

**“Indian Autonomy in Mexico: Alternative Nationalisms and the Politics of Difference”**  
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The politics of identity are often portrayed in the literature as the politics of difference. Authors frequently draw comparisons between the civil rights movement, which was based on demands for a uniform basket of goods for all, and contemporary movements organized around identity politics, which demand to be recognized as different and accorded differential rights based on that difference. Authors have viewed new social movements (NSMs) as based on a politics of difference since, in Western Europe, citizens are already guaranteed access to citizenship rights. In Latin America, however, citizenship rights, while guaranteed by law, are not accessible to the majority of citizens. The EZLN movement,<sup>1</sup> unlike NSMs in North America and Western Europe, demand both citizenship rights (i.e., access to a uniform basket of goods) and differential rights based on historic claims as original inhabitants. Some authors have characterized the EZLN and the national Indian movement's strategy as one of ethnic citizenship (de la Peña 1996; Harvey 1996). An example illustrating this strategy of ethnic citizenship is the autonomy projects proposed by the National Indian Congress (Congreso Nacional Indígena, CNI), which I discuss at length in the first section of this paper.<sup>2</sup>

Since 1994, national Indian movement leaders have proposed two principal autonomy projects. The first proposal, the Autonomous Multi-ethnic Regional project (RAP) is based on the notion that different ethnic groups, with historical claims to the land they inhabit, would live together under regional governments. These regional governments would manage the region's resources, land tenure rights, the distribution of governmental credits, the location and supervision of health care facilities, and the development of school curricula. The RAP proposal recommends political and administrative decentralization and proposes the creation of a fourth level of government.<sup>3</sup> RAP proponents insist that their demands for autonomy be understood within the wider national context of social movements demanding democracy and the transformation of the state (Sierra 1995: 244).<sup>4</sup> RAP proponents insist that Indians have maintained certain customs and practices, not because of anything essential or inherent in Indian cultures, but because they have struggled against historic discrimination and exploitation and have lived largely self-sufficiently on the

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<sup>1</sup> On January 1, 1994, a group of Indian men and women from several regions of Chiapas, calling themselves the Emiliano Zapata National Liberation Army (EZLN), briefly took over and occupied four municipal capitals in the state: San Cristóbal de las Casas, Altamirano, Las Margaritas, and Ocosingo. Of the EZLN's thirty-four demands presented to the government in February, 1994, the following referred specifically to indigenous peoples: the creation of an independent indigenous radio station; compulsory indigenous language training from primary through university education; respect for indigenous culture and tradition; ending discrimination against indigenous people; indigenous autonomy; administration of their own courts by indigenous communities; the criminalization of forced expulsion from communities by government-backed caciques and measures to allow the expelled to safely return; and, finally, maternity clinics, day-care centers, nutritious food, kitchens, dining facilities, nixtamal and tortilla mills and training programs for indigenous women (Harvey 1996: 18). On gender equality, the EZLN's first public declaration of demands made in January, 1994, included a Revolutionary Law for Women (*EZLN Documentos y Comunicados* 1994).

<sup>2</sup> The CNI was officially constituted during a national meeting of Indian organizations in October, 1996, in Mexico City. Since the EZLN uprising in 1994, several national congresses of this sort have been held. The October, 1996, congress consolidated these previous efforts into one, large national organization, which includes EZLN sympathizers as well as older Indian organizations from throughout Mexico.

<sup>3</sup> This proposed fourth level of government would add to the existing three levels of government-- the federal, state, and municipal--currently stipulated by the Mexican Constitution.

<sup>4</sup> Sierra views autonomy projects as falling into two central camps: ethno-nationalist or Indianist. Ethno-nationalists situate their autonomy projects within the broader national context of democratization and state transformation. Indianists, according to Sierra, treat custom, tradition, and customary law as central elements for the building of an alternative political and legal order (Sierra 1995: 244).

margins of the Mexican nation (field notes 1995-96).<sup>5</sup> The second autonomy proposal is based on the idea that Indian identity is best maintained within the structure of the local community. Custom, tradition, and customary law are the central elements for the building of an alternative political and legal order (Sierra 1995: 244).

The EZLN and the national Indian movement are different from traditional citizenship movements in the sense that they reject outright the assimilation model, which was premised on the idea that the fusion of European races and indigenous races would result in a united, mestizo nation. From the founding of the National Indigenist Institute (INI) in 1948 to the late 1970s, the INI's principal mission was to assimilate indigenous peoples. Indian leaders have accused the Mexican state of practicing ethnocide through its assimilation policies. In recent years, Indian peoples have positively asserted their group identity in order to achieve power and participation in dominant institutions. Indian leaders have demanded that the state dismantle the INI and that it transfer the control of these monies to independent Indian organizations. Indian political movements have also promoted a notion of group solidarity against the individualism of liberal humanism. They claim that the notion of group rights does not contradict individual rights, but are rather a complement to them.

Since 1994 and the emergence of the EZLN, Indian movement activists have increased their calls for cultural autonomy. Indians demand respect for Indian languages, the exercise of local uses and customs, and the right to maintain their cultural integrity as communities and regions. Many Indian organizations demand that the state recognize their historical territorial rights over land and the natural resources located on that land. Indian autonomy demands are different from popular autonomy initiatives in that they offer multiple ways in which people can belong to the nation, rather than a singular identity, which in Mexico has been premised upon the mestizo.

Indian demands for autonomy question the synonymy of national unity and centralization, an equation that has a long history in Mexico and in Latin America (Díaz-Polanco 1991). While Indians have made it clear that their project is not a separatist one and that they see their autonomy projects as a contribution to the national debate on democracy, they are firmly asserting their right to maintain their indigenous identity.<sup>6</sup> Proponents of the two principal autonomy projects being discussed in Mexico demand state acknowledgment and respect for difference, while adding to a national debate on citizenship and democracy. Indian politics, I argue, cannot be classified as fitting nicely within either modern or post-modern categories: Indian autonomy demands are couched within the language of nation, self-sovereignty, and citizenship. Yet, Indian politics are also characterized by "post-modern" challenges to the liberal state, such as the idea that a single, unified subject-- the mestizo-- could represent heterogeneous identities and social processes. Advocates of Indian autonomy demand that the state recognize indigenous peoples' exercise of collective rights, yet they also demand that their individual rights enshrined in the Mexican Constitution be protected.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Following Young (1990), I define essentialism as follows: "those who are defined as different are defined as absolutely different. Excluded groups are marked with an essence. Categorical opposition of group essentializes them, repressing the differences between groups" (Young 1990: 170).

<sup>6</sup> Despite the persistence of views by leading intellectuals and politicians that indigenous autonomy is a separatist project, a careful reading of autonomy documents and declarations by advocate organizations does not support this conclusion. The San Andrés accords make it very clear that the accords are situated within the framework of the nation-state and promote national unity. Interestingly, during the International Encounter Against Neo-liberalism and For Humanity, which was convoked by the EZLN and held in Chiapas in July, 1996, many European anarchists and autonomists were shocked at the open demonstrations of Mexican nationalism by the Zapatistas. During the inauguration of the Encounter in Oventic, Chiapas, one of the EZLN comandantes serving as MC introduced participants from the Basque country as "our Spanish compañeros." This was met, not surprisingly, by boos and hisses from these compañeros!

<sup>7</sup> Although it has been common practice in the literature to strictly demarcate the boundaries between positive law and Indian law, scholars have questioned this dichotomization in recent years, arguing that the two systems are a product of interaction and mutual accommodation since the colonial period (see Chenaut and Sierra 1995). It goes without saying, however, that the two systems have never been on equal playing ground, since the constitution is based on positive law and legislators have only recently recognized Indian law as legally binding on the state level (e.g., Oaxaca). Communal and individual rights do not oppose one another in all instances, but, rather, represent values that exist in tension within democratic polities.

Does the existence and exercise of Indian autonomy in Mexico imply an alternative national project? This paper examines the relationship between citizenship rights and autonomy projects in Mexico—focusing specifically on the Chiapas case. In what ways does autonomy challenge liberal citizenship rights in Mexico? Can the two models co-exist within the liberal state? In the first section of this paper, I examine the regional and communal autonomy proposals in light of their nationalist aims. In the second section, I look at actual daily practices of autonomy within the Tojolabal region and contrast these with Indian leaders' discourse about autonomy. I argue that Indian leaders have used the autonomy issue as a way of differentiating Indian communities from other groups within the larger society. In practice, however, the boundaries between political and legal practices among Indian and mestizo communities are not as stark as leaders' discourse suggest. I conclude by situating my discussion of autonomy and Indian political practices within the literature on identity politics. I argue that my research challenges dichotomies scholars have typically drawn to analyze Indian politics (i.e., modern/post-modern, traditional peasant/new social movement organizations, and Indian law/positive law).

### Two Autonomy Projects: comparing regional and communal autonomy

Since the late 1970s and early 1980s, popular organizations in Mexico have demanded increased independence from state control over their organization and leadership, without absolving the state from its responsibility to provide certain goods and services. These efforts have included the creation of independent and quasi-independent popular organizations-- where official client-based organizations formally existed-- as well as the emergence of network organizations such as the National Union of Autonomous Regional Peasant Organizations (UNORCA) and the National 'Plan de Ayala' network (CNPA). Since the mid to late 1980s, Indians in Mexico have increasingly couched their demands for land, health care, bi-lingual education, and basic human rights within a discourse that emphasizes autonomy. These demands are no less material than those articulated within a peasant frame of reference, but highlight the fact that identity is mediated not only through class relations and nationality, but through the interactions of gender, age, class, race, ethnicity, place, religion, and occupation.

The state's discourse on Indian rights also shifted during this period and greater emphasis has been placed on the country's multi-ethnic composition and ethnic diversity. The autonomy proposals and the San Andrés accords signed by the government and by EZLN delegates in February, 1996, combine demands based on traditional peasant and worker pleas for education, health care, and access to government services with important provisions for the use of and respect for indigenous languages, increase in indigenous political representation, diffusion of Indian culture, the recognition of Indian peoples in the constitution, their right to free-determination, and the protection of migrants.

Attention to Indian rights in Mexico is part of a broader, international focus on specific collective rights that correspond to the so-called third generation of human rights. These rights can be defined in economic terms (right to development, to manage natural resources), in political terms (such as a group's right to participate in making decisions at local, regional, and national levels and the recognition of traditional authorities and customary law) and in cultural terms (such as the official recognition of Indian languages for political, administrative, legal, and cultural purposes, as well as the recognition of customs, traditions, and spirituality) (Sierra 1995: 244). Recently, these categories of Indian rights are being expressed and elaborated in the demands for autonomy promoted by a substantial number of Indian organizations.

Since 1994, Indian organizations-- along with the EZLN-- have expanded the definition of political autonomy to include control over territory. They have also added cultural autonomy to their list of demands-- which includes the right to speak indigenous languages and the right to practice local uses and customs. Since the Zapatista uprising, the Indian movement has made autonomy a central focus of its efforts to redefine the relationship between the state and indigenous peoples. Anthropologist and vocal advocate of Indian autonomy, Héctor Díaz-Polanco, speaks of the crucial impulse the Zapatista uprising gave the "autonomists":

What we have, then, if we could divide the entire long period into two parts: we could say that in the first phase, until 1994, the autonomist current within the national Indian movement is a minority, a relatively small group with certain prestige, with a certain amount of influence within the Indian movement but without being able to take control of the central direction of the movement as a whole.

What the Zapatista uprising does in 1994 is revert all of this to give it a new direction. Beginning at this moment, autonomy becomes hegemonic within the more organized sectors of the movement and this manifests itself in the negotiation process, in round one [Indian Rights and Culture] at San Andrés.<sup>8</sup>

While observers and activists disagree on the extent of Zapatista commitment to autonomy, observers generally agreed that the demands for autonomy received an extraordinary boost by the uprising. The National Assembly of Indigenous Peoples in Support of Autonomy (ANIPA) itself grew out of the dynamic generated in the wake of the Zapatista rebellion. In the last months of 1994 and early 1995 the idea of forming a group of Indian autonomy supporters emerged from within the national Indian movement. After the two initial forums in the spring of 1995, the assembly met in late May, 1995, in Yaqui Indian territory in Sonora. Subsequent assemblies were held in August in Oaxaca, in December, 1995, in Chiapas, and in Guerrero in April, 1996. These assemblies served to organize many local and regional Indian organizations around support for autonomy; a substantial number of participants later served as advisors or guests the EZLN invited to the official peace negotiations.<sup>9</sup>

The discussion of autonomy-- in numerous forums, conferences, and congresses held throughout the country since the uprising-- has occurred on three levels: regional, municipal, and communal. On all three levels, proponents demand control over the natural resources found within these boundaries, recognition of local leaders elected by their communities under Indian law, greater indigenous representation in tribunals of positive law, and control over the means of communication. Since 1994, one of the most heated debates within the Indian movement has concerned the relative merits of regional and communal autonomy. The Autonomous Multi-cultural Regions (Regiones Autónomas Pluriétnicas, or RAP) project is the most concrete regional autonomy project currently being proposed by Indian organizations. According to its proponents, the RAP are "founded upon principles of national unity within diversity, of equality of all Mexicans in their plurality, fraternity among its members, and upon equality among all identity groups, both Indians and non-Indians, that co-exist in the diverse regions within the country" (ANIPA 1996). While the RAP project is probably the most fully developed autonomy proposal in a legislative or legal sense, a substantial contingent of indigenous organizations and leaders both within ANIPA and within the movement as a whole supports communal autonomy (over regional or municipal). Adelfo Regino Montes, a Oaxacan Mixe leader, states that while the indigenous he represents are not in principle opposed to regional or municipal levels of autonomy, they have opted to put their energy into consolidating communal autonomy because, he argues, "our daily life takes place in large part within the framework of the community and therefore, from our perspective, communal autonomy is our foundation." (*Servicios del Pueblo Mixe*, A.C. 1996).

It is difficult to assert Zapatista preferences with respect to this important debate on autonomy-- which at times has threatened to divide the movement-- because they have not been specific about the level of

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<sup>8</sup> Héctor Díaz-Polanco, interview with author, Tlalpan, México, May 21, 1996. In another place, Díaz-Polanco insists that activists discussed autonomy before January 1, 1994, but without the force or dynamic that the Zapatista movement generated for it: "It was not as if the demand for autonomy was completely absent before the Zapatista uprising. There were voices and isolated groups that demanded autonomy and that rejected the imposition [of the federal government] and articulated indigenous aspirations for a better world. On some occasions indigenous organizations utilized the term, although in very few cases was it converted into the backbone of a political program that recovered, at the same time, the ethnic, the national, and the urgency of democracy. More than a clear articulation of demands, the organizations often presented an un-organized and interminable laundry lists of demands. But with the Zapatista uprising, the theme of autonomy acquired a national relevance, democratic vigor and a more defined profile. A multitude of small and large contributions have originated from every corner of the country, theories and practices that have been constructing the concept of regional autonomy, pluri-ethnicity, and inclusive democracy as a tool of justice for indigenous peoples and for the peace of the nation" (Díaz-Polanco 1993: 133).

<sup>9</sup> Héctor Díaz-Polanco puts the number of ANIPA participants who served as EZLN advisors and guests at fifty percent or more. Díaz-Polanco's close ties with ANIPA suggests that this figure is probably exaggerated, but he is correct in noting that participation was substantial.

autonomy they currently practice and would support within the regions they control.<sup>10</sup> Yet, most activity within Zapatista territory has occurred at the municipal level. On December 19, 1994, the EZLN created thirty-two new municipalities through a military take-over. This was part of a response to Robledo Rincón's inauguration as governor of Chiapas, an act that was viewed by the Zapatistas as well as by many other *chiapanecos*, as illegitimate. Along with Amado Avendaño, who was sworn in by most of the popular sectors of the state as governor of a "transitional" government, the Zapatistas began to call for the creation of free municipalities (*municipios libres*).

Autonomy figured prominently in the final accords reached between the government and the Zapatista delegations in the first round of discussions (on Indian Rights and Culture) in February, 1996, and is one of five key principles that are to guide the State in a new pact between the state and the indigenous.<sup>11</sup> While the accords are significant in that the state admits the failure of the integrationist policies that attempted to *mexicanizar* the indigenous, it is important to note that the government's understanding of autonomy is a seriously attenuated version of what many independent Indian organizations are demanding. The government has preferred to focus on communal autonomy rather than on regional autonomy, because the latter might be strong enough to challenge state and national government policies (i.e., autonomous regions would be potentially strong enough to control natural resources and independent candidacies would potentially circumvent traditional political parties). The Mexican state has historically sought to reduce indigenous action to the communal level to ensure greater control as well as to avoid potential revolts. In this century, official party leaders have often supported local caciques who, in return, have delivered Indian votes (Rus 1994). Supporters of regional autonomy, such as ANIPA, call for the creation of a regime of autonomy that would ensure the recognition and exercise of political, economic, social, and cultural autonomy on communal, municipal, and regional levels.

Since the Zapatista uprising, Indian organizations have used autonomy as a catch-all category for a variety of related demands. Varying interpretations of autonomy have emerged in relation to different types of rights-- human rights, indigenous rights, and women's rights (Stephen and Collier 1997). Indigenous organizations pressure the state to protect their right to use their languages and local cultures and customs, women struggle for control over their bodies and reproductive rights, and human rights organizations press for individuals' right to protection from arbitrary state prosecution and arrest. Indians' call for regional territorial autonomy is one of the most radical articulations of autonomy. State officials have been wary to extend territorial autonomy for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is the potential loss of state control over indigenous areas of the country. For indigenous organizations, autonomy demands include both cultural and political autonomy. At the same time, these organizations have demanded increased participation in national political institutions. For example, Indian activists have pressured the state to add an additional electoral district reserved for indigenous representatives.<sup>12</sup>

Proponents of both proposals have reiterated that autonomy does not denote separatism and that it is not to be confused with the sovereignty of the Mexican nation-state. In the first days of the uprising the president and other high-ranking officials accused the Zapatistas of being foreigners and of threatening the

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<sup>10</sup> One of the most elaborate descriptions of the kind of autonomy the EZLN envisions is found in the Third Declaration of the Selva Lacandona (January, 1995) in which the EZLN states that the government should recognize "the particularities of the indigenous, recognizing their right to inclusive autonomy and citizenship" (cited in Bргуete 1995).

<sup>11</sup> The other four principals are pluralism, sustainability, integrated-ness, and participation (*Pronunciamiento Conjunto que el Gobierno Federal y el EZLN Enviarán a las Instancias de Debate y Decisión Nacional*).

<sup>12</sup> Both autonomy proposals insist on the possibility of political representation for Indian peoples without the participation of political parties. Many indigenous have spoken out about the division that partisan political conflict has caused in communities. Indian organizations in Oaxaca have been pioneers in pressuring the state government to modify its Electoral Law to protect the exercise of Indian "uses and customs" in the election of political representatives. In Oaxaca's Code of Political Institutions and Electoral Proceedings, Volume 4, Article 112 ("Of the Renovation of State Government positions in the Municipalities through Election by Uses and Customs") it states that "the communities referred to here, respecting their uses and customs, may register their candidates directly, without the intervention of any political party or through any political party" (*Código de Instituciones y Procedimientos Electorales de Oaxaca, Instituto Estatal Electoral*, October, 1995). This law has been in force since September, 1995).

nation-state. The EZLN quickly responded that they were simply asking that the promises of the Constitution and the Mexican Revolution be fulfilled for all Mexicans. While many right-of-center Mexican intellectuals continue to insist that Indian autonomy proposals are separatist and encourage the isolation of the indigenous, Indians have responded by claiming that the autonomy proposals are intended to help democratize the country and not to create Indian enclaves.<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, autonomy proponents call on the state to go beyond liberalism by recognizing specific Indian rights to difference. This recognition of difference would involve the acknowledgment and protection of Indians' communal rights in addition to the protection of individual rights enshrined in the Constitution. It would involve giving specific powers previously reserved to national government to autonomous communities and regions in the administration of lands and the management of resources.<sup>14</sup> Both communal and regional autonomy projects involve some degree of political decentralization from the federal, state, and municipal governments to autonomous communal and regional areas. Yet the communal and regional autonomy projects differ in their scope and in their breath. They also differ with respect to the degree to which they foster pan-ethnic identification among Indian ethnicities, which has important implications for the larger movement. The specific differences between these two projects are discussed in the following section.

### *Regiones Autónomas Pluri-étnicas*

The Autonomous, Multi-ethnic Regions (RAP) project best represents the politics and ideology of the regional autonomy position. RAP proponents propose the creation of a fourth level of government, in addition to the three current levels (federal, state, and municipal). The project is based on substantial decentralization and devolution of political power from the central government to the periphery. Regional governments, with enhanced powers to raise revenue, would take over new competencies and functions (e.g., the maintenance and exploitation of natural resources and education). The transfer of these new responsibilities and powers would be negotiated with federal, state, and municipal authorities. One of the key arguments RAP proponents raise against the communalist position is that regional governments would be large and powerful enough to challenge the federal government, unlike municipal or community-based governments. Díaz-Polanco and other RAP supporters insist that the compartmentalization of indigenous peoples into communities is a legacy of the colonial period and not "natural" to Indian communities (Díaz-Polanco 1991).<sup>15</sup> While comunalistas argue that autonomy must be built from the community level, RAP

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<sup>13</sup>Some Mexican intellectuals are attempting to revive the notion that indigenous isolation is responsible for the deplorable living conditions in Mexico's indigenous regions. Héctor Aguilar Camín, renowned Mexican historian and novelist insists that "the indigenous peoples and individuals who have had less bad fortune than most in this country are those who have developed an increased level of contact, mixing, and integration with the basic currents of national life. I believe that the best opportunities for indigenous peoples lie in contact, not in isolation" (cited in Correa and Corro 1996: 23). ANIPA has responded to criticisms à la Aguilar Camín by stating that they do not seek to create privileges but rather to recognize the legitimate historic rights of Indian peoples. "The RAPs are founded upon the principles of national unity within diversity," they have stated. Both the regional and communal autonomy projects go to great pains to insist that "the right to autonomy does not lessen or reduce the rights and obligations that, as Mexicans, correspond to those who integrate the country." Indian claims for different treatment, in both proposals, are based on the righting of past wrongs and on their claim to be original inhabitants.

<sup>14</sup> Writing about the Ecuadorian Indian movement, both Radcliffe and Westwood (1996) and Zamosc (1994) argue that indigenous confederations have attempted to defend indigenous identities within the framework of a re-negotiated, more inclusive citizenship (Radcliffe and Westwood 1996: 130; see also de la Peña 1996 for work on ethnic citizenship in the Mexican context). In contrast to Indians' demands for inclusive citizenship, according to Radcliffe and Westwood, the state and multi-national companies often act on the basis of formal citizenship rights.

<sup>15</sup> Díaz-Polanco's position has been widely criticized, not the least by comunalista supporters. The work of social historians suggests that substantial village political autonomy was widely customary, even by the close of the colonial period. According to Eric Van Young, "The point is that this[village autonomy] seems not to have been imposed from the top of the imperial structure down, but was rather accommodated to as it continued to well up from the smallest political cells in rural society" (Van Young 1993: 260).

Bermejillo argues that a distinction must be made between the comunalista option and that which the state proposes. He claims that the former emerges from the base and the latter is a old strategy used for political control: "In an atmosphere of autonomy and decentralization, when the state carries the banner of the community it can be the "kiss of death" for genuine community projects" (Bermejillo 1995: 36).

supporters believe that the national Indian movement should push for a legislative umbrella that would guarantee regional autonomy, among other forms of national recognitions and protections.

While ANIPA has been identified with the RAP project since it was formed in early 1994, it has modified its position after each successive assembly held. For example, in May, 1995, the Second Assembly took place in Yaqui-Mayo territory in Sonora. The experience of listening to Indians who have lived in mono-ethnic autonomous regions for decades forced ANIPA leaders to accept the possibility of mono-ethnic regions and not just the multi-ethnic ones originally proposed. After assemblies in Oaxaca in August, 1995 and Chiapas in December, 1995, ANIPA accepted a gradualist formulation of its objective by admitting the co-existence of communal and municipal autonomy in areas where conditions did not exist for the formation of RAPs.

RAP proponents have stated that "it is necessary to rethink the project of the homogenous state" while reiterating that their project is not a separatist one. "The regime of autonomy proposes to strengthen unity and national integration, favoring the increase of harmony among all the socio-cultural components of the Mexican nation and providing the impetus for democratic life" (ANIPA 1996). Supporters of the RAP project assert that it is possible to enjoy the constitutional liberties guaranteed by the liberal state while simultaneously "conquering spaces to reproduce difference." Because racial and cultural discrimination has been so pervasive in Mexican society, Indian leaders have insisted that the resulting inequalities cannot be addressed on the basis of equal rights for all Mexicans under the Constitution. Indians are now demanding rights based on the very ethnic and racial differences mestizos have used against them. At the National Indian Forum held in San Cristóbal de las Casas in January, 1996, one Indian noted that "with the term "Indian" they oppressed us, with the term "Indian" we will be liberated. We want to be recognized as Otomí, Purépecha, and Maya." 16

The notion of autonomy, especially as expressed by proponents of the RAP project, highlights the profoundly political nature of space. In autonomous regions, leaders would draw new political boundaries to enhance the possibilities of electing indigenous representatives to local and national congresses. RAP supporters recognize political representation as being partially constituted by spatial boundaries and Indian leaders have linked spatial boundaries and political power to demands concerning larger national issues such as federalism and democracy.<sup>17</sup> In the final document emerging from ANIPA's fifth meeting held in San Cristóbal de las Casas in December, 1995, one of the principal reasons cited for the "miserable and oppression situation of the indigenous in Mexico today" is the extreme centralism of the current Mexican political system (ANIPA 1996). ANIPA participants argue that the government cannot recognize genuine *de jure* autonomy without a profound restructuring of political and economic power in Mexico.

RAP documents and conversations with RAP proponents suggest that the RAP proposal does not attempt to substitute a new nationalism for the current one, rather it proposes a restructuring of the Mexican state. As Díaz-Polanco states, "The regional autonomy project seeks to transform the present system of political organization and the actual state regime (centralized, exclusive, authoritarian, homogenizing) and replace it with a state of autonomies that make a respect for plurality possible and opens the doors for the participation of Indian peoples" (Díaz-Polanco 1996). The state has reacted fiercely against the RAP

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<sup>16</sup>The restructuring of political and economic power under a regime of autonomy, not surprisingly, is seen as an unacceptable threat to the status quo by many politicians, intellectuals, and political analysts. While the government has attempted to dilute the potential for increased political power and control over natural resources that the indigenous would exercise within autonomous regions by limiting the exercise of autonomy to local levels, even that is seen by some observers as ceding too much. According to Fernando Escalante, general director of academic programs at the renowned Colegio de México and noted sociologist, the EZLN is, in effect, "asking that discrimination be legalized...that the laws make a distinction on the basis of ethnic origin; they are supporting discrimination by demanding that there is one law for the indigenous and another for non-indigenous" (Correa and Corro 1996: 25).

<sup>17</sup> On a comparative note, regional indigenous confederations in Ecuador have used visual representations of indigenous nationalities' land-- such as maps and topographical studies—as a way of representing political and ideological interventions in state-defined land allocation and titling procedures. According to Radcliffe and Westwood, the popular geographies exemplified by indigenous confederations' maps "refer implicitly to—and are contextualized by—a series of social, political and administrative agendas for change, beyond the land issue per se" (Radcliffe and Westwood 1996: 127).

proposal: state officials are fearful that strong, autonomous regions would reduce electoral support for the official regime as well as wrest control of natural resources from the state.

The strongest feature of the RAP project—from the perspective of building a national Indian movement—is its attempt to build political identities that extend beyond the local indigenous community. In the case of the Tojolabal—an Maya Indian people living in southeastern Chiapas, principally in the municipality of Las Margaritas, where I did field research for fifteen months in 1995 and 1996—regional Indian identity was based not just on participation in local communities, but on a shared sense of oppression and discrimination. The RAP project is an attempt to create a larger Indian community that could potentially attract indigenous peoples not currently living in communities, such as migrant workers. It seeks to unite indigenous peoples in regional, pan-ethnic alliances. In contrast, the communal autonomy project, while bringing indigenous peoples together by focusing on the common values, such as Indians' relationship to the land, spirituality, and ritual ceremonies, there is little attempt to forge broader identifications. The communal project is limited in dealing with indigenous peoples who live outside communities, which is accelerating as pressures on the land increase and as Indians migrate to urban areas. This limitation, as well as the communal project's strengths, will be taken up in the next section.

### *Communal Autonomy Project*

According to proponents of the communalista autonomy project, the most vocal of whom are Mixes, Zapotecos, and Mixtecos from northern and central Oaxaca, indigenous resistance is located first and foremost at the community level. Jaime Martínez Luna, Zapotec anthropologist and comunalista, describes the central importance of the community in maintaining the history and traditions of indigenous peoples: the community has been responsible for the fact that we have not forgotten our customs, fiestas, and ways of thinking. By necessity, perhaps, our villages have taught us to fulfill community responsibilities (*cargos*), *tequio* (communal work), and to participate in the communal assembly. Our elders have transmitted, from generation to generation, the limits of our territory, histories about land, the mountains, hills, and the caves (Martínez Luna 1993: 159).

For Martínez Luna, community identity is the result "of the dynamic between our ancestral and present organization, which rests on communal work: work to make decisions (assembly), work for coordination (*cargo*), work for construction (*tequio*), and work to enjoy (*fiesta*)" (Martínez Luna 1993: 160). Within this scheme, Indians base membership on participation in communal labor rather than on language use. Martínez Luna and other comunalista supporters clearly distinguish their definition of the community and community identity from those who have viewed indigenous communities as insulated "closed communities" (Wolf 1957). Martínez Luna makes this point when he insists that "the community is not a symbol of harmony, nor is the community the perfect expression of the cosmic. On the contrary, the community confronts enemies daily; communality is created in the tearing down and building up of consensus, of work, and of communal power" (Martínez Luna 1993: 162).<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Since 1994, activists within the national Indian movement have engaged in a debate over the degree to which organizations should put their limited resources into strengthening communal forms of autonomy, on the one hand, and the extent to which they should expend resources on campaigns for legislative change, on the other. While these two activities are not diametrically opposed, they do represent different political positions. The comunalista position has been the dominant one taken by leaders in the *Congreso Nacional Indígena* (CNI) since its first meeting in October, 1996 (Luis Hernández Navarro, informal conversation April 21, 1997). The San Andrés accords on Indian Rights and Culture signed by the government and the EZLN in February, 1996, also reflect the dominant position of the comunalistas. As mentioned above, the bulk of support for the comunalista camp comes from Oaxaca. Activists associated with this camp are Martínez Luna, Floriberto Díaz, Adelfo Regino Montes, Joel Aquino, and ethnic intellectuals/activists Luis Hernández Navarro and Gustavo Esteva. Comunalista advocates tend to focus more on Indian spirituality, community rituals, and how to build strong Indian governments from the grassroots level.

The other main camp within the national Indian movement is most strongly associated with legislative change and regional autonomy. This camp is closely tied to the CIOAC (Central Independiente de Obreros Agrícolas y Campesinos) in Chiapas. Some of its strongest advocates were formally members of the Mexican Communist Party (PCM). The camp's most



Comunalista activists do not preclude the possibility of broader regional organization and coordination among communities, although they tend to focus their energy on strengthening communal institutions and practices. Martínez Luna, for example, views regional organization and coordination as appropriate for the resolution of particular, concrete projects requiring larger coordination: "Regional organization is the result of a particular conjuncture or, conversely, an answer to very specific demands" (Martínez Luna 1993: 167). Comunalistas, however, are wary that regional coordination might create propitious conditions for the creation of regional caciquismos and insist that "we must never lose, or risk losing, the material and political bases of the community" (Martínez Luna 1993: 166). For comunalistas, regional associations are most successful when they are built from the community level. Comunalista proponent Regino Montes has argued that the guarantee of communal rights actually promotes the exercise of Indians' individual rights because membership and participation in a local community reduces high levels of uncertainty and vulnerability: "we are peoples and, therefore, require the recognition of our collective rights in order to enjoy the exercise of our individual rights" (Regino Montes n.d.: 134).<sup>19</sup>

The caution exercised by Oaxacan comunalista advocates regarding the creation of regional cacicazgos has deep historic roots. While in Chiapas indigenous struggles have been targeted primarily against the exploitation and repression of mestizo cacique/landowners, in Oaxaca, indigenous struggles against neighboring Indian caciques have been the norm. Yet despite the fact that the community continues to be the primary space of identification and socio-cultural reproduction in Oaxaca (as well in the majority of Mexico's indigenous areas), since the late 1970s sixteen indigenous communities in the Mixe area of northern Oaxaca have formed a loosely associated region. While the Mixe people live and work in their individual communities, the area functions as a region for the commercialization of agricultural products, the provision of transport, and for the coordination of activities that supersede the community level. In part, this regional identification has been possible due to particular historical circumstances, specifically the formation of an ethnically Mixe district in the eastern part of the Sierra Juárez during the Cárdenas administration (Stephen 1996). This special district was created in 1938 and forms part of Oaxaca's governing structure today (Stephen 1996: 11).<sup>20</sup>

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prominent advocates include Antonio Hernández, Margarito Ruiz, Araceli Burguete, Carlos Beas Torres, and ethnic intellectuals Héctor Díaz-Polanco, Gilberto López y Rivas, and Consuelo Sánchez.

<sup>19</sup> Based on his work in indigenous communities in the Andean region, Gavin Smith makes a similar argument about the relationship between the local community and the larger society. Smith claims that for the Huasicancha people of Peru "the community is simultaneously the means for inserting them into a larger economy and society and the means for expressing a local identity in contradistinction to that economy and society" (Smith 1989: 29)

<sup>20</sup> In the early 1980s in the Sierra Juárez region of Oaxaca, Floriberto Díaz, Mixe anthropologist and political activist, created the *Comité de Defensa y Desarrollo de los Recursos Naturales y Humanos Mixes*, or CODREMI. CODREMI is a good example of the growing trend towards regionalization of the Indian movement during the 1980s. The organization's demands included land reform, transport, and the commercialization of local products (This information about CODREMI's demands came from an informal conversation with Luis Hernández Navarro in México D.F. on April 21, 1997).. In addition, CODREMI demanded "absolute respect for communal self-determination of lands, natural resources, and autochthonous forms of organization as original inhabitants." CODREMI has also called for respect for community organization and life, indigenous languages, calendars, and inter-community exchange of goods (Mejía and Sarmiento 1987: 96).

In addition to his participation in the formation of CODREMI, Díaz was instrumental in creating a conservatory for young Mixe musicians (*Centro de Capacitación Musical*), the largest of its kind in the country. This project was part of a larger effort by Mixe communities to rescue the Mixe language, that is, to encourage its use and to diffuse Mixe philosophy. In the same region in 1978, the *Asamblea de Autoridades Mixes* united Mixe municipal presidents and traditional leaders in a regional association. In the late 1980s, *Servicios del Pueblo Mixe* (SER) was created to address ethnically-based demands; SER emphasized cultural mechanisms and traditions that distinguish the Mixe people, such as communal work and local forms of justice (Stephen 1996: 12). One area of particular interest to SER has been the relationship between Indian law ("uses and customs") and national, positive law. One of Díaz's students, Adelfo Regino Montes, became in the 1990s one of the most visible and eloquent supporters of the comunalista position within the national Indian movement. The dynamic way in which cultural and material issues and politics have been used by the Mixe people pose a challenge both to state-sponsored culturalist programs that have severed culture and politics as well as to class-based organizations, which have typically viewed cultural issues such as language, music, and art as secondary to more material concerns.

For the Mixes of eastern Oaxaca, the exercise of autonomy is practiced from below, that is, from the community level.<sup>21</sup> They worry that a regional structuring of autonomy could create new caciques and reduce the freedom of individual ethnic groups. They tend to favor mono-ethnic over multi-ethnic autonomy because of long-standing conflicts they have had with other Indian peoples in the region, especially the Zapotec. After the Mexican Revolution, the Mixe fought for the creation of an ethnically distinct district that was established in 1938. In part, this region was formed as an attempt to redress the historic economic and political domination of the Mixe by the Zapotec Indians (Stephen 1996). While in Chiapas mestizos have historically governed municipalities in majority Indian districts, the four hundred thirty-five municipalities in Oaxaca (over a third of Mexico's total number of municipalities) have been typically run by Indians. This is not to suggest that Indian municipal leaders in Oaxaca have been less corrupt and heavy-handed than Chiapan mestizo functionaries. Nevertheless, the municipality in Oaxaca (which in many cases is coterminous with the community) enjoys greater legitimacy than its counterparts in Chiapas and in other largely indigenous states of Mexico. In Oaxaca, independent Indian leaders have attempted to recapture municipal power, whereas in other states Indian organizations have fought to bypass municipal authorities who have been their natural enemies by establishing direct contact with the national government (Victoria 1996: 40). One communal autonomy proposal issued from the best-known organization supporting communal autonomy in Mexico, the Oaxaca-based *Servicios del Pueblo Mixe* (Services of the Mixe People), recognizes the merits of the RAPs proposed by ANIPA, but notes that "there is not, today, a clear consciousness in our region concerning the convenience of installing a RAP and is therefore not in our present interests." Rather, for the Mixe people, "the communal level of autonomy is the most adequate form to preserve the aforementioned values of the community" (*Servicios del Pueblo Mixe* 1996).

Similar to the RAP project, communal autonomy proposals condition the exercise of individual rights on the recognition of the communal rights. According to the SER proposal, the Mexican state needs to take affirmative action "not to create inequalities among Mexicans but to redress those inequalities that already exist." In a public debate with the historian Aguilar Camín on the pages of the Mexico City daily *La Jornada* in October, 1996, Mixe leader Regino Montes (founder of SER) argued that "the demand for autonomy should not be viewed as an attempt at isolation from the rest of the country." He insisted that "we understand the recognition of our autonomy as something that will benefit and strengthen not only indigenous peoples but will consolidate the unity of the entire nation."

Stephen (1996) notes that comunalista autonomy proponents sever the nation from the state and liberate the concept of nation to be reappropriated from below in relation to particular regional and historical circumstances. In the comunalista proposal, she claims, the nation is no longer the overarching, consolidating category that it is in liberal and socialist thought, rather autonomous communities and nations are the foundation of a new, multi-cultural nation. Indigenous autonomy is translated into everyday practices through decision-making in the areas of politics, economics, culture, and the law in the internal life of indigenous pueblos (communities/nations). This decision-making process is made in strict coordination with the offices of state and federal government. Comunalista and RAP supporters, however, fail to address the practices within indigenous communities that do not foster multi-culturalism, pluralism, and democracy. The mere existence of autonomous communities, regions, and even nations does not necessarily guarantee a multi-cultural Mexico.

The Mixe people of western Oaxaca are not the only example of ethnic resistance and communal autonomy in the state. The history of the Zapotec people of Juchitán is one of the most important examples of self-determination and ethnic politics in the country. From the colonial period, Juchitán has emerged as a site of ethnic resistance rooted in illicit commerce, in defense of communal lands and salt flats, in an adversarial relationship to the Marquesado hacienda, and in opposition to colonial and mestizo Tehuantepec (capital of

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<sup>21</sup>Gustavo Esteva is the ethnic intellectual most closely associated with the Oaxacan proposal of communal autonomy. In public forums and numerous essays, he has described the project of communal autonomy as the most "radically democratic" of the autonomy proposals because it is based on Indians' daily practice of autonomy at the grassroots level. He is strident in his opposition to the RAP project, which he sees as creating unnecessary bureaucracy and as unrepresentative of how Indians presently organize themselves.

the Isthmus region) (Campbell 1994: 242). *Juchitecos*, in contrast to other Indian groups in Mexico, have historically cultivated a positive sense of being Zapotec. Howard Campbell notes that during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, conflicts hardened between residents of Juchitán and authorities of Tehuantepec (regional capital), Oaxaca City (state capital), and Mexico City (national capital). *Juchitecos* turned in on themselves and developed a fierce localism, regional identity, and love for the Zapotec language and customs (Campbell 1994: 243; Rubin 1990). During a period of political opening under the progressive administration of Luis Echeverría (1970-76), the Coalition of Peasants and Students of the Isthmus (COCEI) was born. Unlike previous ethnic organizations active within the Juchitán community, COCEI espoused class politics and politicized cultural identity. The COCEI used ethnic identity to win a class battle with upper-class Zapotecos who claimed that they were the "legitimate" representatives of Zapotecan culture, as opposed to peasant and working-class Indians. As Stephen points out, the COCEI used a class-based ethnic identity to fight a very specific class battle within Juchitán (Stephen 1996: 27).

In the 1980s, the COCEI was the first leftist opposition group in the country to be recognized by PRI political leaders in municipal elections. During the two-and-a-half year term of the "people's government," the COCEI embarked on an ambitious cultural program centered on the Zapotec language and attempted to regain land lost by peasants to large landholders, to organize the peasantry, and to develop public works projects that would benefit the city's poor majority. In 1986, it took part in municipal elections and joined a coalition municipal government, and in 1989 it won the elections and governed jointly (but in a majority role) with the PRI (Rubin cited in Stephen 1996). The COCEI won another victory in 1992 and governed the city until 1995. Unfortunately, attempts at applying the Zapotec experience to other Indian areas in Mexico have not been very fruitful. It is a movement whose experiences are largely based on the particular history of Zapotec Indians from one city. *Zapotecos* from Juchitán have been reticent to include even their Zapotec neighbors in their project (Stephen 1996).

Mexico's national Indian movement relies on some effort to forge a pan-ethnic identity, that is, a sense of belonging that transcends individual communities and ethnicities. The RAP proposal attempts to forge a sense of pan-ethnicity by creating regional zones where different ethnicities work and live together. Pan-ethnic identity, however, has been difficult to construct because of the strength of local community identifications and the historic tension among indigenous ethnicities as well as among indigenous and mestizo communities. The state has furthered these divisions through their support of caciques. In all of their talk about the grassroots democratic practices within indigenous communities, such as voting by consensus, both RAP and comunalista proponents have not considered sufficiently the non-pluralistic and un-democratic practices within many autonomous communities and regions. Legislating the existing inequality that exists in autonomous regions would have deleterious consequences for the most vulnerable citizens (e.g., women).

The two autonomy proposals discussed here are closely linked to particular geographic spaces and historical experience. Chiapan Indian leaders have been instrumental in the leadership of ANIPA; the RAP project originated in Chiapas under the guidance of Tojolabal leaders Margarito Ruiz and Antonio Hernández Cruz. The SER proposal is the product of Mixe experience in a largely mono-ethnic region where infighting among Indian peoples has occurred for generations. While Indian struggles in Chiapas have been directed primarily against an exploitative ladino oligarchy, in Oaxaca conflicts are typically waged against hostile Indian neighbors. Because of the widespread system of debt-servitude and share-cropping that often forced Indians from different ethnic groups to mix together and opened up the possibility for regional association and organization, Chiapan Indian peoples have cooperated across ethnic groups to a degree unimaginable in Oaxaca. The early loss of land in Chiapas during the colonial period (especially in eastern Chiapas among the Tojolabales) and the historic control of Indian areas by ladino municipalities contrasts sharply with the situation in Oaxaca where Indians have been more successful in maintaining control of their land and who govern themselves in small communities. The colonization of eastern Chiapas since the 1940s also has facilitated the possibility of inter-ethnic cooperation in the state. The presence of progressive Catholic clergy and leftist organizers working in Chiapas since the 1970s has also been a significant factor in stimulating inter-ethnic alliances. Stephen (1996) notes that state repression in Chiapas has been more generalized than in Oaxaca. Ironically perhaps, harsh state repression provided Chiapan Indians with a common enemy and facilitated multi-ethnic organizing strategies.

The two principal points of contention between the comunalista and the RAP camps I have highlighted in this section is the emphasis each places on legislative reforms and the level at which indigenous autonomy is exercised. Regarding the first point, the comunalistas have prioritized the recovery of communal practices ("uses and customs") of direct democracy in the community and the forging of communal self-government. RAP supporters, in contrast, have made the struggle for juridical recognition key (Vera 1995: 37). Regarding the level at which indigenous autonomy is exercised, RAP proponents want to see legislation guaranteeing the potential exercise of regional governments, which, they argue, simultaneously protects communal and municipal autonomy. Comunalistas worry about the creation of regional cacicazgos and additional bureaucracies that, they argue, would take attention away from the much-needed task of strengthening community-level autonomy efforts.

While the comunalista and regional autonomy proponents have their differences, they agree on many issues. Comunalistas and RAP supporters agree on such fundamentals as the protection of Indian rights, the enforcement of Convention 169, and an end to indigenismo. The comunalistas correctly point out that any lasting autonomy project must have a strong foundation of community support because the community continues to be a point of reference for many Indians. If future legislative reforms protecting Indian autonomy are to have any meaning, Indians must be creative in developing viable and diverse community development projects on this level. Nevertheless, I echo the concerns of authors who worry that the community level is too vulnerable to sustain the current attacks on it by migratory pressures, state agricultural policy reforms, and increasing militarization. As Vera notes:

While it is indispensable that the values of self-government on the community level are practiced...and that we find and recover these experiences that can serve as a reference point to develop proposals, it is nevertheless illusory that self-government on its own can be sufficient. There is too much hostility, too many processes, and the environments where people exercise governance and make collective proposals are too few in the country (Vera 1995: 38).

The comunalista focus on local identities and practices highlights local meanings and experience. For some activists within the national Indian movement—such as RAP proponents—this focus on local experience is a limitation in that it impedes broader identifications that would help forge a pan-ethnic identity. Warren discusses a similar tension among the Maya peoples of Guatemala. Community identities or what she calls, experience-based memories, are being replaced by ethnic nationalist explanations in building a wider ethnic revitalization. She argues that the most difficult dilemma currently facing Indian movement in Guatemala is the successful invention of a pan-community Mayan identity, since virtually all Mayas identify with their home communities as their primary ethnic unit or more diffusely with their language groups. For these ethnic nationalists, wider identifications are crucial if Mayas are to avoid modern forms of the divide-and-conquer strategy historically used by dominant groups (Warren 1992: 211).

In the final analysis, comunalista and RAP supporters agree that any regime of autonomy must involve some combination of these two projects. Despite differences between the two views, activists from both camps concur that legal or juridical autonomy proposals must be backed up by grassroots experiences of autonomy. Both camps also agree that without some legal guarantee that the state will respect the exercise of indigenous autonomy, abuses by the state and local caciques will continue to impede the exercise of autonomous practices on community, municipal, and regional levels. Both camps also face the dilemma of radicalizing the terms of the debate-- such as asserting that their projects fall outside the purview of the nation-state or harshly critiquing racism within the left-- and losing their popular allies, which they badly need to gain the smallest victories.

While scholars have recently published a great deal of material on autonomy projects per se, very little work has been done on the actual practice of autonomy on local and regional levels. In the next section, I examine a regional autonomy project in Las Margaritas—a Tojolabal-Maya region in southeastern Chiapas.

### Indian Autonomy: Discourse and Practice

The RAP project draws on a long history of autonomous political, social, and cultural practices in the Tojolabal region, which I will describe in some detail in this section. I argue that since 1994 autonomy

demands have taken on different cultural and political significance in the region. This does not mean, however, that these demands are “new,” that is, that they did not exist before the Zapatista uprising. After 1994, Tojolabal demands for autonomy have been articulated through a national Indian movement, which interpellates Indian subjects differently than, say, the campesino movement or local community organizations and practices.

On October 12, 1994, the State Council for Indian and Peasant Organizations (CEOIC), an organization formed immediately after the uprising that united two hundred eighty peasant and Indian organizations in support of a peaceful resolution of the conflict, declared seven autonomous RAPs in the state of Chiapas. After declaration of these RAPs in October, activists organized a series of regional forums throughout Chiapas to discuss the details of how these regions would function in practice. While the Tojolabal region had been the foundation for the development of the original project designed in large part by CIOAC leadership and Margarito Ruiz, the northern region, encompassing eleven municipalities including Simojovel, Bochil, and Soyaló, quickly became a focus of attention and activity. The CIOAC spearheaded a series of forums in this region in the fall of 1994, which culminated in the ratification of the Constitution of the Autonomous Region of the Tzotzil, Chol, and Zoque Indian Peoples on October 17 in Soyaló. After the ratification of the region's constitution, activists took over municipal buildings, “recovered” farms and ranches, and suspended negotiations with federal and state governments (Morquecho 1994). Diverse Indian organizations around the country publicly lauded the declaration of the autonomous northern region and pledged to support the effort. Roxana Ojeda, member of the *Unión de Comuneros Emiliano Zapata* (UCEZ) from Michoacán, publicly declared that Indian autonomy in Chiapas “is not illegal because it is recognized in Convention 169 of the International Labor Commission that Mexico ratified” (Pérez 1994).

Forging a regional autonomy project in Chiapas involves the formation of regional identity. While declaring a region autonomous is a first important step, leaders in the movement say that the daily work of the autonomy is the hard part. Arturo Luna, one of the key actors behind the northern autonomy project, comments on the long and laborious process of forging a regional sense of identity:

We can say that the problem of autonomy has to do with the economy of the region and of the communities. We are not going to be autonomous if we do not resolve the problem of self-sufficiency in food production. It is not a problem of discourse, it is a question of developing subjects, actors that can genuinely build autonomy. We need to build a diversified agricultural base in the region for families....We are also talking about health teams. In each community we are trying to develop health teams that would integrate traditional medicine from the communities with Western medicine....We need to strengthen the cultural foundation of the communities with theater and dance. We need to strengthen their own instances of justice. The entire society needs to develop itself so that it can demand, with force and strength, its own autonomy and forms of government. This will not come about just because a decree institutes autonomy or because the government and the EZLN sign an accord in San Cristóbal. We can sign a decree but if we do not achieve a strengthening of our own communities and regions we will continue to have to deal with *cacicazgos* and dependencies on the government.<sup>22</sup>

José Antonio Vásquez, regional leader of CIOAC-Comitán and Tojolabal from Bajucú, Las Margaritas speaks of the gap between autonomy practiced at the regional level and that practiced at local levels. Among the Tojolabales, he says, “people are autonomous, but in their own way, from their own community, as they see it.”<sup>23</sup> While Tojolabal leaders from CIOAC-Comitán such as Antonio and Luis Hernández have been at the forefront of the autonomy movement in Chiapas and on the national level, Vásquez admits that does not clearly understand the details of the RAP project:

When at times I have spoken to the people about the RAP project, it is not clear to me yet what it actually consists of. Or maybe I am seeing it like the people do because I am judging it with them from their perspective....Words on paper are one thing. The law is one thing but the trick is how it is practiced. That

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<sup>22</sup> Arturo Luna Luján, interview with author, Tuxtla Gutiérrez, March 25, 1996.

<sup>23</sup> José Antonio Vásquez Hernández, interview with author, Comitán, November 22, 1995.

is how I see it. I am in agreement with autonomy. Maybe it just needs to be explained to the people better."<sup>24</sup>

Similarly, local CIOAC leaders such as A.G. and J.G. of the ejido union Pueblos Tojolabales, when asked about the RAP that has been declared in the region where they live and work, told me that they could not comment on this because "we don't know anything about it."<sup>25</sup> Yet, when I asked A.G. and J.G. specific questions about the election of authorities, internal forms of justice, and community organization, I saw that the daily practice of autonomy is operative in Tojolabal communities. A.G. spoke of the fact that most problems are resolved within the community in negotiation with local authorities:

Now, if the problem is very grave we work it out within the CIOAC. We see how it can be arranged there and smooth things out. As a community and as an organization we see how things can be worked out. Our problems are resolved within the community or the organization [CIOAC].<sup>26</sup>

Comments made by J.G. and others suggest that members of the PRI-affiliated union in the region, Lucha Campesina, often present complaints at the Public Ministry in Las Margaritas, whereas CIOAC-affiliated union members tend to work problems out within communities or within regional structures, such as the CIOAC. Not surprisingly, then, autonomy demands, when they are made, are made by opposition political activists. According to local leaders from the ejido union Tierra y Libertad (also affiliated with CIOAC) in the selva region of Las Margaritas, autonomy means that the people have decision-making capacity to name their authorities: "For example, in the community and the municipality, the people have the right to name their own authorities.... All the work that is being done in the community here makes it easier for the people to understand what autonomy is because they are now beginning; it is already working."<sup>27</sup>

While RAP proponents aim to construct a new Tojolabal political identity, my work in the Tojolabal region suggests that despite a long tradition of lived autonomy in the region, the task of forging a regional identity and government is not an automatic process, but requires the political work of strengthening regional and pan-ethnic organizations.<sup>28</sup> This finding presents a caveat to much of the current literature on identity politics that claims that diasporic identities and increasing migratory flows—both within nations and outside them—have largely displaced local identities. Yet, my work indicates that in practice people continue to identify with local spaces. Within the Indian movement, demands for land are juxtaposed to demands that transcend specific locales and territories, such as demands for cultural revival, national bi-lingual education, and protection from racial discrimination. These latter demands are not entirely removed from local spaces, yet do not completely transcend them either. A key question within the Indian movement today is how to forge regional and pan-ethnic identities without abandoning indigenous peoples' historic connection to the land, which is becoming increasingly tenuous.

RAP proponents have also attempted to transcend local identities by deliberately designing their project to be multi-ethnic, again taken from the Tojolabal experience of living side-by-side with Tzeltals in Altamirano and mestizos in the municipalities of Independencia and La Trinitaria. As Araceli Burguete put it: "Our experience was that it was possible to live together with autonomous governments that were governments for all people because we had come from an experience of political formation where Tzotziles,

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<sup>24</sup>Reports on the extent of integration and consolidation of the RAP project within the Tojolabal region differ greatly depending on the person with whom you are speaking. In an interview published in *La Jornada* on November 4, 1995, Luis Hernández, secretary general of CIOAC-Chiapas and Tojolabal leader, affirms that thirty-seven of the communities in the CIOAC (border) region are in the process of integration in the autonomy process: fourteen from Pueblos Tojolabales; ten from Yajk'achil B'ej and thirteen from Tierra y Libertad (Morquecho and Rojas 1994).

<sup>25</sup> Interview with author, Comitán, December 18, 1995.

<sup>26</sup> A.G., interview with author, Comitán, Chiapas, December 18, 1995.

<sup>27</sup> E.M., interview with author, ejido Tabasco, Las Margaritas, January 2, 1996.

<sup>28</sup> Ejido assemblies typically elect the municipal agent and other local officials. Minor crimes are resolved within the community and region without having to go to the municipal judge in Las Margaritas, punishments are set by the communities, and most have their own jails.

Tzeltales, Tojolabales, and mestizos all shared one region."<sup>29</sup> Yet, Tojolabales continue to identify predominantly with their ejido community, especially in the highland region of Las Margaritas. Multi-ethnic organization has been easier in the selva since Tojolabales have uprooted themselves and left their communities of origin to create new ones in the Lacandón.

In the months following the Zapatista uprising, the attention of politicians and the public focused briefly on Indian rights. Indian leaders in Chiapas wanted to ensure legal protection for some form of autonomy during what they understood to be a limited window of opportunity. So, using this logic, even though little grassroots work had been done in Chiapas on how the RAPs would function in practice, Antonio Hernández Cruz thought that "we must declare the RAPs where the conditions are present...where they are not we must say that we are in the process of forming the regions."<sup>30</sup> This attitude, in part, explains the CEOIC's declaration of seven RAPs in Chiapas on October 12, 1994. While understandable on a strategic level, the follow-up and operationalization of the RAP has been very difficult since leaders-- both Indian and mestizo-- designed the project. This is not to say that autonomy does not exist as a daily practice: the election of local leaders and the exercise of local forms of justice and community decision-making illustrate that the practice of autonomy is widespread in Chiapas. It does mean, however, that much political work remains to be done on forging a regional identity among Tojolabales and other indigenous peoples in the state.

My research suggests that there is a gap between Indian leaders' discourse about Indian autonomy and its practice within Indian communities. Leaders use the autonomy issue as a way of differentiating Indian communities from other groups within the larger society, while in practice the boundaries between political and legal practices among Indian and mestizo communities might not be as stark as leaders' discourse suggest. In her work among Indian communities in the highlands of Puebla, Maria Teresa Sierra noted a gap between collective discourse about autonomy and the individual exercise of Indian law within indigenous communities. She summarized her findings by saying that:

It is important to differentiate what seems to be an individual strategy from a collective strategy when considering the uses of law and custom. From a collective perspective, Indian organizations tend to revindicate tradition and customary law to differentiate themselves from the dominant culture, building an imaginary community rooted in harmony and consensus, isolated from the negative influences of the official legality. This discourse contrasts with everyday social practice where individuals are confronted with particular needs that they try to meet with whatever means they have, taking advantage of law and customs. These two levels of analysis correspond in fact to different aspects of reality.... My research suggests that the concept of customary law commonly invoked by Indian organizations when they propose an autonomous Indian legal system is better understood as political rhetoric than as an argument based on a description of practices in Indian communities (Sierra 1995: 250).

Since 1994, Indian leaders have articulated ambitious plans for regional and communal autonomy. Yet, because little is known about concrete legal practices within Indian communities, it is difficult to determine the extent to which leaders are using these plans for political purposes and the extent to which they are describing actual relationships between Indian communities and the state and between Indian law and positive law. My work in the Tojolabal region suggests the preliminary conclusion that legal practices exercised within communities reflect a dynamic mixture between Indian law and positive law. This mix also occurs with regards to autonomy. Leaders who insist that Indian law and autonomy do not integrate norms and practices emanating from positive law misrepresent the relationship and historic interaction between the two systems.

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<sup>29</sup> Araceli Burguete Cal y Mayor, interview with author, San Cristóbal de las Casas, April 9, 1996.

<sup>30</sup> Comment made by Antonio Hernández Cruz in a session held on Indian autonomy and rights during the 1995 ANIPA congress held in San Cristóbal de las Casas in December.

### Concluding remarks

Indians today seek independence from the state and they desire to be self-governing-- on the communal, municipal, and regional levels. They also seek state recognition of this autonomy. Is this an unresolvable contradiction? In the Mexican context, Indian activists demand that the state recognize their right to autonomy, but they also insist that the state fulfill its general responsibility to indigenous people as citizens (education, health care, and housing) as well as meet their particular needs as Indians (bi-lingual education, state respect for the use of indigenous languages, and cultural preservation).<sup>31</sup> How do Indian autonomy projects envision the relationship between the state and autonomous communities, municipalities, and regions? Does autonomy mean independence from the state, and, if so, to what extent? What responsibility would the state have under a regime of autonomy? These questions are important ones that autonomy proponents have not fully addressed to date. Likewise, responsibilities that correspond to the state under the autonomy proposals have not been concretely defined; even the accords reached in San Andrés are imprecise on this note.<sup>32</sup> Indians are demanding that the state protect and guarantee their rights as citizens of the Mexican state. Yet, they also demand political autonomy, that is, freedom from state intrusion into their internal laws and practices. Fernando Escalante, a well-known Mexican sociologist, has accused Indians of hypocrisy for desiring both autonomy and state recognition. "Now, on the one hand," Escalante says, "they [Indians] ask that they [the government] leave them alone to produce and that intermediaries leave, and on the other hand, they demand education, health, social spending, and guaranteed prices. These are contradictory demands" (Escalante cited in Correa and Corro 1996: 24).

Proponents of Indian autonomy defend their position by stating that "autonomy does not mean that the state should abrogate its responsibility to its citizens."<sup>33</sup> Guillermo de la Peña (1996) and Neil Harvey (1997) explain this seeming contradiction by arguing that indigenous peoples in Mexico demand "ethnic citizenship": access to both citizenship rights and preferential rights based on ethnic identity. Similarly, in his work on the 1990 Indian uprising in Ecuador, León Zamosc argues-- against critics who claim that the uprising was a reaction against modernity-- that the Indian movement highlights the hypocritical modernity advanced by the current regime. Zamosc claims that the rhetoric about universal citizenship put forth by liberal Ecuadorian statesmen was not matched by democratic institutions that allowed for popular

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<sup>31</sup> In the Mexican context, Indians' desire for state recognition is not only a question of dignity and authenticity. Because the Mexican state controls a disproportionate amount of resources-- compared to Western European and North American states-- Indians have little choice other than to solicit monies from state officials.

<sup>32</sup> In the second of three documents signed by the EZLN and the government in February, 1996, in San Andrés Larraínzar, Chiapas, it is stated that: (1) "we are to create a new juridical framework that establishes a new relationship between Indian peoples and the State, with a foundation in the recognition of the right to free-determination and the juridical, political, social, economic, and cultural rights that are to be derived from them. 1a The new constitutional dispositions must include a framework of autonomy; (2) Autonomy is the concrete expression of the exercise of free determination, expressed as a framework that conforms to part of the nation-state. Indian peoples can, in consequence, decide their form of internal government and their own ways of organizing themselves politically, socially, economically, and culturally. Within this new constitutional framework of autonomy, the right to free determination on the part of Indian peoples is to be respected in each one of the levels on which they are to be enforced, encompassing one or more Indian communities that conform to particular circumstances in each state and municipality. The exercise of autonomy on the part of Indian peoples will contribute to the democratization of national life and will strengthen the sovereignty of the country.

In a subsequent sub-section of this document entitled "Competencies," it states that "it is necessary to configure a concurrent provision dealing with agencies and institutions of the federal, state, and municipal governments as well as the distribution of political, administrative, economic, social, and cultural, educational, and judicial competencies, the management of resources, and the protection of the environment between these institutions and levels of government and the State in order to respond in an opportune manner to the requirements and demands of Indian peoples. Similarly, we must specify the faculties, functions, and resources that may be transferred to indigenous communities under the criteria established in the addendum 5.2 of the document entitled "Pronunciamientos Conjuntos" as well as the diverse manners in which Indian peoples will participate in front of government agencies and institutions with the goal of interaction and coordination with the latter, particularly at the municipal level" ("*Propuestas Conjuntas que el gobierno federal y el EZLN se comprometen a enviar a las instancias de debate y decision nacional*, January 18, 1996).

<sup>33</sup> Araceli Burguete Cal y Mayor, interview with author, San Cristóbal de las Casas, April 9, 1996.



participation. Indians, he argues, are demanding a more inclusive citizenship than the Ecuadorian state has offered in practice:

The Indians' explicit demands show that they are interested in the material benefits of development and wish to be citizens of the Ecuadorian state. What they seem to want is a different kind of modernity: one that would provide self-determination, a space of their own to try to be what they are discovering they want to be (Zamosc 1994: 65).

The Zapatistas and the national Indian movement in Mexico have shown that people can belong to the nation in different ways. These movements have demonstrated the possibility of holding multiple affiliations: one can be Mexican, modern, and Indian. The EZLN has been interested in the formation of a national movement that would encompass the entire country, yet they have insisted that regional and local bases be the foundation of any broader movement. Yet, the local version of nationalism has not, according to Lomnitz-Adler (1996) and others, devised a political formula that functions in a contested democratic field and offers the kind of state protection that revolutionary nationalism provided.

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