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ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Networked alternatives against the state: zapatista autonomy and informality as resistance

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Abstract

Since their 1994 uprising, Zapatista communities have built social, political, and economic alternatives within autonomous territories, setting an example for multiple Transformation Initiatives and social movements globally. Focusing on economic solidarity through coffee distribution, this article investigates how the boundaries between being inside, beyond, or against the state and the market are relationally conceived and performed by autonomous peasants and European activist networks. The study is based on multiple fieldworks between Europe and Chiapas and years of engaged research. Beyond dual rationalizations between silent and loud resistance, I argue that anticapitalist worlds surrounding Zapatismo connect everyday forms of struggle with broader, structural hopes for change through transnational alliances. It is the existence of an organized infrastructure that allows this form of trade to reproduce its own antagonism, in constant tension against the state, reified as the ultimate perpetrator of the neoliberal order. Revisiting informality through the lenses of anti-systemic movements allows us to decentralize resistance, encompassing non-hegemonic processes *from below (and to the left)* that cannot be reduced to Western categories nor trivialized as the sole weapons in the hands of voiceless and powerless societies. Articulating Marxist anthropology with decolonial thought through the framework of Zapatista autonomy suggests that it is not enough to categorize resistance as visible or invisible, formal or informal. The study of economic solidarity surrounding the Zapatista experience provides an understanding of the complex realities of anticapitalist resistances today, where collective organization is as much about survival as it is about reimagining power and economy.

Keywords Zapatista autonomy · Economic solidarity · Coffee distribution · Anticapitalist resistances · Informality · Marxist anthropology

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> The political relation of power precedes and forms the basis of the economic relation of exploitation. before being economic alienation is political; power precedes labor; the economic is a derivative of the political; the emergence of the State determines the appearance of classes. (Clastres 2011 169)[1]

Introduction

Zapatismo is about structural change based on a slow process of collective organization that draws on transnational alliances. The article investigates how the boundaries between being inside, beyond, and against the system and the market are conceived and performed in the context of economic solidarity networks supporting the Zapatista rebellion. Focusing on informal economic practices as forms of resistance, the study analyzes strategies adopted to create commercial alternatives compatible with autonomy and non-mercantile political claims.

In militant research, we are situated within a reflexive space where the boundaries between academic observation and activist solidarity blend. Immersion is essential for addressing inherent paradoxes of studying movements in which we are deeply embedded. Working closely with activists and subaltern subjects, the challenge is to support resistance while maintaining a critical perspective, co-producing knowledge in ways that question extractivist scholarship. As engaged anthropologists, we face accusations of bias due to our overt solidarity with activist causes, as if neutrality were an achievable stance in the face of structural inequalities and didn't imply an implicit alignment with power dynamics also affecting academia and processes of knowledge production. This research is based on multiple fieldwork experiences in Europe and Chiapas between 2015 and 2025. I conducted 6 months of fieldwork in Chiapas in 2016, and I returned for shorter periods in 2017, 2018, and 2019. In 2024, I was back to the field for 10 months, and during all these years, I actively participated in the European network supporting the cause. In Chiapas, I directly engaged with solidarity groups and supported events organized by the EZLN.[2] The study of the solidarity network was developed by participating in regular assemblies and discussions, annual in-person meetings, political initiatives, fundraising campaigns, and other public events. Italy is the country where observations remained consistent over time, and where I collaborated closely with a collective that is part of the European network, though not directly involved in coffee distribution. With activists from other territories, I conducted open and semi-structured interviews that complemented informal conversations during shared activist spaces. Other interlocutors included local or international organizations, political authorities, informal conversations with inhabitants of autonomous communities, and *organic intellectuals* historically close to the cause. With Zapatista coffee producers from the Highlands of Chiapas I shared multiple coffees, meals, and long conversations. I could follow the coffee, observe their work, and accompany them during transfers to coffee collection centers in dif-

[1] Unless indicated differently, original texts in Italian, French, and Spanish were translated by the author.

[2] *Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional*: Zapatista Army of National Liberation.

ferent MAREZ,[3] to the warehouse where the product is stored, processed, and prepared before being sent to the harbor, as well as the *casa* (*home*) where administrative tasks are managed.

The EZLN raised from the ashes of the FLN,[4] a Marxist-Leninist guerrilla founded in Monterrey in 1969. The Marxist-Leninist theoretical heritage and the Guevarist guerrilla tradition of the FLN encountered indigenous modes and engaged in a dialogue with their worldviews: the result is an innovative political experience, a slow but profound revolution. Marxism never underestimated the power of imperialism and coloniality within capitalism. Still, it was built on Western analytical categories and understandings of history that needed to be revisited not only *at the margins* (Anderson 2016) but through the eyes of historically marginalized subjectivities (Mellino and Pomella 2020). Instead of dismissing Marxism as an obsolete euro-centered set of theories, or just analyze how it was "adopted and adapted by revolutionary thinkers in the Global South" (Fadaee 2024), I suggest it is far more interesting to study how it has been questioned, reconceptualized, or even rejected (and why) by gendered, racialized, indigenized, and other subaltern subjects. I argue that Marxist anthropology can be articulated with decolonial thought through the radical autonomy framework surrounding the Zapatista experience, which is not based on uncommunicated political epistemologies but on a constellation of anticapitalist visions constantly shaping each other's practices of hope. Revisiting informality through the lenses of anti-systemic movements allows us to decentralize resistance beyond neocolonial approaches and postmodern drifts. It allows encompassing non-hegemonic processes *from below (and to the left)* that cannot be reduced to Western political categories nor trivialized as the only possible weapons in the hands of voiceless and powerless societies.

Conclusions suggest that the mobile limits between formalization and informalization processes of economic practices are relationally performed as strategies for survival and forms of resistance to state's cooptation and neoliberal subsumption while simultaneously linked to self-government, the pursuit of non-state powers, and decommodified economic systems. Zapatista autonomy doesn't seek economic independence from solidarity networks: the possibility of maintaining constant tensions against the Mexican state relies on the construction of transnational alliances and their fight to reappropriate the commons and *disperse power* (Escobar 1995; Zibechi 2010).

Anthropology of political action and the politics of anthropology

Classical political anthropology was dedicated to studying societies represented in Eurocentric terms as *stateless* and *archaic* or even lacking political organization just because different systems were not recognized according to Western categories. In addition to these classical divides between *modern* and *traditional* societies, an ideological divide has been theorized between, on the one hand, societies where neolib-

[3] *Municipios Autónomos Rebeldes Zapatistas*: Rebel Zapatista Autonomous Municipalities.

[4] *Fuerzas de Liberación Nacional*: National Liberation Forces.

eralism and capitalism are forcedly, openly, or implicitly accepted and, on the other hand, political experiences inspired by socialist principles. Contemporary anthropology has vastly questioned the ability of Western and neoliberal categories to explain not only other cultures but the world itself. The *ontological turn* brought anthropologists to rethink multiculturalism and its ability to account for different perspectives over one single and static reality, switching the attention to "different enactments of worlds" to allow "the recognition of the non-modern on its own terms" (Blaser 2009). Just adding an "s" to the notion of *culture* to make it plural is not enough; it doesn't account for radically different pluriverses in alternative to the universalistic representation of one inevitable neoliberal modernity. Without a structural change, the effort to recognize the agency of subjectivities historically invisibilized is vinified by the reproduction of the power matrix that lies behind their inferiorization and the capitalist need to control, dominate, exploit, and extract value.

Applied to politics, decoloniality increasingly criticized the imposed superiority of Western standards when fighting for a better world. Elitist leftist struggles made in Europe had to give space to other forms of resistance. The inability to identify political leaders and values, together with the awareness of the limitations of specific state-centered experiences, generated a mistrust towards traditional tools of Marxist struggle. To face contemporary dematerialized capitalism and *molecular power* (Foucault 2004), strategies of political action had to be renewed. In the attempt to account for the variety of possible forms of resistance, political anthropologists multiplied their efforts to recognize hopes of impact of invisibilized everyday practices. Wider, louder, and more visible political initiatives have been dissected and scrutinized to problematize and deconstruct the elitist legacy of the European intellectual left and the traditional ingredients of revolutionary action. Small-scale, apparently harmless, and spontaneous practices of *everyday resistance* (Scott 1985) needed to be redeemed from an implicit position of inferiority. The fear of misrepresenting less visible initiatives and the urge to relativize political agencies created the conditions for a widespread critique of collective action, perceived as a privilege of social classes with the time and resources to say no to the established order.

Black Marxism (Robinson 1983) raised awareness about the singularity of experiences of racialized communities, challenging traditional Marxist interpretations. Marxist feminisms (Federici 2004; Sargent 1981; Spivak 1988) articulated the mutual constitution of patriarchal hegemony and capitalist exploitation. Intersectionality (Davis 1981; James 1975) and decolonial feminisms (Lugones 2016; Vergès 2021) allowed accounting for race, gender, and coloniality as specific control devices that cannot be reduced to sub-categories of class oppression, though they certainly thrive under capitalism at the same time as they feed its ability to exploit minds, bodies, and territories. Economic-centered views showed their limitations and tendency to reductively understand other forms of domination as fragments of class oppression instead of articulating its entanglements.

New Marxism has taken on the ambitious challenge of overcoming obsolete and reductionist "definitions of politics anchored in traditional actors who struggled for the control of the state, particularly the working class and revolutionary vanguards" and views of "society as an entity composed of more or less immutable structures and class relations" (Escobar and Alvarez 1992, 3). We observe a shift from the focus on

mass class struggle to a more complex analysis of power as "the matrix of all differences" (Clastres 2011, 23), within a processual framework of evolving hegemonic structures and *multiple governmentalities* (Foucault 2008). The naturalization of power itself came to be questioned, looking for alternatives to the eternal dichotomy between the coercive State and its "despotic destiny" and the absence of institutionalization with its "anarchist horizon" (Clastres 2011, 25). Postmarxism has been accused of reformism, seen as unable to overcome the state (Day 2005, 9). Yet if we agree that "mondialized capitalism is the support of the bourgeois State" (and vice versa), doing politics at a distance from institutions is not anymore just a libertarian romance, "the extinction of the state is indeed a principle that must be evident in every political action" against the idea of "communism as an objective to be achieved through the conception of a new state" (Badiou in Douzinas and Žižek 2010).

Power can no longer be reduced to totalitarian repression; it must account for molecular forms of domination and resistance, considering desires and agencies. In this *biopolitical* scenario, "what makes power work is freedom" (Abélès 2014, 51) and not its absence. The bodies of Clastres' (2011) *societies against the State* were "marked" by an epidermized refusal of submission: "you shall not desire power" was the interiorized social and political norm. As Holloway (2002) highlights in his classic, "*Change the World Without Taking Power* gave voice to an idea that was central to the alter-globalisation movement, to the Zapatista uprising in Mexico": conceiving change through state power "involves the abstraction of the state from the social relations of which it is part". Therefore, the *deterritorialization* of revolutionary practices became necessary analytical and political tools to understand and face contemporary systems of domination (Hardt and Negri 2000; Deleuze and Guattari 1980). The words *resistance* and *rebellion* started to be preferred over *revolution* – even by the Zapatistas – guilty of conveying a coercive counter-hegemonic project. After Chiapas 1994, Seattle 1999, Porto Alegre and Genoa 2001, and against a reductionist concept of Social Movement, decentralizing terms such as the *movement(s) of movements* (Mertes 2004; Rosset et al. 2005; Sen 2017) and *peoples in movement* (Zibechi 2024) were adopted to better capture emerging global subjects of change. Bayat's (2010) *non-movement* goes beyond the fluidity of the *multitude* (Hardt and Negri 2004), referring to forms of action that are not organized, formalized, or even necessarily intentional. In this realm, the Zapatista struggle fed countless political philosophies, artistic and cultural expressions, theoretical and practical prefigurations of alternative futures beyond state structures and neoliberal logics.

Beyond or against the state? Informal practices as forms of resistance

> "the binary division between resistance and non-resistance is an unreal one. The existence of those who seem not to rebel is a warren of minute, individual, autonomous tactics and strategies which counter and inflect the visible facts of overall domination, and whose purposes and calculations, desires and choices resist any simple division into the political and the apolitical. The schema of a strategy of resistance as a vanguard of politicisation needs to be subjected to

> re-examination, and account must be taken of resistances whose strategy is one of evasion and or defence […]. There are no good subjects of resistance."
>
> (Gordon in Scott 1985)

Resistance Studies were born with the explicit aim of developing an understanding not limited to visible, organized, and mass initiatives, overcoming the dichotomy between *overt/public* and *hidden/everyday* forms of resistance (Murru and Polese 2020, 6–7). Decolonial studies applied to social movements have shown that organization is far from a privilege of euro-centered progressive politics (Escobar and Alvarez 1992; Zibechi 2024). Attributing the ability to coordinate resistance to supposedly enlightened vanguards doesn't account for bottom-up experiences – such as the Zapatista – that find their strength in a slow and conscious process of collective organization, strategically using silence as a political stance. Theories on *everyday resistance* suggest that recognizing the agency and the *weapons of the weak* (Scott 1985) implies a disenchantment with more intentional and coordinated initiatives. Focused on politicizing *pre-politic primitive rebels* (Hobsbawm 1959) and *post-politic rebels* (Magazine and Duarte Bajaña 2022), the risk is to reproduce a dualism between uncoordinated and organized initiatives, as if different repertoires of rebellion needed to compete for one single spot in the political arena.

Informality has been conceptualized as "the art of bypassing the state" and divided between practices developed *in spite of* state rules or *beyond* the state when absent (Polese 2021). Recent debates within informality studies attempt to overcome polarized conceptualizations, "challenging a dualistic mode that sees the state as the formal legitimate actor and other (non-state) actors as being at the origin of informality" (Polese 2021, 331). State and policy-oriented perspectives are based on an idealization of typically Western ideals such as (neoliberal) democracy, (individual) freedom, and developmentalist progress. In the attempt to recognize and channel its positive sides, informality can be seen as "one of the first steps to the creation of an active civil society" (Polese 2015, 15). This understanding of civil society's engagement is often reduced to individual participation (fostered through empowerment projects, public policies, and other forms of neoliberal governance). Samers (2005) reminds us that informal and diverse economies are often viewed through an overly optimistic lens by reformist policymakers and critical scholars alike. Informality comes to be celebrated as an alternative to welfare retrenchment, precarious labor, and the broader injustices of corporate capitalism (Samers 2005, 875). Yet, this enthusiasm can obscure important distinctions. He argues that "a more analytical treatment of informal and diverse economies" requires differentiating between the "mundane but dyspeptic varieties" of informality and those "with a seemingly more "progressive" production, extraction, and redistribution of the surplus" (Samers 2005, 883). In the context of Zapatista economic practices, such differentiation is crucial. The Zapatista concept of *sociedad civil* refers to people struggling for emancipation in a conflictual context deeply permeated by power structures. In the Zapatista perspective, authorities and their civic counterpart cannot be separated from the underlying hegemonic dynamics to which they take part and contribute reproducing, as suggested by the

Gramscian notion of "*società civile* as a part of the bourgeois apparatus of domination" stabilizing class hegemony (Brand and Hirsch 2004, 373).

Informal practices are conceived as experiences of resistance to state mechanisms when they represent a reaction to institutional ineffectiveness or a result of individual morality or societal norms (Polese 2021). *Infrapolitics* (Scott 1985) and *quiet encroachment* (Bayat 2010) are applied to describe the impact of individual behavior when repeated numerous times by many people. Drawing on Marx's critique of Stirner's individual anarchism, Ciavolella (2013) argues that identifying the individual as the subject of change is a contemporary trend compatible with the neoliberal ideology, echoing Harvey's (2005) analysis of neoliberal states' ability to hide systemic crisis behind personal failures. Denying structural responsibility to society and the economy, inequality is attributed to personal moral conducts instead of being recognized as the historical product of power relations.

Day's (2005) provocative assertion that "Gramsci is dead" reflects a post-anarchist orientation that critiques the persistence of hegemony-based strategies in contemporary social movements. He argues that many radical struggles (including Zapatismo) embody a "logic of affinity" that rejects the very grammar of hegemony, favoring instead non-universalizing forms of resistance. Nevertheless, the Zapatista refusal of the Mexican state is embedded in historically grounded, collective forms of organization and antagonism. Zapatista autonomy, as an expression of insubordination, is not merely a spontaneous proliferation of prefigurative alternatives but a long-term, disciplined process, defended through organized community structures, political education, and territorial control. Rather than a mere negation, it is a dynamic, ongoing struggle to reject the passive incorporation of subaltern groups into the hegemonic system. In contrast to the liberal-anarchist tendency to idealize horizontality and spontaneity, Zapatista communities articulate autonomy as a process of political subjectivation that is conflictual, situated, and yet strategic: not reducible to the avoidance of power, but rooted instead in the transformation of its terms. Modonesi's (2019) conceptual triad of subalternity-antagonism-autonomy captures the dynamic tension in Zapatista praxis: neither passively subaltern nor simply outside the system, their political horizon engages with power in order to rupture it. In this context, Gramsci's legacy is reworked through contemporary anti-systemic practices that openly confront, rather than evade, the problem of hegemony.

The forms of resistance collected in Ledeneva's *Global Encyclopaedia on Informality* (2018) account for underground experiences, mostly stemming from pre-existing social norms, strategically used to gain margins of freedom within authoritarian contexts. *Infrapolitics* is applied to blur the boundaries between passive, unorganized, and spontaneous forms of resistance and openly insurrectional initiatives. *Everyday resistance* is used to question Gramscian theory on cultural hegemony, accused of leaving little space for the subaltern to express their agency and engage with power dynamics. These reflections echo De Certeau's (1990) theories on the *tactics* developed by the oppressed to subtly, creatively, and subversively navigate the constraints imposed by the system. Extensive research on post-socialist territories showed that informality is not disappearing nor has it been reduced by "attempts to consolidate liberal, democratic market society" (Ledeneva et al. 2018, 36). Practices of resistance to formal structures have been situated on an apparently continuous line going

from *infrapolitics* (Scott 1985) to *contentious politics* (Tarrow 1998) until insurgency according to the level of coordination of political action and its effects.

I suggest that looking at informality through the eyes of anti-systemic organized movements broadens our understanding of the phenomenon beyond standardized conceptualizations that reduce informal practices to the self-serving actions of avoiding paying taxes and bureaucracy or the impossibility of accessing formal trade. It also helps reconceptualize informal practices as forms of resistance beyond state-compatible *passive revolutions* (Modonesi 2020), encompassing initiatives that collectively and openly challenge the state order. In this sense, informality is not just a synonym for civil society's (individual) political participation; it's also a tool to analyze organized alternatives to market-driven society.

Who do we have to ask for permission to organize?

The EZLN was formed by 6 Marxist militants who went to Chiapas with the explicit project of building a revolutionary guerrilla based on peasant struggles. The result is a unique experience developed from pre-existing social norms within communities but rooted in a clear political agenda that attributes a deeply ideological meaning to the notions of collectivity and horizontality. In this context – much like in Gramscian perspective – theory and praxis influence and define each other, to the point that it would be reductive to ask whether the tendency to avoid logics of accumulation derives from old peasant institutions or anticapitalist ideologies. What can be observed is a complex mixture of both phenomena, intertwined and inseparable. The Zapatista experience stems simultaneously from the state's neglection of indigenous rural areas, as from a specific revolutionary project. It stems from institutions unable (or unwilling) to guarantee essential services to indigenous communities and, at the same time, it claims the construction of another possible system perceived as incompatible with capitalist state structures. The EZLN lost any hope of negotiating with the Mexican government after the 2001 constitutional reform that undermined the San Andrés Accords, leading the guerrilla and its support bases to proclaim self-governance and focus on building autonomy through the creation of the *caracoles* and the *JBG*.[5] The Zapatistas eventually left behind the Guevarist tradition of Latin American guerrillas through complex contamination with Indigenous epistemologies and international activist networks progressively modifying its revolutionary scopes and practices. As they first named autonomy in 1995 (EZLN in Pinheiro Barbosa and Rosset 2023: 35), they used the plural form as a synonym of integration of minorities, opposed to its separation. The Zapatista Critical Thought is highly theorized and subversive but profoundly embedded in lived praxis of resistance: "an anticapitalist, anticolonial, and antipatriarchal method of analysis" (Pinheiro Barbosa and Rosset 2023, 87).

Zapatista communities and radical activists supporting the cause share a common political imaginary that strongly questions the ability of institutions to guarantee common interests and people's well-being. States are seen as initiators of an irratio-

[5] *Juntas de Buen Gobierno*: Good Government Councils, replaced in 2023 by GAL (*Gobiernos Autónomos Locales*: Local Autonomous Governments).

nal war for domination, the source of legitimation of capitalist economy. While states are reified as a common enemy, Zapatista autonomy clearly seeks independence from the Mexican government in a way that is not systematically mirrored by European activists. The Zapatista fight for autonomy is conceived as an alternative to both economic and political systems of oppression that cannot be analyzed separately. At the local level, their priority is to build a parallel organization without having to depend on any institutional support. At the macropolitical level, autonomy became an inspiration for anti-globalization movements worldwide and represents an explicit critique of nation-state structures:

> There is the informal network and, at the same time, a relationship with the formal. There are always typical tactics to find a way for the formal and the informal to be tied together and utilized. This has been, throughout Zapatism, one of the most interesting exercises [...] the fact that formal money can also reach the informal space that doesn't report back. [...] I find it even richer because it is accounted for with stories, photos, experiences, videos… and not with reports of how much I spent and the VAT...
>
> Creating community here and there... the capacity we have for inventiveness, to hack the system, to find a way around it and get money despite not having money, despite not giving importance to money. [...] Finding the loophole and the possibility of surviving despite no possibilities of being formal because, to begin with, the EZ is not an S.A. (Guiomar Rovira, April 2024, personal conversation)

Zapatista coffee distribution is not a typical example of informality if we reduce it to practices such as nepotism, informal labor, tax evasion, or payments under the table.[6] What differentiates it from practices commonly included under the informality label is the explicit, collective, and organized struggle to oppose the state. Economic exchanges undergo constant attempts of informalization that feed autonomy claims: being at the margins of the capitalist state and the market economy is the ultimate utopia against the "neoliberal nightmare" (Subcomandante Insurgente Moisés and Subcomandante Insurgente Galeano 2017). In this scenario, formalized economy is the support of institutions subjugated by global financial agencies. Transition to formality is perceived as a corruption of anticapitalist values that could preserve an ideal level of purity only without having to go through formal economic channels. The state is objectified (Fassin 2015) and constructed as the executor of the neoliberal project and perpetrator of its multiple crisis. The main head of the *Capitalist Hydra* (EZLN 2015) is an eagle: shield of the Mexican (institutional) national identity. This demonization of the Mexican state hasn't prevented communities from accepting solidarity from foreign institutionalized actors (mediated by activists). Rebel autonomy for the Zapatistas is not a synonym of social nor economic isolation: it needs to avoid dependence on the Mexican state at any cost, but it's simultaneously built around economic and political relations with the internationalist community. This

[6] See Polese (2021) for an attempt to map informality in global debates.

apparent incoherence is mitigated by repeated efforts to cultivate and decolonize relations and present them as direct solidarity, echoing Graeber's (2009) reflections on direct action within anticapitalist movements. Solidarity ties are reframed as a common struggle against capitalism: "a form of action that we call a politics of solidarity put into practice".[7]

European networks commercializing Zapatista coffee are a heterogeneous constellation; including small collectives as well as associations, some of which formalized their status precisely to be able to import the product. These networks are not formalized, but most of the collectivities are coordinated, and smaller groups depend on formalized entities to access the product. Spain, for example, buys coffee through a French organization with all the necessary importation permits and a higher purchasing power. Then, the coffee is roasted and stored by a local NGO that doesn't sell it but only serves as an intermediary to allow the smaller association to avoid further bureaucratization. In the mountains of the Mexican southeast, families cannot accept any support from the government as long as they want to be part of the organization. Zapatista territories are sites of violent ongoing conflict with the state, paramilitary, and criminal groups involved in drug trafficking (actors that in Mexico cannot be separated). Maintaining autonomy has a cost not only in economic terms: taxis of a service developed by BAZ[8] were burnt because of their refusal to accept official permits. Most of the coffee is exported, and to allow its legal commercialization beyond the Mexican borders, they created a few cooperatives with the necessary exportation permits. The first Zapatista coffee cooperative attempted to resist formalization and atomization by not declaring the names of its members but didn't survive institutional sanctions. Most autonomous indigenous peasants don't have birth certificates; they don't exist on paper. The producers who now export the product are the ones who have legal identity, who own their land according to *ejido*[9] rights. Coffee farmers who want to maintain autonomy towards (and against) the state have no other option but to sell their product locally, mostly to *coyotes*.[10] They are faced with the impasse of having to choose between the two main heads of the hydra: the state or the capital, even though they conceive it as one and the same.

> Many of the *compas* say, 'I don't want to register with the government. I don't want that, no. It means we would be in the government's hands'. But in order to look for a price and be able to sell, one has to be registered. Even though we want everything to be autonomous, it seems that we still haven't reached that point yet, even though we want autonomy.

[7] Text of a fundraising campaign of the European Zapatista Network (not specialized in coffee distribution).

[8] *Bases de Apoyo Zapatistas* (Zapatista Support Bases): it refers to the civilian component of the organization.

[9] Introduced by the Mexican Constitution of 1917 following the agrarian reform prompted by the Mexican Revolution, the *ejidos* represent an attempt to redistribute land for communal use against elitist private property, particularly within indigenous territories. *Ejidatarios* need formal papers awarded by the authorities.

[10] Intermediaries speculating on coffee prices, often working for large private exporting companies.

(Zapatista coffee producers, January 2025, collective conversation)

The cooperative's earnings are distributed among members based on how much coffee each family produces, according to the ejidal land they own. Some solidarity activists try to mitigate these differences by donating funds from coffee sales to communitarian authorities so they can be used for collective expenses. If producers want to access these funds, they must ask for permission from the authorities of their communities, who will evaluate their request based on mutual needs and priorities identified. Recently, many collectives involved in coffee distribution donated their surpluses to a campaign we launched aimed at raising funds to build an operating room in the Lacandon Jungle. Building an autonomous health system has been among the main scopes of the Zapatista struggle. This shows how formalization is directly linked to recognizable forms of private property but can still be reoriented for the collective construction of autonomy towards the state.

Among tactics developed by European activists to resist formalization processes, we find the use of personal bank accounts or means of transportation, partial undeclared payments and sales, the circulation of money in cash, the use of personal connections to avoid bureaucracy, hidden storage spaces, and the attempt to develop projects of self-certification and artisanal roasting. The organic certification process has generated endless debates both within the autonomous cooperatives and European networks, as official international labels are considered neocolonial devices. In Chiapas, producers don't believe in Western agencies determining whether their product deserves to be considered organic, but they allow it out of necessity in order to export. This is a particularly delicate subject for a struggle built around peasant and indigenous rights for self-determination. While similar dilemmas have been discussed in the U.S. context regarding Fair Trade certification (Naylor 2019), European networks engage with these mechanisms in distinct ways. Only a portion of the coffee exported to Europe bears the official Fair Trade label, as many collectives explicitly reject it, and Zapatista producers themselves clearly differentiate their experience from that of non-Zapatista cooperatives. In this context, Fair Trade and organic certifications operate as separate and differently mobilized devices, and the coffees distributed across Europe under diverse "rebel" labels are explicitly marked as political products, openly positioned as part of a broader and collective anticapitalist struggle.

> We find it very difficult because we are used to working organically. It's hard... buyers are used to seeing a little piece of paper... that they copy from the government. That's the tricky part, so we're struggling.
>
> (Zapatista coffee producers, June 2016, collective conversation)

> There was once the idea of creating self-certification, but apparently, it doesn't work. Why? Because there are still several European consumers who don't value that document and want the official document, the one issued by a certifier. So, it hasn't worked so far. But I think little by little we'll see about it, because it has been tried several times already. (Zapatista coffee producers, January 2025, collective conversation)

Multiple groups are connected to local occupations offering spaces to store or sell the coffee. In Italy, the recent eviction of a historical CSOA[11] risked undermining the distribution of the product stored for more than 20 years between the occupied walls of the social center. Independent music and cultural festivals have an important role in distribution, where informal economic transactions tend to be generalized (even though they become increasingly harder to practice in many European countries due to national transparency laws and the widespread dematerialization of payments). A lot of activists nostalgically remember the good old times in which the funds raised were personally carried to the communities in resistance: substantial amounts of money have circulated between Europe and Chiapas in our pockets, and this practice is still frequently used, but increasingly less in the case of coffee.

Many collectives share the perception that they could do more to avoid relying on formal actors and that gaining self-managed control over the whole process of coffee distribution would be ideologically more coherent. They challenge these contradictions, giving in as little as possible to formality: choosing informal or semi-formal actors to collaborate with, non-declaring these collaborations on paper, choosing the least formal option when it comes to legal identity, or legalizing only a portion of their economic solidarity activity. Frequently, a certain level of formalization comes to be practiced (which doesn't mean that it is fully accepted) once the organization decides to engage with the coffee distribution. Certain collectives that didn't have any legal identity and were invisible on paper decided to create a small association just to be able to import the coffee, but the rest of activist artefacts (t-shirts, indigenous and self-made crafts, publications, pamphlets…) continue to be sold informally and circulate as both economic and political vehicles. When formal intermediaries are chosen, they tend to be selected carefully according to ethical and political criteria: fair trade NGOs or associations that are not too big, ethical banks, and other entities where personal connections can enhance trust relationships. These choices need to be legitimized at different levels: towards rebel communities in Chiapas (that might not like or accept every choice made by the European collectives), the rest of the network, and intermediaries.

> They called us into a small meeting with a banker where she updated the file and said: 'But what are you doing?' I remember we said we were doing... what was it again? It was quite funny. 'We support indigenous struggles through trade'. And then she said, 'Oh, it would be better to say that you do trade with indigenous people'. We said okay, we'll write that.
>
> (European activist distributing Zapatista coffee, July 2024, personal conversation)

Informality is not only performed as an alternative to market economy but also to the hierarchization of powers: avoiding bureaucracy is perceived as a guarantee of horizontality, whereas the more the group is formalized, the more it is considered exposed to internal inequalities. Formal bureaucratic structures and roles are often mobilized

[11] *Centro Sociale Occupato Autogestito*: Occupied Self-Managed Social Center.

strategically as a *façade* that might be legally required, but behind which decisions and responsibilities are redistributed (or at least try to be). Actors who remain totally informal need to rely on others who decided to give in to formalization processes. Countries like Spain or Belgium that distribute small amounts of coffee don't import it directly from Mexico but depend on French infrastructures and permits. Therefore, the reason behind the possibility for smaller experiences to remain informal is their relationship with the rest of the solidarity network. Smaller collectives might not appear on paper as traceable distributors of Zapatista coffee, but in the emic perspective they're not just clients; they're part of this organized experience. The level of engagement and dedication to the cause is often unrelated to the level of formalization: entities that participate from the margins of the system don't guarantee less continuity, time, or efforts. In certain cases, formalization processes generated conflicts that ended up destroying collectives, whereas in other cases, they were accepted as a natural evolution of the activities of the group. Some activists have increasingly learned to play with the margins of the system to carry on their projects.

> And then all the paperwork... the certification, for example. You start to realize that administrative issues are often the most political. So, well, we've always had one foot inside and one foot outside the system, always playing in that space because we understood that a fully cooperative model didn't particularly interest us, but neither did being entirely at the margins.
>
> (Spanish activist distributing Zapatista coffee, March 2024, personal conversation)

For communities in resistance, giving in to formalization would also mean losing the ongoing *low-intensity war*, characterized by counter-insurgency strategies of cooptation adopted by the Mexican government, aimed at weakening the movement through incentives given to families who accept to abandon the organization. In Chiapas, alliances between political and economic powers create the conditions for developmentalist programs enforced though processes of paramilitarization that situate territorial sovereignty and autonomous structures as enemies of capitalist modernization, legitimizing the displacement of entire communities and the extraction of resources (López y Rivas 2004, 129–132). These practices are a form of institutionalized corruption and further legitimize the willingness to challenge the boundaries of formality. Collective organization is also a defense strategy for survival from economic and violent state repression. Informal solidarity ties built around the coffee represent a relational political weapon of resistance, allowing the maintenance of an acceptable level of autonomy from Mexican institutions while fostering coalition against capitalism. In this context, collective organization is aimed at building autonomy and resisting institutional cooptation, but also at avoiding subsumption to neoliberal logics. Although deeply invested in political significance, organization is not a static *strategy*; it simultaneously entails dynamic *tactics* (De Certeau 1990) developed to chart peasant and Indigenous lives that have historically been dispossessed.

The embodied dimension of the struggle manifests itself through the importance given to sharing physical and convivial spaces. When the coffee arrives in Europe,

countries that collect the money through pre-orders organize parties to distribute the product. In Mexico, the solidarity community is regularly invited to festivals and other "networked spaces of transnational encounter" (Juris and Khasnabish 2013) within autonomous territories. The trips to Chiapas, the existence of personal connections, and the possibility to deliver funds in person assume a central role in legitimizing economic action against the impersonality of neoliberal logics. Direct solidarity and horizontal relations are opposed to anonymity and hierarchical institutionalized structures. At in-person meetings, activists share not only the space where the assemblies take place but also eating and sleeping areas. The same goes for Chiapas: visiting Zapatista territories is an intensive experience that blends political action with human interaction, and that many people remember having a deeply emotional impact on their lives. This doesn't eliminate internal differences, asymmetries, or tensions but helps dilute them. It also makes it less hard (though not free of contradictions) to accept institutionalized actors, as long as their role is mediated and overseen by trustworthy anti-systemic experiences.

The tensions between formal and informal economic practices reflect a conscious decision to maintain autonomy while still engaging in global economic systems. This shows that autonomy does not necessitate total isolation from formal structures but rather careful negotiation with them to avoid dependence while sustaining resistance. The practices described manifest a constant refusal to submit to neoliberal logics that is deeply relational and collectively constructed. For many collectives, the possibility of remaining informal depends on their relationship with formalized entities. It is the existence of an organized network that allows this form of trade to reproduce its own antagonism. The study of economic solidarity practices surrounding Zapatismo demonstrates that it is not enough to categorize resistance as either visible or invisible, formal or informal. Instead, we must attend to the ways in which these practices are constantly shifting, evolving, and interweaving with broader and interconnected transnational struggles. Articulating Marxist anthropology with decolonial thought through the framework of Zapatista autonomy provides a deeper understanding of the complex realities of anticapitalist resistances today, where collective organization is as much about survival as it is about reimagining power and economy.

Discussion and conclusions *from below (and to the left)*

The EZLN openly refuses classical labels like Marxism, communism, or anarchism, claiming that *our fight is for humanity* and the priority is autonomy. Escobar (2015, 93) relates Indigenous and peasant processes of resistance to a generalized feeling that life itself is at stake, turning these initiatives into "movements for re-existence". The Zapatista rebellion starts with the expropriation of the land and its restitution to the peasants. The insurrection of 1994 was also motivated by the revision of Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution, which questioned the agrarian reform, jeopardizing the *ejidos*. As a critique and radical alternative to rights that need to be granted by the government to be recognized, the EZLN is implementing *The Common and Non-Property* within recovered territories:

> "Neither private, nor ejidal, nor communal, nor federal, nor state, nor business, nor anything. A non-ownership of land. As they say: "land without papers". So, in those lands that are going to be defined, if they ask who owns that land or who is the owner, the answer will be: "nobody's", that is, they are "common"." (El Capitán 2023)

According to Hardt's (2010) analysis of Marx's *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, "the common in communism" is an alternative to both "the private property of capitalism" and "the public property of socialism" against accumulation by dispossession. The common is a form of "immaterial and biopolitical production" (Hardt and Negri 2009) inherent to contemporary capitalism that holds within its autonomy both the risk of being exploited and controlled but also the potential for its own liberation. Autonomist marxisms, particularly Italian *operaismo* and *autonomia* (Negri 1979; Hardt and Negri 2000; De Angelis 2017), have conceptualized "the common"[12] as an autonomous sphere of social cooperation emerging from within and against capitalism. These traditions share historical and political continuities with the emergence of Zapatista-inspired movements. In Italy, contemporary autonomous social movements have developed through both the inheritance of 1970s workerism as well as profoundly impacted by the Zapatista uprising. Many of the early collectives that organized solidarity with the EZLN stemmed from this political milieu, merging the legacy of autonomism with the practices and imaginaries of indigenous rebellion. Zapatista thought articulates its own understanding of *lo común* as a living, situated practice rooted in everyday forms of resistance and collective organization. Zapatista men and women constantly remind us that they have not found *lo común* "in a book or a manual," but in the memory of their communities and in the shared and slow process of autonomy itself. The willingness to be subjects (and not only objects) of history is often claimed by the Zapatistas and applied to political action, recognizing the subversive potential of subaltern movements that historically have not been recognized as classical subjects of revolution. This recognition is linked to the destruction of private property in all its forms: also in a sense of exclusive (and colonial) ownership of the means to achieve change.

When building autonomy within their territories, Zapatista men and women strive to progressively implement the non-property as a clear opposition to "those who treat us as foreigners in our own land and demand papers and obedience to a law whose existence and fairness we ignore" (Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos 1994). However, when it comes to exporting coffee, the level of autonomy needs to be constantly negotiated, operating in a gray zone that reshapes political subjectivities, influencing both local and global perspectives of change. Recognizing these complexities allows us to rethink the relationship between informal economies and political resistance, revealing that informal economic practices do not fit neatly into categories of either resistance or compliance. Rather than viewing informality merely as a workaround to

[12] For further discussions on the common within Latin American frameworks, see Rivera Cusicanqui (2018) and Gutiérrez Aguilar (2017), who grounded it in concrete experiences of indigenous and popular autonomy. My use of the term, however, draws primarily on Zapatista critical thought rather than from theoretical elaborations external to their struggle.

state repression, it should be understood as an organized and active strategy to build economic alternatives that are relational and strive to undermine neoliberal logics from within, beyond, and against the state – simultaneously – where autonomy and informality are both forms of prefiguration and resistance.

When I asked representatives of Zapatista authorities what the term dignity meant to them, they invited me to share a bowl of beans and sleep on their beds made of wooden planks. Dignity is not something they could explain with words; it had to be experienced to be understood. In this anti-systemic scenario, alternative economic practices are permeated by a human dimension that is deeply politicized. Before an Italian association financed the construction of dormitories, Zapatista coffee producers used to sleep alongside the coffee in a warehouse they call *casa de todos* (house of all). They didn't separate life from work: building economic and political alternatives is part of an everyday fight to enact a *different possible world* that already exists in the embodied slow construction of autonomy. Not without contradictions, nor totally bypassing the state, the commercial ethics behind Zapatista coffee exchange openly challenge hegemonic powers by investing economic relations of social and political significance. In the era of *cognitive capitalism* (Moulier-Boutang 2007), resistance is not confined to traditional labor struggles but encompasses the humanization of everyday activities – economic or otherwise – as a form of anticapitalist fight embedded in social life. From communal work to informal trade, the Zapatista experience challenges the pervasive reach of the *social factory* (Negri 1979) through the "political activation of relationality" (Escobar 2015), creating autonomous spaces where social relations are continuously redefined against capitalist logics.

The political subject of the Zapatista struggle is heterogeneous: the Zapatistas name it *igualdad en la diferencia* (equality in difference), identifying in *the ones from below* the subjects of oppression, then adding *to the left* to name the subjects of resistance. They never gave up advocating for a structural change, showing a deep awareness of neoliberalism's ability to subsume postmodern, uncoordinated forms of resistance. Developing a radical thought from the slow, embodied experience of indigenous communities, the Zapatista fight allows us to overcome dualistic representations between Western rationalized and politicized modernity opposed to powerless Rousseaunian societies. Autonomy became the new paradigm to aspire to, the new synonym of revolution for a multitude of rebel experiences beyond borders and the color of their flags. Zapatista men and women created something radically new stemming from the daily struggles of indigenous communities that were able to hold together (without making it seem incompatible) prefigurative politics, revolutionary imaginaries, everyday acts of resistance, and the creation of alternatives slowly undermining capitalist hegemony.

> And if there's no crack, well, we'll make it by scratching, biting, kicking, hitting with our hands and head, with our entire body until we manage to create in history the wound that we are. (SupGaleano 2015)

Conceptualizing informality as a form of resistance practiced by organized anti-systemic movements disrupts the eternal dualism between social movement studies looking at collective initiatives and resistance studies with their focus on subtle

and uncoordinated subaltern experiences. It accounts for emic epistemologies and practices that do not conceive organized political action as separate from everyday life and personal biographies. Inextricably embedded in social lives, these forms of resistance must be framed as an everyday collective practice to be understood. Reframing informality through the lens of Zapatista autonomy, these economic practices appear far from monolithic: they include micropolitical forms of survival and organized, politically engaged practices that shape collective subjectivities and transnational hopes for change. Autonomy itself is not a fixed or absolute condition, but a relational and negotiated process through which communities subtly reconfigure neoliberal logics while cultivating alternative social and economic systems that are already in the making. Beyond neocolonial approaches and postmodern drifts, collective action is not intended as a homogenizing *mass* process but as a common *social* and evolving effort to organize and develop *tactics* (De Certeau 1990) to escape and *crack* (Holloway 2010) or *hack* (Rovira Sancho 2009) capitalism.

Collective organization within Zapatista communities is deeply rooted in assembly decision-making processes, embedded in community rationales, and invested in subversive political significance. The paradox that studies on *infrapolitics* still need to overcome is the dichotomy generating the otherness of the *weaks*. Decolonizing the *weapons* to achieve change should give political subjects the freedom to self-define their forms of resistance, the ingredients of their mobilizations, and acknowledge their ability to inspire and shape other struggles. Whether they end up being silent or loud, changing the world through armed insurrection or creative joy (or both), their transformative potential lies in the art of thinking and acting against the state, creating networked spaces for transnational alliances with radically diverse experiences. Working collectively and raising critical (class) consciousness *from below and to the left* is not just an old Marxist inheritance, but a *sine qua non* condition for the survival of peoples in movement fighting together for humanity against capitalist wars and crises.

Beyond hierarchizations of political action, I argue that recognizing the political dimension of "micro-resistances generating micro-freedoms, mobilizing unexpected resources, hidden among ordinary people" (De Certeau 1990, XIII) doesn't need to prevent us from studying how they build alliances, foster collective organization, and broaden their subversive potential. Decolonizing political action is not about giving back power to powerless societies: it is about understanding how they fight hegemonic powers and what they conceive and create instead from the *zone of non-being* (Fanon 1952 in Zibechi 2024). To transcend the opposition between silent and loud resistance, everyday practices must be articulated simultaneously with attempts to build political subjectivities and organize collectively. The possibility to overcome dual rationalizations lies in their constant re-articulations and *dialectical combination* beyond the divide between emotional and reasonable political expressions (Smith 2024, 17). Only in this way will we be able to emancipate our studies from reductively equating organized struggles with homogenized mass action and visibility.

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