Chapter Three

Mexico

Challenges and Difficulties of Urban Territories in Resistance

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Autonomy is the political form that communities in resistance have adopted in order to change the world. To illustrate these hypotheses I propose to reconstruct a small segment of the vast urban popular movement in Mexico since 1968, with the understanding that autonomy is a never-ending process: one of comings and goings that are visible not in declarations or programs, but in the traces left by daily life.

The Comunidad Habitacional Acapatzingo is one of the most important urban autonomous experiences in Latin America, for the depth of its construction of community, for its duration, for its vocation of transforming the whole of society, and for its fierce resistance to state power at all levels. I will highlight some aspects that contribute to an understanding of this singular experience—how it came to be what it is, and the paths taken and not taken. In short, I will examine the exhausting uphill climb involved in any autonomous process that seeks to avoid subordination by existing institutions.

Secondly, I offer a brief reconstruction of what the community is and what it does, the daily lives of the families that compose it, their internal and external links, and their modes of organization. Every human collective has its own style and ways of proceeding that distinguish it from others, and while the Acapatzingo community has similarities with other Latin American movements (or, more accurately, it contains features of other movements both rural and urban), some of its style and customs are original, and these constitute its most distinctive features.

Thirdly, I propose to reflect on some general characteristics of "autonomies from below," based on the experience of the Frente Popular Francisco Villa Independiente (FPFVI), with which the Acapatzingo community is affiliated. The main question is how to deepen the construction of autonomy in an era in which state and capital demonstrate a renewed ability to bury autonomous communities through a combination of repression and social programs.

FROM THE OLD TO THE NEW CACIQUISMO

After the student revolt of 1968, popular sectors in Mexico managed to gain a foothold against the domination of the party-state. The acceleration of urban population growth forced the popular sectors to occupy lands on the peripheries of Mexico City and other large cities. In 1952 the capital's metropolitan area had 2.3 million people, of whom 14 percent lived in self-constructed housing. By 1970 the figures were 7.3 million and 47 percent respectively, and by 1990 the area contained 15.7 million people of whom 60 percent, or 9.5 million, lived in self-constructed housing settlements (Gisbert 1997, 104). The Mexico City region grew at a rate that overwhelmed its legal framework and led its inhabitants to create, in effect, a new city: the Distrito Federal, joining the existing capital to adjacent cities whose annual growth rate topped 10 percent in the 1950s (Alonso 1980, 44).

An early characteristic of Mexico City's mid-century urbanization was the appearance of numerous invasions, as in Ajusco in 1948 when migrants decided via an assembly to occupy vacant lands, which were legally granted to them two decades later after further rounds of invasion and conflict (Alonso 1980, 306). In some cases, as in Monterrey in the 1970s, up to 100,000 settlers grouped into twenty-four communities and joined together in the Frente Popular Tierra y Libertad to occupy lands (Castells 1986, 277). The scale of the invasions was a result of massive rural-urban migration and a growing urban housing deficit.

According to Castells (1986), two factors contributed to the new urban movements: the reformism of the Luis Echeverría government (1970–1976), which "came to recognize, to a point, the right to protest at the margins of established channels," and above all the political radicalism of post-1968 students, who "supplied a base upon which to build a new form of autonomous political organization" (275). The first claim is debatable, as the author recognizes, while the second claim needs to be developed. The Echeverría regime's relative permissiveness was based in large part on the Institutional Revolutionary Party's (PRI) past experience of delegating local political leaders (caciques) to control community organizations by offering them the support and recognition of the authorities; therefore, "illegal land invasions

were not in themselves a challenge to the social order" (Castells 1986, 275). Caciquismo was functional for the party-state, legitimating it even in the face of mobilizations. This is one of the central characteristics of the regime, based on the popular and revolutionary roots of the PRI, which could more or less do as it pleased by channeling popular mobilization.

The new revolutionary left arose precisely to contest this elite-directed way of operating, and the first cracks in the political culture were apparent in 1968. Castells (1986, 275) mentions that many students and professionals who supported the October 2 settlement (*campamento*) in Ixtacalco, inhabited by 4,000 people, did not just support them from the outside but came to live among the inhabitants and joined them in a January 1976 confrontation with the police that left many people injured and much of the settlement in flames. This joining of university militants and settlers helps to explain the autonomy that the families claimed against government attempts at co-optation.

This attitude was not just because of the support of the student movement. From the late 1960s onward, "ex-activists of the student movement of 1968, promoters of Christian Base Communities, and militants of the non-party Left" played a key role in fomenting and politicizing the movement (Ramirez 2003, 6). These currents permitted the organization and mobilization of the urban popular sectors, but they were also able to promote local leaders and militants through active training processes as occurred in other Latin American movements (Zibechi 2013a). It is worth noting that this confluence of leftist Christian militancy was also present many years later in the origins of the Zapatista movement.

After a decade of intense mobilization, in which the still-new urban popular movement carried out countless land invasions, demonstrations, and other actions seen as "combative, radical, anti-government and anti-party" (Ramírez 2003, 7), a new era began. Around 1980 several "mass organizations" were created, including the Unión de Colonias Populares del Valle de México, which worked to "coordinate at the regional level" (Moctezuma 1984, 72). These in turn gave rise to national meetings, out of which developed the Coordinador Nacional del Movimiento Popular Urban (CONAMUP) in 1981. This entity, composed of more than 100 organizations from across the country, carried out ambitious national actions such as the National Day Against the Cost of Living in September 1982 and a march of 60,000 people to the Zócalo in Mexico City, as well as forums and political and cultural events, all designed to "forge the unity of the mass movement from below" (Moctezuma 1984, 80). In May 1983 the fourth national meeting laid down the bases for a unity process between the popular movement and the rest of the left, with the goal of promoting a "national day of struggle" in June and a general strike in October.

A political culture with strongly centralist tendencies, dedicated to the construction of the most solidly structured organization possible, coexisted within the movement alongside what Moctezuma (1984, 72) calls an "alternative culture" expressed through bulletins, pamphlets, songs, murals, political caricatures (*calaveras*), and street theater. Meanwhile, women's groups within the organization at all levels emphasized the need to modify social relations through criticism, ideological struggle, collective work, study circles, and festivities.

Several important characteristics of today's urban popular movement were already visible in the early 1980s, even before the 1985 Mexico City earthquake and the 1987 Neighborhoods Assembly. We can see this through the example of one of the most important organizations of the era, the Unión de Colonos, Inquilinos y Solicitantes de Vivienda-Libertad (UCISV-L), associated with the Unión Popular Revolucionaria Emiliano Zapata (UPREZ). This organization, founded in 1987, was linked to the Organización de Izquierda Revolucionaria-Línea de Masas (OIR-LM), one of the most influential currents in the urban popular movement and in CONAMUP. The UPREZ itself contained several neighborhood organizations (Barragán 2010, 95).

The UCISV-L is one of the four organizations whose members settled on the El Molino parcel, which eventually brought together between 3,000 and 5,000 people seeking housing. They were organized into brigades of twenty-five families each, with several brigades forming a group with an elected coordinator (Sánchez 2003, 29). During the first phase they held weekly meetings and assemblies, and staged takeovers of government offices with the active participation of university professors and cadres of the OIR-LM. The brigades were active in the "self-construction" (*autoconstrucción*) of housing, building a total of 1,086 units based on a master plan that the residents, with the guidance of advisers chosen in an open competition, had developed. The integral character of the plan was noteworthy, including a plaza or community space every four blocks "to promote the communication and community life among residents," and kitchens located in the front of each house "so that mothers could see their children playing outside" (Sánchez 2003, 31). The residents took an active role in all aspects of design and planning, in the administration of the construction process, in generating popular enterprises to create employment, and in job training through a "people's school." The UCISV-L developed a fully fledged alternative urban project, based upon environmental sensitivity (including a plastics recycling workshop and drainage works), education (including preschool, adult education, and a library), a strong civic culture component to promote communal harmony and strengthen community traditions, health care (including both conventional and alternative medical centers), small business (for example, producing construction materials for neighborhood housing and clothing de-

sign), a cooperative store and a marketplace, and soccer fields and basketball courts (Ariza and Ramírez 2005, 344–45).

In the late 1990s the UCISV-L began to weaken, although the origins of this process can be found a decade earlier in the crisis of the PRI on a national level and the development of a convergence among the electoral left, led by Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas and the Frente Democrático Nacional in a four-party alliance, along with splinter groups from the PRI and independents who came together to participate in the 1988 election. As Barragán (2010, 78) observes, by the time of the 1988 federal elections a popular movement that had already spent ten or more years in nonelectoral struggle, arguably without much to show for it, faced a difficult and contentious decision. By 1990, according to Barragán (2010, 79), "we are left with a movement whose struggle would take place alongside political parties," namely the four member parties of the FDN. In her analysis, this quickly led to "the disappearance of the ideas and practices of people power," based on assemblies and land invasions, in favor of the pursuit of housing within the idiom of political and citizenship rights, "based on negotiations between a leader and state institutions via a political party" (Barragán 2010, 83). Hierarchies returned, and opportunities for ordinary people to exercise power within the movement were closed off. In short, the old political culture of subordination to the PRI returned, this time as subordination to the parties of the National Democratic Front (FDN); the letters changed, but the essence was largely the same.

The movement of so many people into positions in the state bureaucracy or to elective posts deprived the movement of its leadership (Ariza and Ramírez 2005, 347). This institutional insertion took place in a context of antagonistic party currents within the UCISV-L, all of which "wanted to keep their ties to politicians and officials in order to obtain resources for their group, without regard for the others" (Ramírez 2003, 37). As immediate and factional interests took precedence over longer-term collective interests, the organization fragmented and the community disintegrated. The loss of organization built up through long processes of struggle and resistance, and the rise of a political culture of corruption and individualism, became irreversible tendencies.

In 1989, as most of the urban popular movement was being integrated (with fatal consequences) into party and government institutions, the Frente Popular Francisco Villa (FPFV) was founded through a long process of land invasions, violent expulsions, and extensive debates in Ajusco, the southernmost and highest zone of Mexico City. It was born in the university through the Frente Estudiantil Revolucionario y Popular, and from the militants of the Cooperativo Allepetlalli in El Molino (a 1985 land invasion), which was itself a confluence of various experiences ranging from anthropology and political science students of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) to leaders and members of CONAMUP-affiliated housing coopera-

tives and residents of irregular settlements and popular *colonias*, coming from diverse left traditions. Within a few years FPFV became the largest urban popular organization in the capital. In 1996 its congress defined the FPFV as a "broad organization of the masses" focused on land and housing, but also on "the organization of production and consumption" in its territories (FPFV 1996). The group defended a "proletarian morality" based on principles of collectivism and mutual aid between comrades, labor, and study discipline, and "ideological, political, and organic independence with respect to the State and its parties."

The FPFV had strong support from as many as 10,000 taxi drivers (Los Panteras), street and other informal merchants, and operators of market stalls (Sánchez, 2003). But at the fourth congress in 1997, a motion was presented to support Cárdenas as governor of the capital district in the first popular election for that post in Mexican history. The majority voted to set aside their policy of abstaining from elections in favor of a "strategic and conjunctural political alliance" with the candidate's PRD (Sánchez, 2003), while the dissident minority withdrew and took the name of "Independent" (FPFVI, Frente Popular Francisco Villa Independiente).

THE SLOW CONSTRUCTION OF A NEW POLITICAL CULTURE

The 1997 election season followed the same script as in 1988: everything built up over years of hard struggle at the base level was squandered on a candidate and his slogans. I would suggest that the urban popular movement is facing a challenge that can only be overcome by a new political culture that can displace the hegemonic institutional one. (Although it is not the topic of this chapter, it is worth considering the Zapatista rejection of the 2006 presidential campaign of Andrés Manuel López Obrador—an attitude judged "intransigent" by many leftists—in the light of these two negative experiences.) The schism in the FPFV was brought about by militants who after years of struggle saw the electoral option offering "the possibility to grow and widen the social base of the FPFV . . . without losing sight of its strategic objectives, its identity as an organization, and its struggle to defend popular causes" (Sánchez, 2003).

Mexican political culture has proved more resistant to change than the protesters of 1968 imagined, especially those who survived the Tlatelolco massacre and subsequent despair to continue their efforts to change the world.

> Mexico's urban popular sectors have always been well organized at the community level, and this organization has served two important functions: it has permitted them to exercise pressure in favor of their demands to remain on the lands they have occupied and to obtain basic services, and it has represented a

> fundamental channel of political participation subordinated to the PRI. Both
> aspects have been, in the end, complementary, and local leaders [caciques]
> have been agents of this process. (Castells 1986, 275)

The greatest challenge to this political culture is the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) and its over 1,000 Zapatista communities. In the urban setting the FPFVI, with its 596 families and 8 settlements, is working to overcome the old culture through the creation of autonomous "communities in resistance" on the periphery of one of the world's largest cities. The members are the inheritors of a tradition of urban struggle described above, enriched by the experience of the EZLN as well as by popular organizations in other countries (Lao and Flavia 2009).

The land on which the Acapatzingo-La Polvorilla community was built, in Iztapalapa to the east of Mexico City, was progressively occupied in 1994 by expelling the intermediaries who profited through land speculation. The settlers bought the land in 1998 with a credit from the Instituto de Vivienda del Distrito Federal (INVI) and began to build houses in 2000 (Lao and Flavia 2009; Zibechi 2009). The group was composed of families who arrived from other land invasions like El Molino, or from failed attempts like Puente Blanco. They first built temporary housing for the homeless, and once these were completed they built permanent single-family units that were distributed to families.

The houses of members of a brigade (the base-level unit) are contiguous and are all painted the same color. Temporary housing is maintained to house other families who are in the process of occupying land and building communities elsewhere. In this sense Acapatzingo is a school for the movement as a whole. In mid-2013 the community had two seedling nurseries growing food crops, a community radio station run by teenagers, recreational spaces including a skating rink and bicycling area for children and the elderly, two basketball courts, and an open-air theater. A health clinic and schools (preschool, primary, and secondary) are under construction. A vigilance commission, staffed on a rotating basis by all of the residents, regulates entry to the community and police may not enter except by permission of the community, and must be unarmed.

The construction of the community was a long process in which cultural and subjective factors played a more important role than physical constraints—a barren landscape was radically transformed into a beautiful neighborhood and community. The inhabitants describe the process this way:

> We came together bit by bit, like raindrops forming a river; we walked together in struggle and solidarity, we faced and overcame our fears to take on the bureaucracy, official negligence, the State. . . . We developed our arms, mobilization was fundamental in reaching our objectives, while at the same time we developed our own culture, and we continue to build it, a community culture,

one of life and not death, and we strengthen it with our patrolling, our work
details, with our radio station and with our cultural project. (FPFVI-UNOPII
2009c)

Through this brief description, highlighting the two central ideas of commu-
nity and culture, I want to reconstruct what I consider to be decisive aspects
in the formation of this *autonomous community in resistance*: the change in
subjectivities, the internal organization, and the understandings that made
possible the community life (*convivencia*) of the families making up the
community. I assume that these three aspects are intimately linked, and I
separate them only so they can be analyzed in greater depth. My goal is to
understand *how* community can be created out of the sum of a large number
of individuals.

Subjectivities were modified over a long process of internal and external
interactions, particularly those critical moments of repression and division
that showed participants who they (collectively) were, what they did and did
not want to be, and with whom they could and should work. A beautiful
semi-internal document details this process, emphasizing the "arrests of our
leaders, [and] the rupture with those who were previously our comrades but
who betrayed the principles of our organization by becoming elected offi-
cials, and those who decided to go with them because it would get them out
of working" (FPFVI-UNOPII 2009b).

Repression and betrayals generated "disenchantment" but also isolation
and impotence, as those left behind had to carry on in worse conditions. They
speak of their pain at those who died in the struggle, but also of "broken
marriages, children who have left," and the enormous collective effort of
working ten-hour days in badly paid and precarious jobs to earn a living. This
shared pain is one of the bases of community creation: as Antonio Negri
(2003, 161) has written, "all great collective subjects are formed through
pain."

The members of FPFVI and the Acapatzingo community note that the
pain of separation, of repression, and of hard work "purified us, leaving
behind the best, the most combative, the real comrades" (FPFVI-UNOPII,
2009b). Without this purification there could be no internal growth, and
without the betrayals and deaths they would not have reached their current
stage. It should be recalled that over 100,000 families took part in the Mexico
City urban popular movement in the 1970s, and that the 1988 front brought
together 10,000 families, while the FPFVI consists of only a thousand fami-
lies. The rest were lost along the way—they were dispersed, or they joined
the system and lost their autonomy. This is part of the learning process, the
lesson being that under the current Mexican political system, "only pain
constitutes consciousness" (Negri 2003, 184).

A change in subjectivity is produced when people begin to be able to overcome "their own fears, fight the traumas imbued in us from childhood, and break with egoism and apathy" (FPFVI-UNOPII 2008b). This interior project is "individual in collective," in other words neither one nor the other; it breaks the individual/collective polarity, conserving the concepts but dissolving their opposition. This is evident in land occupations and in the meetings converted into open-air schools, where "assemblies, marches, patrols, and work details become a collectivity, an expression of concern for one another" (FPFVI-UNOPII 2006). In short, *I am to the extent that I share with others. I do not exist in isolation, and it is only through others that my individuality can grow and be affirmed*.

As Eric Hobsbawm (1995, 308) noted about early twentieth-century workers, the fundamental element of their lives was "the collectivity, the dominance of 'we' over 'I,'" because they understood that people like themselves could only improve their situation through collective rather than individual action, to the point where "life was, in its most pleasant aspects, a collective experience." This explains why individual escapes are described as "treason," a broad term applied within the FPFVI to those who collaborate with the police, abandon the community in favor of an individual path, join wider elected institutions, or seek the patronage of outside politicians. Any of these steps typically bring a more comfortable life, similar to the lives of outright enemies of the communities in resistance.

This noteworthy change in the subjectivity observed in members of the urban movement has roots in the "natural" communitarian nature of Mexican *colonias*. The FPFVI has rescued this orientation from the risks of the market, the political parties, and the patriarchy. The subject of the changes already exists, which is the community culture itself; the task is "merely" to safeguard it, expand it, and liberate it from "prejudices and traumas" such as racism and domestic violence, which "can be defeated by prevention and by community care" (FPFVI-UNOPII, 2006).

The organization of the front itself is oriented toward the tasks of rescuing and strengthening community. The base is always the same: the brigades of twenty-five families each, whether at established sites like Acapatzingo or at the most recent occupations and settlements. Each brigade determines the leadership of its "commissions," which are typically press, culture, vigilance, and maintenance. Acapatzingo has twenty-eight brigades, while other settlements have different numbers according to the number of families. The commissions in turn name representatives to the general council of the settlements, where the brigades are brought together.

Enrique Reynoso explains that the idea behind the brigades is to create centers "where people can generate a link, while the commissions are two-way transmission paths between the organization and the families," so as to improve the work of everyone (Zibechi 2009). At the brigade level there is

both the time and the interpersonal confidence required to deepen discussions, for instance about whether to ally with the Zapatista Otra Campaña, and the results of these brigade-level discussions are brought to a general assembly of the whole settlement (monthly for Acapatzingo, weekly in some others) as the highest decision-making body.

It is important to look more closely at what happens at the brigade level, which is not only the basic unit of the organization but also of the community. Each family has one vote at brigade meetings, where the overall rules of the settlement are debated and revised until all brigades are in agreement. The brigade also handles conflicts, including domestic ones, and if the conflict is severe it can ask for intervention by the settlement's vigilance commission or general council. Each brigade takes charge of the settlement's security for one day per month, but the notion of security or vigilance is not the traditional one of control but rather of community self-protection, with a strong educational aspect. "The vigilance commission can't be the settlement's police force," explains Reynoso, "because we would just be repeating the power of the state" (Zibechi 2009).

The vigilance commission also has the assignment of marking off the borders, and determining who can and cannot enter. This is perhaps the most important aspect of community autonomy, which implies a physical and political differentiation between inside and outside. This is how living organisms function, by creating a perimeter within which interactions occur that permit many to function as one (Maturana and Varela 1995). This is the same "closure" that operates in Zapatista communities, permitting social links to develop differently within the perimeter to give the community its distinctive characteristics. But it is not a closed system—it has multiple links to the outside. The Acapatzingo community works intensively with its surrounding neighborhoods, training them in the creation of base-level committees and community security; they also provide advice about how to respond to evictions, which the recipients repay in food. They have made presentations in surrounding schools about student safety, and neighboring merchants even advertise on the community radio station. "We are seeking a utopia that is not an island, but rather an open space that can have a contagious effect on society," explains Reynoso (Zibechi 2009). Other settlements, almost all in the Pantitlán area, work with surrounding neighborhoods in planning Carnival and other festivities that transcend community borders.

Since their participation in the Zapatista Otra Campaña, the FPFVI's members have been spearheading the organization of minibus operators displaced by the expansion of Mexico City's Metro, but also of the informal venders who work within the Metro trains and stations. They have organized ten alternative transportation routes and three vendor organizations with 3,000 members each, as well as artisans and shoe-shiners, all joined in the Alianza Mexicana de Organizaciones Sociales (AMOS), based in the eastern

part of the city with some 15,000 members. FPFVI members also participate in the Red de Resistencias Autónomas Anticapitalistas along with a dozen other organizations from throughout Mexico.

One of the central tasks of this organization, perhaps the most central, is to include education and training as part of an overall alternative cultural project. Through its twenty years of history the FPFVI has enjoyed the support of university students and professionals who have led its cultural work. In the early stages of the El Molino community, the Huasipungo cooperative proposed a "pedagogical center" to train preschool teachers with the agreement of the teachers' union, since there were few schools in the area and children from the community faced discrimination. Along with movie screenings, block printing workshops, and the encouragement of sports, these initiatives were the precursor of what would later become a "cultural project."

In 1999, two years after the division that gave rise to the "independent" FPFVI, the organization established a relationship with striking students at the Psychology and Exact Sciences faculties of the National University, with professors and students of the Pedagogical University and with musical and cultural groups during the construction of the La Polvorilla community. Acapatzingo's culture commission channeled these links into initiatives such as the book club, a center for early education, and literacy campaigns (FPFVI-UNOPII, 2008b).

At its third congress the FPFVI resolved that "one of the priorities of the organization is to develop a cultural project . . . in order to generate the conditions for change and transformation in society" (FPFVI-UNOPII 2008b, 4). In its first stage the center for early education worked with single mothers, the Centro Pedagógico para el Desarrollo Integral de las Inteligencias provided study help, university students created "Saturday sessions" to develop the creativity of children, and a community loudspeaker "radio" was started, in addition to a movie club and adult literacy classes.

During the second stage the work was reoriented along three axes: science, culture, and political training. The goal was to "work for the construction of our own educational system, all the way from preschool through high school, . . . that would affirm the organization as a way of life and as the only way to face the system of exploitation" (FPFVI-UNOPII 2008b, 5–6). Several initiatives arose in parallel: a space for young people, initially called "youth assemblies"; events about sexuality, drug addiction, gangs, domestic violence, and other topics: as well as workshops on producing clothing, videos, and musical instruments. A group of psychologists was created to work with cooperative members to build a less alienating lifestyle. According to the psychologists, their work with the community

has taught us, and has developed within us, a very different notion of society than what we practice in other settings. It is a psychology that does not try to adapt the person to society as it is, but rather strengthens and supports the person to develop the ability to transform society into the society we need. (FPFVI-UNOPII 2008b, 7)

In subsequent years they established relationships with more collectives, such as Jóvenes en Resistencia Alternativa and Brigada Callejera, which enriched their cultural and political work. In October 2012 they held the first "meeting of commissions" with the theme of "Capitalism, Autonomy, Socialism" in Acapatzingo. In general, all of the initiatives work on the basis of methods and criteria spread by popular education: collective self-training with facilitators, roundtables to encourage participation, flip charts to record points of agreement and discussion, discussions based on daily experiences, the awakening of the critical spirit, and understanding reality in order to transform it, among others.

Another important question has been the overall community rules (*reglamento*). By way of example we will examine the *reglamento* of the Centauro del Norte settlement, which was established on land occupied in 2007 in the Pantitlán area. There are around fifty families in temporary housing in rows with a central path, differentiated by color as they are all part of a single brigade. The houses are rudimentary but solid, with permanent walls and roofs, and concrete floors. The settlement is characterized by cleanliness and order, with an overall climate of dignity and spatial organization, including a children's play area. There are several emergency alarms, and designated assembly points in case the alarms sound.

The general *reglamento*, which is very similar to that of other settlements, is twelve pages long and was approved by all residents. The community, according to the text, seeks to provide a housing alternative for families who lack it, and who "agree to break with individualist habits and practices" to construct a collective project toward "the construction of Popular Power" (FPFVI-UNOPII 2009a, 2). Attendance at assemblies is mandatory, and repeated absence can be cause for expulsion from the settlement. The assembly created four commissions: maintenance (in charge of collective work), vigilance, culture, and health. The final commission works on preventive mental and physical health, attention to the chronically ill, and nutrition and vaccination campaigns.

The *reglamento* strictly governs matters of *convivencia* or community life: it prohibits physical or psychological abuse and the playing of loud music, and it calls for conflict between neighbors to be solved through dialogue while providing that the vigilance commission can intervene in grave cases. When there is an act of physical violence, "the aggressor must cover the costs for care and recovery of the victim," and is also subject to tempo-

rary or permanent removal. Robbery or theft leads to removal regardless of the amount stolen, and the culprit's entire family may be removed as well (FPFVI-UNOPII 2009a, 6–7). On the nonpunitive side, the *reglamento* provides for play areas and the creation of children's assemblies and commissions with adult support. Common areas must be kept clean and free of drugs and alcohol. The calendar and timing of patrols is strictly regulated, and collective workdays are obligatory when decided by the assembly or commissions.

In the Centauro del Norte settlement one observes that the most active residents are women, who show off the community to visitors with pride, including the health centers and library, and who explain the work of the commissions in detail. Children, starting at age ten, are willing to participate in collective activities. Each settlement has a space for assemblies that often functions as a dining hall. In all of the settlements I visited, I asked what they did about domestic violence, and they all said the same thing: the aggressor has to leave the community for whatever duration the victim requests, from weeks up to three months, "to think about it." He can only return when the victim accepts him, and the community provides emotional support to the family.

In some settlements there are prominent billboards with the names of persons not permitted to enter. In Acapatzingo the residents say that when there is any domestic violence the children come out into the streets with their whistles, the practice used by the community in the event of emergency. The overall peacefulness is such that even in the most populated settlements like Acapatzingo, with 3,000 residents, it is common to see children playing alone with total confidence, in a safe space protected by the community.

AUTONOMY AND COMMUNITY: THE NEW WORLD

The experience of the Acapatzingo community and those of the FPFVI show us that urban communities can be created even in the face of enormous difficulties and the "structural obstacle" represented by their members' dependence upon precarious employment (Pineda 2013, 58). It also shows us that the world does not change thanks to large-scale demonstrations on the major boulevards, but rather on a small scale and at the margins of the system: "The great transformations do not start from above, or with epic and monumental acts, but rather from small movements that appear irrelevant to the politician and pundit up above" (Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos 2007).

Societies change from daily local practice, in defined autonomous spaces, because autonomy is the perimeter that protects counterhegemonic practices. Autonomy is the means by which other worlds can exist, worlds that need

protection by virtue of being different. When and how these practices and ways of life might expand is impossible to predict, much less determine and direct. Militants can push the world toward a certain state of affairs in a certain space, but they cannot—and should not—try to design "from on high" a new reality.

In order to survive, subalterns (*los de abajo*) need to strengthen their ties to others like them, strong ties that can demonstrate resistance and resilience. Along the way they create diverse forms of community that generally are made up of groups of families with some stability and permanence. They see themselves and are seen by others as communities, in the widest sense of the word. They live in a defined physical space, their territory, typically on urban peripheries but sometimes not. Regardless, they are always in marginal spaces from the perspective of capital accumulation, spaces that have been subjected to environmental or physical degradation.

By "community" we mean practices, ways of working and living, of producing and reproducing, that take place in spaces, modes, and times for decision making and with the mechanisms to make sure those decisions are respected. In other words, the community is also a form of power, unique in that it is neither state nor hierarchical. Among the practices that make community are *reciprocity*, which differs from solidarity in that it is based not on a subject-object relationship but rather on the plurality of subjects; and *siblinghood* (*hermandad*), which is based on an integral material and spiritual bond that is one of the horizontal forms of community.

The practices that make community are based upon the assembly, which takes decisions and determines the order and rotation of tasks and the control of assigned tasks by the members, through the seven principles of "servant leadership" as synthesized by the Zapatistas: serving others rather than oneself, representing rather than superseding, constructing and not destroying, obeying and not dictating, proposing and not imposing, convincing and not vanquishing, and self-abasement rather than putting on airs (*bajar y no subir*). This series of practices indicates that the community is not an institution or an organization, but rather a way of working, based on collective work and agreement.

Collective work is a key piece, even the heart, of the community, and as the Zapatistas note, it is the motor of the community's autonomy. Community is not just collective property—it must be sustained by permanent and constant activity that modifies the habits and inertia of individualism and egocentrism. In those societies that were based on collective or state ownership of the means of production but not based on collectively organized work projects, the result was the reproduction of the values and culture of the capitalist system.

The Western view of community is based on collective property, even in Marx. In his correspondence with the Russian populist Vera Zasulich about

the rural commune, Marx wrote that its fundamental characteristic was "the common ownership of land," and therefore of the product (Marx 1980, 40). Collective property certainly plays an important role in the existence of community, but to grant it sole importance is an economistic oversimplification. Seeing the community as practices—of production, of health, of education, and so forth—opens up the concept rather than closes it off as merely a type of property.

One of the central aspects of these practices is collective labor dedicated to producing, empowering, and protecting the common goods of the community. We have previously noted the vigilance patrols as one form of collective work in Acapatzingo, but there are others, including public works (streets and storm drains). These projects are the result of long debates in the assemblies, which take all the time necessary to reach agreement by consensus rather than by majority vote. Agreement carries with it the recognition that the community has the power to carry out its decisions, but this coercion is unlike the state's coercion because it is not exercised by a specialized body that stands apart from the community (bureaucracy), but by the community itself. The *reglamento* plays a double role: it represents both agreement and the mechanisms of implementation.

Communities, with their territorial basis, are necessarily under siege by the system, by the state and capital, which need to impose their order on all spaces and to impose their laws on all persons. Faced with this, communities can choose to submit to the state-capital order, or seek to resist outside that order. If they choose the latter, they become communities and territories in resistance. To affirm their characteristics and to defend themselves against attempts to subjugate them, they must affirm themselves as autonomous, that is to say self-governing, spaces.

Can we speak of autonomy, concretely in the case of Acapatzingo, when the land was purchased with a thirty-year loan from a government agency that also financed the design of the settlement and the construction of the houses? In political and academic circles there is one understanding of autonomy that precludes any contact with the state, but I wish to outline several reasons why a nonsubordinate relationship to the state (including loans, or donations of construction materials) need not undermine autonomy.

First, in cases like this, the state is responding to social and collective pressure from the movements themselves. The movements demand and the state concedes, to use the state's own language, loans or materials or technical assistance. Second, the construction of Acapatzingo was the product of years of negotiation and pressure that permitted construction on twice the area originally approved by the state, thanks to family and community labor. Something similar took place with the construction of water and sewer lines, for which the community provided labor and the state provided materials.

This was, then, a relationship between two powers, neither of which was subjugated by the other.

Third, the Acapatzingo community was able to discuss its own project with the state's technicians, proposing solutions to break bureaucratic impasses set by the government's policies and practices. This debate and exchange with the technicians is a key point, since in many experiences of cooperative housing construction in Latin America the technical and "professional" issues are left outside the control of communities (Programa Regional de Vivienda y Hábitat, 2012). Lastly, it is important to note that although community is not synonymous with autonomy, the existence of solid, active organizations, with rotation of tasks and spaces of a communal character, typically strengthens and empowers the autonomous action of collective subjects. In this sense, community life is itself a skill that can improve the life of its members by giving them knowledge and capacity that they previously did not have.

To be sure, as in all human organizations, in the communities there is oppression. In communities in resistance, whether rural like the Zapatistas or urban like Acapatzingo, oppression is not hidden: it is out in the open, and can be addressed, particularly in the case of generational and gender oppression that impacts young people and women. In many activities in which I participated, I could see that women spoke up in discussions three or four times more than men, something that distinguishes Acapatzingo even from other urban communities in resistance, where men usually are the ones who speak even when the majority of inhabitants are female.

While there is a strong gender division of labor in the community, many jobs that in capitalist society are solely female are part of the collective work set out in the *reglamento*, so while women may be in the majority, they are not the sole participants. This is the case, for example, for cleaning and maintenance, for gardens, and for health and education. These activities are not considered inferior to salaried or "productive" work. The community has some ability to regulate and intervene in family matters and in situations of domestic violence. Reproductive work is not devalued or made invisible.

Urban communities have their limits and problems. They are framed by urban life, the nucleus of the power of the dominant classes, of the repressive apparatus of the state, of the mafias, and of consumer culture. They cannot secure their subsistence without joining the outside labor market, since they lack sufficient land for self-sufficiency in food. On the other hand, they can more readily establish alliances with health and education professionals, as the FPFVI communities have done.

The most significant critique comes from those who downplay local experiences as insufficient to resolve the problems of humanity. David Harvey (2012, 184), for instance, recently launched a harsh attack on radical democracy and horizontality as concepts that "can function well in small groups but

which cannot be applied at the scale of a metropolitan area, not to mention the seven billion people who currently inhabit the planet." In my view, this position has two major problems, one regarding the construction of the subject, and the second regarding the kind of transition that is imagined and promoted.

Academics typically refer to subjects, or to antisystem movements, in very general terms, without taking into account that these actors can only take shape in concrete spaces and in concrete relations, in other words, in spatial and temporal settings relatively controlled by subalterns. In other eras these settings were, at least in cities, the factory, the tavern, the neighborhood, the church, or the university. The system has sought to destroy these settings, whether by repression or by commodification. In the current reality of capitalism, people who would participate in movements must create settings in which to relate and rediscover (starting with themselves), to exchange experiences, and to construct a collective subject through community radio stations, cultural and interest groups, even the community gardens that Harvey (2013) mocks—in short, in any space that is born in opposition to the dominant culture. Militants are not formed by reading classic or even current authors—although that reading can be useful at a later stage—but by doing and sharing.

The second question is about how the transition to a different world should occur. If we imagine a transition that can take charge of common goods on a global scale, we are thinking of a state-directed transition that changes things from the top. This has never happened and it is not a plausible future; in any event, it is just more "Enlightenment" Eurocentric thinking. It seems necessary to reflect on other transitions, such as the movement from feudalism to capitalism, a transition that took many centuries and was not directed but rather chaotic, not linear but progressive, and full of uprisings, insurrections, and revolutions.

We are going through the final phase of the world system, and of U.S. domination, and all the evidence—including environmental—suggests that it will be a disordered transition, one that will take the form of disintegration. This will be painful, but it can create the conditions for reconstruction on new foundations (Wallerstein 1998). In this reconstruction, urban and rural communities in resistance will play a relevant role, and can serve as a decisive point of reference for the society of the future. Something like this has happened several times before in history. To get to this new world, we should work to deepen, improve, and expand the handful of truly autonomous communities.

NOTE

The chapter was translated by Richard Stoller.