circle of exploitation and alienation. In no way do we reserve for ourselves the tragic role of an enlightened 'vanguard', which produced the totalitarianisms of the past. We are moving forward by creating the ground on which to establish a creative political dialogue rooted in equality.

Through a positive feedback loop between different visions, perspectives and experiences of struggle, we have developed a multitude of tools for moving forward: direct democracy as a polity; self-institution; local popular/community assemblies; social organization along ecological lines; grassroots social struggles; the recuperation and self-management of the land, the means of production, the old and newly-created commons; opposition to all kinds of mediation, representation, exploitation, hierarchy and statism.

A true grassroots democracy cannot exist in the future without the efforts of many people in the present. The future we dream of exists within our practice today. To evoke it in theory but abandon it in practice, entrusting our fate to 'representatives', would be to effectively renounce it, to nullify our desire. The future is not only the result of thought, but above all of action; it is gestated in the actions of the present. It is not merely to be thought about but to be acted upon.

Traditional means of struggle such as demonstrations, marches and strikes, although useful as means of resistance, are not sufficient in themselves as instruments of social transformation. Nor is the mere rotation of governments and political personnel. The point is not to vote for a better government, but to become citizens: to participate in decision-making, in drafting laws, in creating and administering justice. To this end, we need to change the current institutions, the dominant concepts and significations. We can only achieve this from outside the oligarchic state institutions.

What is needed is the re-emergence of politics as an embodied collective process, as exemplified by the Zapatista struggle for self-determination. Only through the extension of a radical democracy to all spheres of life can we bring about a wholesale transformation of society's institutions, significations, values, goals and visions – that is, bring about a genuine grassroots revolution. Capitalism is not simply an economic system, it is also a complex matrix of values and significations that breeds competitive, atomized and alienated individuals. To this we reply with the reemergence of solidarity, democracy, equality and cooperation, with the reemergence of a bottom-up politics.

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Asking questions with the Zapatistas
Reflections from Greece on our Civilizational Impasse
2022

<https://trise.org/2022/09/03/asking-questions-with-the-zapatistas-free-ebook/>
This is the extended English-language original of the Spanish-language pamphlet 'Preguntando con los zapatistas. Reflexiones desde Grecia sobre nuestro impasse civilizatorio', published in Spanish by Cooperative Editorial Retos in 2022. It is part of the 27-pamphlet collection Al Faro Zapatista, with one pamphlet for each year since the 1994 uprising, supporting the Zapatista Gira por la Vida.

Editor: Matthew Little

Publisher: Transnational Institute of Social Ecology

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