

THE MEANING AND SCOPE OF THE STRUGGLE FOR AUTONOMY

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The term autonomy holds a central position in the current intellectual debate and political struggle in Mexico. It refers particularly to the Indian peoples, but involves the entire country.

I examine here the current meaning of the term, as used in popular movements, and present the hypothesis that although it already forms a part of their own tradition, it also corresponds to a new semantic constellation of social transformation. It expresses, in contemporary terms, the old dispute between the elites' project and the people's project, for the definition and constitution of political power and the State.

I. THE POLITICAL DISPUTE

The extinction of the founding project

Mexico was the fruit of an unfortunate invention.¹ The country became an independent State before having constituted itself as a nation (Wolf, 1958). In the small, predominantly Criollo group that conceived this State, there existed a combination of two things: first, the anxiety of some to use, to their own advantage, the Spanish system of domination and second, the obsession of others to bring to the new country they dreamed of, even by force, the institutions that were in fashion in the countries that were a model for them.

The ideas of nation that nourished the intellectual and political movement that led to independence from Spain, such as those of Clavijero², were inspired by foreign experiences: "Almost no one was thinking based on the Mexican realities of the moment" (Gonzalez y Gonzalez, 1974, p. 92). Neither did they take into account the culture, hopes and aspirations of the majority of people who would be converted into Mexican citizens. When all these ideas were formally crystallized into the Constitutional Act of the Federation, approved on January 31 of 1824, they were left reduced to the molds of the States that they were imitating.

The continuous obsession that followed, to give more solid roots to the national project, was never able to escape this dilemma that still today operates like a strait-jacket: the ideas are considered to be "the root and legal foundation of the Nation, the concrete manifestation of the democratic ideals of the Mexican people, a form of government that remains valid today"³. Because of this, among other reasons, the invention of Mexico is so unfortunate. None of the later Constitutions or national projects have been able to go beyond the inability to recognize the basic plurality of the country, or the actual condition of the majority of its inhabitants. They have dedicated themselves to "forge a nation", to use Gamio's celebrated phrase, but the realization that it does not exist has been used to force reality into the imported design inscribed in the founding act, even against the prevailing feelings. In this way, an interminable dispute has been opened among Mexicans that is the origin of a good part of the ills that have plagued the Republic since its birth.

Guillermo Bonfil identified the nature of this permanent dispute as a question of civilization: he showed the differences between two sectors of Mexican society, that he called "imaginary Mexico"

and "deep Mexico", and revealed that their differences stem from their two essentially distinct forms of thinking and behaving.⁴ He called imaginary Mexico that which the political and intellectual elites of the country form: the Mexicans that have embodied and promoted the dominant project ever since the founding of the Mexican State, in order to construct the nation in the mold of Western civilization. He called deep Mexico to that which has been formed by those who are rooted in forms of living of a Middle-American lineage, who do not share the Western project, or who assume it from a different cultural perspective. (Bonfil, 1987, pp. 9-10)

According to this distinction, the current counterposition between the Mexicans is not only of an economic nature: between the rich and the poor, the haves and the have-nots. Neither is it confined to an ideological, party or religious affiliation, or to the political or economic "model" to adopt in the face of current predicaments. All these contradictions do exist, but it would not be possible to understand them and even less so to resolve them if they are not framed, as Bonfil points out, in the challenge represented by the presence of two civilizations, two different horizons of intelligibility, in the same society. "Because two civilizations signify two civilizing projects, two ideal models of the society to which one aspires, two different possible futures. Any decision taken to reorient the country, any path that is taken with the hope of coming out of the current crisis, implies an option that is in the favor of one of these civilizing projects and against the other" (Bonfil, 1987, p.9).

Prior to Bonfil, this counterposition had barely been perceived. After his death, the general adoption of his terms was frequently accompanied by a forgetting of its meanings. Such forms of negation of a general and obvious reality of the country have a variety of motives and reasons. Some are strictly ideological: the conviction of the elites that all Mexicans are irremediably inscribed in the Western matrix, for example, has weighed far too heavily. The inexactitude of the term (with its implicit opposition to the "Eastern" matrix that no one in Mexico argue for), has contributed to create this prejudice that denies the civilizing matrix of the majority of the Mexicans. Also contributing to this is the affirmation of the condition of mestizo as the fundamental trait of the national being. Such condition is real and has saved the country from dangerous obsessions about "racial purity". But what has no basis in reality is the generalized assumption that the interminable mixing of blood, which makes almost all Mexicans into mestizos, determines that everyone thinks and behaves in the same way, within the same civilizing matrix and the same mythical system.

One other factor has weighed even more heavily than the ideological one in this negation and forgetting of that which separates us from each other. The counter-position of these two civilizing projects is not one that is commonly sensed or lived, since the project of deep Mexico has not really existed as such. Continually occupied with a struggle of resistance, generally dispersed and badly articulated, deep Mexico has lacked an explicit project to oppose the dominant project. Because of this, among other factors, it has always remained in a subordinate position. The public debate about a national project has always been occupied by the proposals emerging from imaginary Mexico. These proposals, even while different and opposed among themselves, always correspond to the dominant vision.

This situation is about to end. For the first time, the project of deep Mexico is taking shape. For the first time, the order of the day for Mexican society includes an alternative to the project that has been dominant since the day the country was founded. And this is not the fruit of the sudden emergence of a proposal that was not able to be formulated for almost 200 years. Rather, it is the fruit of two concrete factors:

1. The growing awareness of the social majorities regarding the urgent need to oppose the current version of the dominant project, in which there is no dignified place for them, and to replace it with a united project that can accommodate the diversity of their conceptions and interests.⁵

2. The fact that this version, which was just one more effort to end the old historical dispute among the Mexicans, had an unexpected and counterproductive effect: it made the original invention of the country convulse to such a degree that remaining in it appears to be a sure formula for destruction.⁶

Deep Mexico is not only made up of Indian peoples, although it was born from them. A wide majority of the national society belong to it. But the minority that makes up imaginary Mexico is growing continually and becoming more aggressive every day.⁷ It is possible that a significant portion of those who affiliate themselves with the dominant project are not doing so out of conviction, as a free expression of their desire, but because of the perception that no alternatives exist. The evidence that they do exist, as diverse political and intellectual currents try to show, can modify the composition of the two sides in conflict. Also contributing is the fact that, as its struggle moves from one of resistance to one of liberation, deep Mexico is giving the project it is trying to conceive an inclusive character that can set the bases for an agreement of harmonious coexistence capable of forming a general consensus of a type that the versions of the dominant project have never achieved.

In the public debate, the national agenda for 1997 is centered around the elections. It is thought that these can be a groundbreaker that can open an effective "transition to democracy". The "economic model" is also a subject of continuous attention. The group in power tries to gain time, in order to consolidate the recuperation that they announce every day and which begins to be translated as "well-being for families"; in this way they would be able to carry out the current "model" and the political project corresponding to it. No one can succeed in separating it from its path, which it considers as the only right path. This is why the conviction is growing among those who challenge this path that only with an accumulation of political power, for example from a majority in Congress, can the direction be corrected. No party, in any case, proposes such a correction as a substantial shift, and without this the exclusive character of the dominant project would be maintained.

According to my hypothesis, the very result of the elections or the adjustments in the structure of power that they may produce will undoubtedly only acquire their full meaning if they contribute to channelling the historical dispute between Mexicans, through a new and inclusive national project.

The transition

On January 1, 1994 the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (or EZLN, the Spanish acronym) challenged the group headed by Salinas. In giving a new life to the cause of Indian peoples, it also gave a boost to diverse popular movements, who took up their old desires and tried, since then, to join forces to give shape to a new social pact and a new national project. They did not aim to return to the regime inherited from the Revolution, but to achieve what that Revolution and all previous ones were incapable of achieving: a social pact with a true participation of all, and a project for the nation and the State that finally recognized the plurality of the people and cultures that form it, and the diversity of their ideals. This alternative project has not yet been completely outlined, but it has allowed authentic options to the dominant project to be raised; options to a project that no longer has the attraction and credibility that it seemed to have until 1993.

The current political transition represents a step towards a new regime. It is a revolutionary transition: it represents a substantial change in political leadership, as well as in the political, economic and social relationships between Mexicans and their general situation (Pasquino, 1982, p. 145). Once again, people's traditions confronts those of the elites in an effort to define the characteristics of the new regime. The majority wishes to take this step in a peaceful manner, appealing to legal and political procedures. There is a desire to have a pact about the transition and to avoid a situation where the new regime defines itself through sudden maneuvering or violence. That was the mandate that an alert and mobilized society gave to the EZLN, when it supported their causes, in all the historical density of the old popular spirit, but rejected their means. And it is a mandate that the EZLN has complied with rigorously. In keeping with its original definition and taking the relevant lessons from historical experience, it has dedicated itself to promoting political spaces that allow a unification of the many voices and currents of popular momentum, so that this time it can prevail over the voice of the elites.

One of the factors that conspire against the ordering of the current situation is the ruling confusion. From above, in the dominant public debate, change is presented as a simple adjustment in the existing structure, in order to fulfill the task that Salinas left pending: political reform. It is hoped that by substituting a State party presidentialist regime for a democracy more in line with the current canons in the "advanced" societies, Mexicans will be able to define for themselves the direction for the country and will make, if necessary, the pertinent adjustments to the economic model in use. This focus, which is shared by both the government and the parties despite the fact that they carry on an interminable dispute about times and forms, is no more than a variation on the historical project of the elites. This project always included -- although it always postponed -- the establishment of a formal or representative democracy in one of a number of variations (centralist or federalist, presidentialist or parliamentary, etc.). Nevertheless, this treatment of the transition would tend towards the consolidation of the "neoliberal revolution", whether in its current form or in the variations promoted from the left or the right. The reactions that this would produce in those who support a popular project, and who would see in this consolidation the risk of remaining frustrated forever and of continuing suffering the consequences of the current path, could propitiate a serious political setback, deepening the authoritarianism of the present regime.

Under the terms in which it is presented, the "neoliberal revolution" can only continue its advance by force and through manipulation from the State, as has occurred up to now. The fact that President Salinas postponed the political reform was not an act of stubbornness or blindness: only with the use of the antidemocratic resources of the old regime was it possible to advance in the construction of what he had conceived. The difficulty continues today, aggravated by the increasing resistance of the operators of those resources to participate in a project that would inevitably displace them. Unable to formulate clear alternatives, as was shown in the XVII Assembly of the PRI, they cannot make the project theirs nor can they break with it, in the same way that they could neither expel Salinas from, nor accept his continued membership in, the party. Thus survives a fundamental contradiction of the project: it cannot be carried out effectively without a full establishment of formal democracy, nor can it submit itself to an authentic citizen consultation in its current state. Although there continue to be advances in this path in fundamental aspects, with the full backing of the internal and external forces that are promoting it, it confronts increasing difficulties and risks.

People's aspirations cannot be contained within formal democracy: social majorities have their own conception of what democracy means. It is for this reason that the current transition depends in large part on the notion of democracy that manages to prevail in the country. It is not a matter of simply adjusting the present regime or the agony of the one inherited from the Revolution: rather, it is the last phase of the old historical dispute between Mexicans to define the direction of the country. The project that is still dominant tries to incorporate this dispute into the style that prevails in the world now, in the end of the 20th Century, in order for it to confront, without political setbacks, the exacerbation of its contradictions in the era of "globalization". The other project, which sees in the former option a perspective of marginalization for the majorities, tries to carry out the first revolution of the 21st Century: a radical democratic revolution, based in the commons. But only by looking back with clarity, taking relevant lessons from people's struggles, will it be possible to cross the present bridge peacefully and to start to construct, on the other side, the society in which the majority of Mexicans have been dreaming ever since they acquired that condition.

The construction of people's project

It is necessary to explain, first of all, the prolonged absence of people's project. The word project expresses the idea of "to go forward" (the meaning of the Latin word *proiectus*); it alludes to the act of throwing oneself towards the future. In Mexican Spanish, the word refers to "the idea that one has about something that one wants to do, and how to do it"⁸. These meanings of the word are applied with precision to the vision of the elites, to their ideas and behavior, installed as they are in modern western thinking, which defines itself among other things by breaking with the past, in which everything is predetermined, in order to "throw oneself towards the future".

The modern Western man wants to construct the world in his image and resemblance (the image which he has of himself and the world), instead of resigning himself to be constructed in the image and resemblance of God. (Villoro, 1992). For this construction, which defines him, he needs a project. It is a compulsion which Mexican elites have inherited and taken on as their own. For them, however, it was not necessary to invent a project: it was already given; they had the Western project

which they accepted as their own and presumed universal.⁹ The only thing lacking was to impose it, with the adaptations that each generation decided was convenient, according to the illusions which each forged about himself or about the nation.

In contrast, the political expressions of deep Mexico have not been shaped into plans and projects, and much less into a national project. This can be explained due to a variety of reasons. First of all, the groups which form this sector of society have been characteristically scattered, disarticulated; they have not been able to find, until now, a common voice representative of all and which, even more importantly, articulates a common project for the nation as a whole. Moreover, for the most part, they have been dedicated to resistance. Their periodic rebellions, generally localized and more or less ephemeral, have been organized more **against** specific oppressors, than **for** a general idea. Within the social order as a whole they have been characteristically pledged to resistance, not to liberation. They have lacked the serenity, strength and the circumstances which encourage the conception of a general political project.

Secondly, the specific cosmovisions which prevail in deep Mexico, of a Middle-American type, do not give birth naturally to "projects" in the sense of western modernity. They refuse to impose the rupture with the past which defines these projects and which often are but a flight towards the future. This type of flight became typical in the United States, where the lack of a past made it easier to do without.¹⁰ Some groups from deep Mexico still conserve the traditional mentality, which turns the past into destiny, and converts the future into an endless repetition or a return to the origin. More and more, however, they accept being updated; they accept the contemporariness of their existence as an exercise which gives continuity to tradition without breaking with the past, as a way of recovering the present.

They resist, moreover, the arrogance of the modern man, in his pretension of being god. They know that they can not live without an image of the future, but they do not try to control it: instead of the expectations of the modern man, based on the assumption that the future is programmable, they sustain hopes, knowing that these may or may not be fulfilled. They shelter them, so that they don't freeze, but they don't hang themselves from their hopes. In this sense, they go beyond modernity without remaining in it or in pre-modernity. They have an ancient philosophical attitude that has been appearing as a novelty in the West and that can be found in some thinkers who are mistakenly called post-modern.

In the third place, out of these cosmovisions of deep Mexico it is not natural to see projects of domination of the type that necessarily define a nation-State. The majorities that make up deep Mexico possess a different notion of power, and conceive forms of social organization that do not fit within this legal-political design. Given that the ideas of nation that have prevailed in the country, as national projects, have been prisoners of the format of the Mexican State, people's spirit has not been able to adopt them. Perhaps the episode that best illustrates this condition is that of the armies of Villa and Zapata, when they occupied the capital of the Republic and then decided to abandon it: they had not made their revolution in order to "take power" and to carry out, from there, a "national project" that they had not conceived nor wished to conceive.

For these and other reasons, deep Mexico has lacked a "national project". It proposes this task for itself now, for the first time. And the challenge lies in articulating it without ceasing to be what they are, without reducing the project to a form that is unacceptable or inconceivable. At the same time they face the challenge of giving it an inclusive character that does not reproduce a reverse exclusion and subordination of the type that they have suffered.

According to Luis González y González, the direction that Mexico has taken has always been determined by small governing minorities (González y González, 1984, 1989). This hypothesis, so enlightening for the first 150 years of national life, would have to be substantially revised to examine the current situation and perspectives. It is true that "in the rising capitalist world, in the world of the last three centuries, in the time of the independent nations, those truly responsible for social change are the governing minorities; groups of eminent men, assemblies of the notable, not faceless masses nor champions"(González y González, 1989, p.127). But this situation has been modified everywhere in the "era of globalization". Particularly in Mexico, the intensification of the direct or indirect interactions with the outside, and the role of the mass media in the shaping of citizens' thought and behavior has modified the mechanisms of constitution and operation of the governing minority and their function in society.

For many, the primary challenge of the current transition consists in modifying the manner of constituting this governing center of national life. It is a matter of substituting the deaf struggle of factions which since the 1920's has determined the pyramid structure of political power, for a regime of effective suffrage, as well as widening citizen participation in the orientation of national life, reducing the influence of the governing minority and that of the media.

This challenge is real and it is necessary to confront it. But it should not be confused with one of much greater transcendence, one which reflects the counterposition between two radically different political styles. One sticks to the dominant political mythology, which since 1820 has lived off of Hegel's apothegm: the people cannot govern themselves. According to this style, the political question is reduced to the form of defining who should govern, that is, the formally democratic or despotic ways of constructing political power (its center). The other style breaks with this tradition. It does not concentrate on the substitution of a "governing minority" for another, more favorable to people's efforts. Rather, it focuses on constructing another form of society and of government, in which the people are not only formal owners of political power but can actually have, maintain and exercise power. It is this challenge, not the first, which defines the current counterposition between the elites' project and the people's project. The way this challenge is resolved will determine not only the possibility of peacefully organizing the transition; it will also determine the direction that the country will take, and the character of the regime with which Mexico will begin the 21st Century.

The reconstitution of the country

The Constitution does not make up society, but the reverse: it is society that makes up its Constitution. Theoretically and formally, this is done by **all** society: the Constitution is thus the expression of a collective will, of a pact that **all** members of a social body celebrate and subscribe

to, in order to regulate their coexistence. In reality, the Constitution of a country is elaborated and promoted by a small group that **formally** represents all citizens. That formal representation is determined by the **real factors of power** that exist in society, that is, by the form in which power is organized in society. "Constitutional problems are not primarily problems of law, but of power" (Lasalle, 1976, p. 5).

If certain formalities have been fulfilled, established in the Constitution itself, it is **formally** obligatory for all citizens and this document is given the character of **fundamental** law, which establishes the basic principles of legislation and government in a country. These principles express at the same time a **real situation** or position and a **program**: it is not the position or true will of all the citizens or inhabitants of a country, but the position of the factors of power that determine the terms of the applicable social pact. This pact defines the frame within which social transformations must be kept, in keeping with the correlation of political forces that sustain the Constitution.

The current Mexican Constitution, whose articles have gone through 325 changes since 1917, does not reflect the collective will of the Mexicans: it does not express the form in which Mexican society is currently constituted, that is, the correlation of its factors of power or the way in which power is organized in Mexico. The groups that currently dominate State organs, from the PRI or the government, are set on maintaining this imbalance that allows them to have a greater representation than their real power. In addition, they hinder progress towards the implementation of genuinely democratic procedures to construct the State organs, as the recent electoral reforms illustrate and as is made clear in every electoral exercise.

Due to this and other factors, the Constitution itself has turned into an obstacle to the efforts of many Mexicans who are looking to re-constitute the social order. This reconstitution implies new changes in the real factors of power, that would lead to the organization of a Constituent Congress, developed following legally appropriate procedures. This Congress would be capable of elaborating and promoting a new Constitution which would be an expression of the new situation of the Mexican society and its program.

A growing number of Mexicans are actively pursuing the organization of a process that would lead to the elaboration of a new Constitution.¹¹

In general, they want to do this in a peaceful, political and legal manner. They try to avoid a situation in which a violent commotion would impose once again on Mexicans a new "social pact" that would be only one of form. For this reason, there is a multiplication of initiatives and efforts to reconstitute Mexican society from the ground up; to redesign its political bodies and to modify its factors of power. This is so that all Mexicans can participate effectively in the conception of that fundamental legal instrument that can guide and regulate their coexistence, and so that this participation is done through legal and political procedures, not through violence.

Meanwhile, changes are being promoted in the Constitution and laws, some of which --such as the recent reforms in electoral law-- reflect changes in the position of the factors of power. These

changes do not refer to new forms of social existence, which have not crystallized yet, but to transformations in the system of regulation of social order. This has the goal of creating political spaces that allow progress toward the reconstitution of the society that is promoting it. The effort is to eliminate the barriers inserted into the current Constitution, to adapt it more to current conditions and to liberate social forces capable of promoting the transformations that are considered necessary and desirable.

The Agreements of San Andrés between the EZLN and the federal government are inscribed within that process. Because of the measure to which they express, in an articulated and consensual manner, Indian claims that were formulated in the first National Indigenous Forum, ratified in the National Indigenous Congress and agreed on with the Federal Government, they represent by themselves a political change that contributes to the reconstitution of Mexican society. Nevertheless, they do not express the form in which society is currently comprised --the correlation among all its factors of power. Even less do they reflect the form that this will have when the reconstitution currently being promoted finally crystallizes. **They only reflect a provisional and limited compromise between some factors of power that determine the relationship between the Indian peoples and the Mexican state.**¹²

Despite this limitation, which has resulted up to now in a lack of its enforcement, they were able to define constitutional reforms that can unleash the process that will lead to a new social pact, and that basically is comprised of the following:

1. Rights of the peoples: A claim to the right of recognition of INDIGENOUS PEOPLES as such, and therefore to their right to FREE DETERMINATION. This right is not proposed as a claim to SOVEREIGNTY but to AUTONOMY, and this implies the following:

a) The recognition of the COMMUNITIES as BODIES OF PUBLIC LAW and of the right of COMMUNITIES AND MUNICIPALITIES to ASSOCIATE FREELY TO CONCERT AND COORDINATE THEIR ACTIONS.

b) The recognition of the TERRITORIES and of the JURISDICTION of the indigenous peoples. As far as jurisdiction is concerned, there is a claim to the recognition and respect of: their INTERNAL NORMATIVE SYSTEMS; their OWN FORMS OF GOVERNMENT, which implies the delegation of faculties and competence to their organizations, including their own procedures for the ELECTION OF LOCAL AUTHORITIES; and SPECIFIC NORMS AND INSTITUTIONS, in order to give attention to their needs, agreed upon between the indigenous peoples themselves and the State, thus substituting the indigenist conceptions for others that are pluralist.

2. The rights of the indigenous people: A SPECIAL TREATMENT is claimed for the indigenous people that recognizes their CULTURAL SPECIFICITIES (particularly language), when they are migrants or facing state or federal court procedures.

To change the way of changing

If the Agreements of San Andrés and the constitutional and legal reforms that derive from them are important due to their content and scope, they are even more so due to the way in which these were concerted and formulated.

One way of appreciating the significance of this could be comparing it with the form taken by the Constitutional reforms made by Salinas. These reforms can be seen as a partial change in the political regime, due to the extent to which they dismantled some of the fundamental pillars of the 1917 Constitution. In contrast with the top-down, manipulative initiative of Salinas that marginalized or snubbed all opposition, and coopted or repressed all adverse reactions, the Agreements of San Andrés were the fruit of a civil insurrection that included broad levels of society. The actual task of formulating the Agreements and of the constitutional reforms in which these would be expressed was formally given to a small group who negotiated on behalf of the involved parties or the bodies of mediation and conciliation. However, these agreements and reforms were not created in this group; their task could be reduced to giving technical legal form to matters that had been widely discussed in the communities, among the peoples and inside all sorts of public fora.

In Mexico, no other initiative of constitutional or legal reform was made based on a popular movement. There is an evident analogy to be made between this initiative and the formulation of the Constitution of 1917, which gives full meaning to the Convention of Aguascalientes, first for the National Democratic Convention and then for the "Aguascalientes" of the Zapatista area.¹³ It is a partial, limited analogy that nevertheless reflects a lesson from history that is of greater significance: the substitution of violence for a resort to legal and political procedures.

In this case, the violence of the insurgents was limited to a few days and a small area of the country. Despite the fact that the violence of the dominant regime has continued manifesting itself in a thousand different ways in Chiapas and the rest of Mexico, as has been denounced continuously, the Zapatistas have not fired a single shot since January 12, 1994. They have focused their efforts, in a dignified and ever-more lucid way, on political and legal forms to achieve the goals that motivated their rebellion: substantial changes in Mexican society and its political regime.

In a very precise way, the current revolutionary call of the Zapatistas is not an invitation to pick up arms, but to lay them down, without surrendering the push for change. And they are achieving their goal, at the speed that the circumstances allow and that is understandable in processes of this type. In this way they are giving new value to legal procedures which, for almost 200 years, were discredited by the very people in charge of implementing them.

When the dust settles on these years and it becomes possible to see the current events from a distance, we may be able to gain perspective on the meaning of the different links in the chain of turbulence that the current generation has had to live. At that time, this change in the way of changing will perhaps be recognized as being in a central position.

II. THE PROTAGONISTS AND THE DIRECTION OF CHANGE

The tactic is opposite to the strategy, as the means are contrary to the ends. Arms are used to establish peace. A surgeon cuts with a scalpel the body that is thus cured. Applied in politics, this form of approaching human predicaments tends to turn the present into a forever-postponed future. To reach legitimate and accepted ends, means are used that deny the ends and that slowly turn the means themselves into ends: to achieve democracy, authoritarian means are used; vertical systems of domination and control that become impossible to give up (like the monopoly of the State on "legitimate" violence or the bureaucratic vertical structure of its instruments of power). Using these means, the state eventually proclaims itself as a stable one, where the ends are fulfilled. Expressions that are a contradiction in terms, such as "nuclear protection" or "military intelligence" are presented as descriptions of the general spirit, when they are actually a substantive negation of this spirit. "Democratic government" today is not a designation based in people's power, but the opposite: a form of domination in which this power is entirely an illusion.

The effective practice of radical democracy¹⁴ requires that this treatment be dissolved, thus eliminating the contradiction between effectiveness and morality that is unresolvable in formal democracy. Formal democracy "has nothing of good in and of itself: all forms of good come from somewhere else, not from democracy". (Popper, 1997, p.116). Only when the general and continuous intermediation of the centralist State is eliminated, together with the "rule of law" (that legalizes rights and turns the law into the state) (Bobbio, 1982), will it be possible to build political bodies at a human scale, in which virtue can be practiced (Esteva, 1994, 1996; Groeneveld, 1990; Illich, 1978; Lummis, 1996).

The change that is being proposed now requires a change in the way of changing. Change itself, and not only its result, needs to be die-cast in a mold that reflects what is wanted. If what is wanted is for people to take their destiny into their hands, then it is the people themselves that must be in charge of carrying out the transformation. They must do this without surrendering their will, even for a provisional or temporary reason, to popular leaders, the distinguished vanguard, political parties or instruments of power. The active subject of change, its protagonist, must be at the same time the cause and effect of change itself. And this is what it truly means to reassess the meaning of "civil society".

Civil Society

Marcos, the speaker for the Zapatistas, was asked if they were not betting too heavily on the civil society. He responded without hesitation: "And how is it possible that we not bet on it, when it has shown what it is capable of so many times!" When it was pointed out to him that the civil society still appeared to be very disorganized and somewhat slow, he countered with a smile: "and nevertheless, it moves ..." (*La Jornada*, 25-26 August 1995)

References to "civil society" are constant in the Zapatista discourse. This discourse finds broad response, but it is also a source of confusion, given the long and twisted conceptual and practical

history of the expression.¹⁵ It is not necessary to go over this history to appreciate the meaning of its recent use, in a very specific historical context.

In its current incarnation, the notion of civil society is identified clearly with popular movements, in Eastern Europe as well as in Latin America. These popular movements did not adopt the classic forms of class organization or parties to replace authoritarian regimes. Their theoretical points of reference often include Gramsci, but they also use ideas and experiences that come from a variety of diverse traditions. The common denominator of these movements is the autonomy of the organizations that form them, their independence from the State and their antagonism to it.

This notion of civil society has nothing to do with the uses that are currently given to it within the conceptions of liberal pluralism; uses that are more in agreement with the tradition of the term. In these versions, instead of the independent organizations of people and popular movements, it is the private sector that appears as the central actor in civil society. In addition, this civil society is guided by a spirit of competition.¹⁶ The antagonism here with the State is of a different order. In fact, when liberals and neoliberals proclaim now: "as much society as possible, as little government as necessary", they are expressing **the opposite** of what the popular movements are proposing, both theoretically and practically. The popular movements search to have as much governing of behavior and happenings as possible, but by the people themselves, in their own daily lives. There appears to be agreement as far as the need to reduce, marginalize and control the State, but the liberals transfer the **function** of government to private enterprise, under the pseudo-anarchistic illusion of a self-regulated market. The popular incarnation of civil society tries to wrench this function from the State in order to return it to the people, not to a private sector which does not appear to inspire great confidence in the people.¹⁷

In Mexico, two specific moments give new credit and meaning to the term civil society. The movements and initiatives associated with the 1985 earthquake defined civil society as the "community efforts of self-help and solidarity, the space independent of government, strictly speaking the zone of antagonism" (Monsiváis, 1987, pp. 78-79). After a period of silent accumulation of forces, in which **insurgence** replace **guerilla**, **liberation** replaces **development** and **independent organizations**¹⁸ are accredited, the 1994 insurrection extends what as began in 1917 ("the people" as an alternative to "the nation"), in such a way that "the forms of organization that people give themselves, even if provisional and eventually revocable, constitute the civil society, whose expression defines "the popular will". (Aubry, 1994, p.9).

Civil society is thus defined as the sphere of society that organizes itself in an autonomous way, in opposition to the sphere that has been established by the State and/or is directly controlled by it or is associated with it. It is not a substitute for other expressions that carry the same weight of antagonism and a similar general political sense. It is not, for example, the "party of the vanguard" as an agent of historical change. In contrast to a class or party who rise up and seek to take power away from the State in order to put a new regime in its place, the civil society gives empowers itself when it rises up. Or to be more exact, with its mobilization the civil society makes effective the power that it already has. Instead of occupying the State and replacing its leaders, civil society

maintains itself against the State. It marginalizes and controls the State. It is not made up of masses: it is not a herd but a multiplicity of diverse groups and organizations, both formal and informal, of people who act in unison but with a variety of goals. Due to this organizational condition of being made up of small groups, it does not lead to the "tyranny of the majorities". Civil society's form of operating is similar to the model of society that the inventor of the expression "tyranny of the majority", Alexis de Tocqueville, considered to be the best protection against this tyranny (Lummis, 1996, pp. 30-31). This form also does not lead to a bureaucratic dictatorship in charge of "the revolution".

Raymond Williams has observed that differences in the meanings of words in use, in a specific time, "are not usually perceived as a historical variation in the term; normally each position is described as the 'only true meaning' and alternative uses of the word are seen as propaganda or hypocrisy" (Williams, 1976, p. 86). It is doubtless that a phenomenon of this type has occurred with the expression "civil society". Beyond the academic and political debate on the term itself, at this point it seems clear that the term is capable of showing historical variation in its content, in Mexico and elsewhere: a variation imprinted on it by popular movements as they regenerate and transform the meaning of their autonomous constitution.

Autonomy and Democracy

The word "autonomy" has a long tradition in the popular movements in Mexico. The struggle for university autonomy in the 1920's forged a chorus of meanings and connotations that reappeared in the 1970's and joined naturally with the expression civil society. The result was a definition of the new semantics of social transformation, in which neither can be understood without the other.

The Zapatista uprising put the issue of autonomy in the center of the Mexican political debate, particularly in relation to the Indian peoples. While the government reacted with virulence to the expression "autonomy", rejecting in outright, many groups began to make this expression their own. One of these groups created the National Plural Indian Assembly for Autonomy (ANIPA, its acronym in Spanish) in February of 1995. Ever since their founding, they have tried to lead the effort for this demand in the heart of the Indian movement. In the National Indigenous Forum convened by the Zapatistas in the beginning of 1996, the subject held center stage and actually defined the essence of the indigenous peoples' demands. This was also shown in the San Andrés negotiations, where the government was finally forced to accept the term and some of its principal elements. Many non-indigenous groups began simultaneously to make this proposal their own.

The Zapatistas refuse to specify their own notion of autonomy, which they apply in their communities: they recognize that it is not the only nor necessarily the best definition. Even less do they want to define **the** form of autonomy, as ANIPA tries to do in its relation with the Indian peoples. On the one hand, they feel that their proposals regarding the need for autonomy, which they make because they are mainly indigenous, "can just as well be applied to other peoples, to the unions, to the social groups, to the campesino groups, to the state governments or the states that are nominally free and sovereign within the Federation" (Autonomeia, 1995, p. 298). On the other

hand, their struggle is aimed at the creation of political spaces so that all groups and communities can discuss freely their social proposals and establish their own form of autonomy. "We have presented our proposals," they warn, "but we have said repeatedly that we will not impose them on anyone" (Autonomea, 1995, p. 299).¹⁹

The Indian peoples' demand for autonomy implies, above all, respect and recognition for **what they already have**. It is not an ideological proposal or a promised land. "Autonomy is not something that we need to ask someone to give us, or that can be conceded to us", a Yaqui leader has said; "we possess a territory, as well as a capacity for self-defense. Now we demand that what we have conquered by recognized and respected".²⁰

But they are not only demanding respect and recognition for what they already have. They are transforming their resistance into a struggle of liberation, in the heart of the new "democratic" society in which they can co-exist with other peoples and cultures without abandoning their own forms of government and social organization. They are demanding what they practice every day--with practices that have allowed them to survive despite everything being against them. With open eyes, they resist now a neoliberal dream that has become a nightmare for them and for those who offer them solidarity. They have seen that formal democracy is used to numb people and keep them trapped in that illusion. As the Zapatistas warn, they know well that "things will change only if there are also changes up on top". They believe that the promised State reforms will not modify its basic structure. "The leaves on the tree are changing, but the roots are also damaged", they point out (Autonomea, 1995, p.299).

This idea of autonomy is nothing but another manifestation of "radical democracy". It supposes a government **of one's own**, which functions within its own limits, exercised by those who make it up, in which one commands by obeying. Power is not delegated to governors who become "independentized" from the governed during the period of their administration, under the terms prescribed in representative democracy. Under this form, the authorities are responsible for all the specific functions which are entrusted to them, but these are revocable at any time.

The administration of justice among Indian peoples is not the decentralized application of common norms, entrusted to professionals. Rather, it is the exercise of an alternative judiciary rule, founded in the vitality of evolving customs and non-codified norms. "Jurisdiction" is not established as the boundary for the application of general laws or the rule of a centralized government. Rather, it is a truly autonomous space that limits state power as well as economic power.

The issue of land, among them, has little relation to the institutions that are responsible for regulating it as an artificial commodity in modern industrial societies (Polanyi, 1992). They understand their land as an area of responsibility that includes nature and society, starting from a concept of horizon--horizontal--that provides a framework for their interaction with others, with an attitude where occupation is not equivalent to property. Their cosmic attitude towards nature, in which they feel they are immersed, prevents them from conceiving the possibility of appropriating it in an exclusive way. Inside the community territory, land is assigned to its members without converting it into

private property. The Indian peoples do not give up in their claim to territories which have been taken away from them, but now they demand respect for their own forms of conceiving what is done in there with the land and property.

The capacity of Indian peoples to defend themselves is not equivalent to the government function of vigilance, limiting them to worrying about their own security and subordinated to general laws and the hierarchical decrees of the state. Instead, this capacity expresses the decision and capacity to resist, even with arms, the economic, political and military interventions of the market or the State in community life.

All this exists, in one way or another, in a number of Indian communities and to a lesser degree in other rural or urban groups, tolerated to different extents by the authorities. But this self-defense has always been practiced against the dominant regime. It is continuously exposed to contradiction and dissolution by extending itself to "the rule of law" and to the administrative invasion of daily life, together with economic exploitation.

The current demands require, above all, recognition and respect for autonomous institutions and practices. "As the indigenous peoples that we are," the Zapatistas have said, "we demand to be governed by ourselves, with autonomy, because we do not want to be submitted any longer to the will of any national or foreign power ... justice should be administered by the communities themselves, in accordance with their customs and traditions, without the intervention of illegitimate and corrupt governments" (Autonomea, 1995, p. 297). Thus they confront the double challenge of being recognized legally and institutionally, and of projecting this political style to society as a whole, without imposing it on anyone.

The reaction of the state and the parties against autonomy has good motives but bad reasons. It is true that the struggle for autonomy, defined in these terms, poses a clear threat of dissolution of the dominant regime, and undermines the foundation for the existence of the juridico-political regime that the founders of Mexico imported. But it is not true that it contains elements of separatism²¹ or fundamentalism, as has been argued. Nor is it true that it assumes the fragmentation of the country or the formation of casts or "patrimonial" classes.

Recognition of the autonomy of Indian peoples, of their free cultural determination, was made explicit in the San Andrés agreements. This recognition questions the social pact that is formally still valid, inherited from the Revolution and slowly dismantled in recent decades. It demands a new social pact. When the content of social life is changed, together with the social pact, the container will have to change as well. In principle, it will no longer be able to take the form of a nation-State, since the idea of nation will have a new meaning--which will strengthen its unity. Form is always content. Democracy cannot be reduced to a mere form that allows antidemocratic content. Or it has form and content, or it is not.

The regime of local autonomy that is proposed does not emerge as a counterweight to state power; instead, it makes this power superfluous. In this sense, it distances itself from the European

autonomist tradition, adapted in Nicaragua and elsewhere and promoted in Mexico by some groups. Such focus places autonomy squarely within the existing design of government and sees it as part of a process of political decentralization. The government and the parties appear to want less of the same: they accommodate autonomy to the current design, but limiting decentralization by reducing the delegation of power to the minimum possible. In this framework there are no fundamental differences of conception: it is just a matter of bargaining.²²

The tendency of autonomy that apparently represents the generalized spirit of the Indian peoples also wants to win back the powers and areas of competence that the State took away from them. Above all, this tendency wants to dispose freely of its own political and jurisdictional spaces, in order to practice their own way of life and government. This aspiration is incompatible with the current regime, and even with the form of the nation-State; it can only take shape within a long process of social and political reconstruction from the ground up. For this reason, there is no demand right now for a legal or institutional decision that would suddenly establish this autonomy; this would be impossible. What is demanded is a recognition of the self-determination of the Indian peoples, so that they exercise freely the autonomy that they already have within a less rigid or hostile context. In this way, they will be able to construct, together with other non-Indian Mexicans, a new society. This position is not only unacceptable for the State: it turns out to be entirely incomprehensible.

Paradoxically, in San Andrés the foundation was set--albeit in a limited way--to move forward in this sense. The proposal of the formalist tendency was rejected. The case of the autonomous regions illustrates the tangle well. The demands of this latter tendency for a regime of autonomy that establishes autonomous regions in the Constitution, as an intermediate level of government between the municipality and the State, was completely rejected by the government. But the governmental delegation accepted in San Andrés something that is acceptable for the other tendency: the right and liberty for communities and municipalities to constitute, by their own decision, their autonomous regions. What was not achieved in San Andrés is that the community be converted into the fundamental cell of the political system, before the municipality, and for both to have greater autonomous powers and areas of competence, in the formal and practical spheres. It is likely that the matter become more tangled in the legislative process before it begins to be cleared up in both people's heads and in practice, between Indian peoples, the government and society.

In the formalist version of autonomy, "self-government" or "autonomous government" is nothing but "a specific order of government constituted within the system of vertical powers that makes up the organization of the State" (Díaz Polanco, 1996, p. 109). That "autonomy", according to historical experience, assumes the full absorption of the people within state order. To win such an autonomy would be a Pyrrhic victory: it would mean surrendering one's first-born in exchange for a plate of lentils. In exchange for jurisdiction in an administrative territory, with "autonomous" bodies who take on areas of competence and power transferred to them by a centralist State, they would get a consolidation of the State structure, introducing the virus of their own destruction into the heart of the effective autonomies of people and their own systems of government. In exchange for the possibility of some advances in formal democracy, in no way guaranteed by the framework, they would be frustrating the advance of radical democracy. The expression of a Sumo leader thus takes

on full meaning: his opinion regarding the regime established under these terms in Nicaragua was: "it has, without a doubt, some interesting elements. What we are now putting to the proof is to see whether it can really be democratic."²³

Autonomy, in the substantive version, is nothing but radical democracy, the thing itself, people's power. With this emerges the possibility of leaving behind the apothegm of Hegel, which since 1820 presides over the debate on democracy, as well as over theoretical and practical policy: "The people cannot govern themselves."

The Indian peoples' current claim to a right to free determination takes on a different meaning when one considers this meaning of autonomy, as opposed to the conventional one. In international law, this expression affirms the right of all people to exist. In modern terms, this means the right to obtain political independence in order to adopt the form of a nation-State, or at least to acquire a limited form of autonomy within an existing nation-State, such as in Spain, Nicaragua or the United States. The conception of autonomy presented above rejects this interpretation. Self-determination implies the freedom and the capacity to determine oneself freely, in one's own spaces. It implies that one can determine forms of communion with other peoples and cultures, based on an intercultural dialogue; a dialogue that transcends the totalitarianism of logos or the predominance of one culture over the others, that constructs a common myth for all, a shared vision and a new horizon of intelligibility.

Only thus, by giving the Mexican society a new State, can Mexican be what they are in full liberty, with democracy.

Bends of the path

Two recent episodes illustrate both the meaning of the struggle for autonomy and the manner of organizing the transition, appealing to juridical and political procedures within the existing framework ... in order to leave it behind.

Oaxaca, with less than 5% of the population of Mexico, has one-fifth of all its municipalities. This is not just a coincidence, it is the fruit of a long struggle of resistance that allowed Indian peoples to take over the municipality. The municipality is a mechanism of political control established by the colonial regime which continued to fulfill this function in independent Mexico.

In Oaxaca, the authorities have tolerated the continuous practice of Indian peoples' own form of government in the municipalities, in the margin of the Constitution and the law. At the same time, they submit these practices to continuous harrassment and hide them with multiple forms of simulation. The most evident type of concealment is illustrated by the mechanisms for choosing municipal authorities. Although the procedure of designation by consensus and assembly clearly predominates in the cargo tradition²⁴, and even has a duration that is different from that which is legally stipulated, the opposite used to be simulated: the "candidate" (the person already designated by the community) was registered in a political party (usually the PRI). On election day an election

was feigned, usually leaving the filling out of ballots for a municipal officer to do. The ballots often arrived blank, with their necessary signatures and official stamps, in order to be filled by the electoral authorities, who of course did so fraudulently.

After a long struggle, this situation was modified on August 30, 1995, when a change in the electoral law of Oaxaca required electoral authorities to respect the will of the Indian peoples and to recognize as authorities the persons designated by the community, following their own distinct procedures. On November 12 of that year, an impeccable "designation" was carried out in 412 municipalities, of the 570 that exist in Oaxaca. In the remaining municipalities, where the legal election procedure was followed with the participation of political parties, post-electoral conflict was multiplied. Some of these conflicts involved intense violence and lasted over one year; some of them were resolved with a return to "customs and traditions".

This change transcended the electoral scope: it was adopted as a full exercise of autonomy and was extended to many other areas of relation between Indian peoples and the State. The resort to juridical and political procedures allowed the conquest of an "umbrella law" that instead of extending the "rule of law" through increased interference of the State in people's life, stipulated the contrary: it limited the intervention, demanding that the authorities give full respect to community will.

A similar episode has just been culminated in Tepoztlán, a municipality of Indian origin in the state of Morelos, 60 km. from Mexico City. For over a decade, the inhabitants of Tepoztlán successfully resisted development projects that threatened their social structure, their culture and the local ecology. In 1994 a new project of great scope was proposed for Tepoztlán. Backed by a constellation of powerful Mexican and transnational economic interests, it received the full support of the state and federal government.

The people opposed this project. A small militant group that unleashed the resistance soon had the backing of the majority of inhabitants of Tepoztlán. When the struggle intensified, in the face of the persistent blindness of the investors and the State, and repressive events occurred--which included one person killed and various jailed--the Tepozteco movement began to receive national and international solidarity.

In that process, the Tepoztecos declared themselves in rebellion and elected, according to their traditional procedures, new municipal authorities. The government and Congress rejected recognition of these new authorities. Although the project was eventually cancelled, the political and economic pressure continued, as did the rebellion. All this upset life in the village for many months.

When time approached for the legal process of the renovation of municipal authorities in the state of Morelos, the Tepoztecos took a difficult and risky decision. They were convinced that the balance of forces in the state was unfavorable for them, since there the Indian peoples are in clear minority (in contrast to Oaxaca, where they represent two-thirds of the population). So, it was not viable for them to obtain legal recognition for their condition, and therefore they decided to participate in the elections. A political opposition party, the PRD, agreed to "lend" them registration in order to

facilitate their participation, without intervening in any way in the designation of the "candidate". The "candidate" was chosen based on the local customs and traditions. Other opposition parties agreed not to present other candidates. Only the PRI presented a candidate, choosing one of the most respected and well-liked citizens of Tepoztlán. As the elections drew near, pressures and threats against the Tepoztecos were multiplied, and claims were made that a small minority was manipulating everyone. Finally, on March 16, 1997 elections were held. In the state as a whole, the opposition parties made great progress. They won the majority in the State House of Representatives, as well as the principal cities and towns. In Tepoztlán, an impeccable and well-observed election took place in which three-quarters of the population voted for the "candidate" of the people, the one that the Tepoztecos themselves had chosen as the authority in accordance with their customs and traditions.

This episode, as the one in Oaxaca, shows the advance in the struggle for autonomy. Juridical and political procedures are used in the way that is most convenient for peoples' ends, with the goal of ensuring a peaceful transition towards a regime that will leave behind the current system of social regulation and will distance itself, step by step, from the juridico-political design of the nation-State.

The creation of political options

The new incarnation of civil society, the sphere autonomous from the state and opposed to it, has had innumerable manifestations in Mexico in the last ten years. After the revelation of 1985, in relation to the earthquake, the civil society extended and deepened its organizational and mobilizing initiatives. They were characteristically scattered and often lacking in continuity, but they served to put people's struggles in motion. Some of them found a space for convergence after January 1st, 1994. Nevertheless, their initial efficiency in expressing solidarity with the EZLN, in order to avoid their extermination, did not succeed in creating their own forms of articulation. The experience of the National Democratic Convention was frustrating but enlightening in this respect. This experience was one among many others during 1994, 1995 and 1996, all of which affirmed the generalized need for them to create their own appropriate channels for general political expression.

In this process, a profound mutation of that civil society was produced. This was stimulated by some episodes, which led many social groups to lose confidence in the dominant institutions and in the agents of the crisis. Both institutions and individuals lost, in the eyes of many people, what they had left of respectability, legitimacy and the reputation of serving the public interest. Few people still think that the government and political parties propaganda to restore popular confidence in government institutions and the orientation or re-orientation of public policies will be successful. The government itself has been taking preventive measures that will allow it to react with force when necessary. The parties and local power structures, on the other hand, have been trying to make arrangements behind the scenes that more adequately express the new balance of forces, and in time may create the impression that a new mechanism has been created to channel social discontent, through new agents of the crisis. Neither side, however, seems to have perceived the true character of this crisis. As was shown in San Andrés, people are not in the mood for a popular riot, their

intention is for a political rebellion, a peaceful insurgence. It is not civil war that is being prepared for, it is a transforming peace. And people do not seem willing to cease in their efforts, or to resign themselves to accept cosmetic changes. They are trying to modify Mexican society in a profound way, through the progressive construction of political spaces in which effective governance can happen, within a truly democratic society.

It was in these circumstances that the Fourth Declaration of the Lacandona Forest was presented on January 1, 1996. In this Declaration, the Zapatistas invited the civil society with no party affiliations to form the Zapatista Front for National Liberation, defined as a political force that does not aspire to power. Instead, this force was to organize peoples' demands and proposals so that those who rule, will rule by obeying. Above all, this force was to **organize the solution to collective problems without the intervention of political parties and the government**. In this Declaration, they stressed that **the function of government is a prerogative of society, and that it is society's right to exercise this function**. As a political force, the Front was to fight against the concentration of wealth and the centralization of power.

From the day it appeared, the proposal sparked wide debate. The government and the parties celebrated the transformation of the EZLN into a political force, but tended to disqualify their proposal. For many analysts, the idea of promoting democracy at the fringe of political parties and that of a political struggle that does not aspire to power or public office was equivalent to inviting someone to see a rainbow at night. The Declaration was said to have unbearable contradictions and antidemocratic vices. In reality, it is a radically democratic proposal that questions the illusions of democracy, not its ideals. It threatens conventional political wisdom and widespread prejudices; it does not threaten common sense or popular spirit. Despite the scandal it provokes, it could be the means to propel forward the political transition that has been agreed upon: this is the necessary option in the face of the chaotic decomposition of the regime, but it became bogged down in the negotiation between the parties and the government, which only produced limited electoral reform.

The majority of Mexicans do not participate voluntarily in political parties, and very few aspire to hold public position. The idea is simply inaccessible for some, and undignified for others. Here, the disenchantment with political parties is more sharply felt than elsewhere, and this has intensified popular resistance to any interference in group decisions. As far as voting is concerned, the traditional distrust in its validity is now coupled with the experience of its uselessness: far from producing desirable changes, it creates the opposite.²⁵

The Fourth Declaration appeals to this consciousness, now shared by a good part of Mexicans. A profoundly discontented society, anxious to react, has been lacking political channels to express itself adequately. Without any options other than those proposed by the government or the parties, it seemed doomed to passivity and to refuge in local spaces for the resolution of immediate problems, or at most to specific mobilizations, to promote specific causes. By directing their call to these people, to the margins of party militancy, the Zapatistas provide an opportunity to forge a new political style that can express itself, above all, in the direct, daily and constant exercise of society's power. It thus revives the meaning of democracy as government by the people, people's

power. Instead of state Power, the only thing that interests the parties, they propose people's power, which implies a concentration in the specific capacities of communities and barrios to govern themselves. It is a capacity that is often lost when subordinated to the interests of a party and which, in contrast to the electoral exercise, can be practiced at all times and in the issues that actually interest people, not just in those that the technocracy or the market defines.

The proposal suggests to exercise democratic control of officials, both during the transition and in the new regime. No legal or institutional mechanism in democratic States has succeeded in eliminating corruption or the antipopular blindness of the governors. Bad government has been the incurable disease of democratic societies. A militant political force, with moral prestige and the power to convene people, would make it possible to act timely against bad government until the day that it becomes possible to free people from it.

The Front would articulate the action of communities, barrios and popular movements; an action that has been scattered up to now. It would do so in order to begin the reconstruction of social and political life from the grassroots. It would allow the creation of political spaces so that in addition to exercising their power directly, people could have effective influence on the national society. And thus they would pave the way to proposing a new, real and formal constitution of Mexican society, through a Constituent Congress that would maintain the principle of ruling by obeying and of serving, instead of serving oneself.

The new society that would begin to construct itself based on this proposal would not be able to fit inside the format of the nation-State. This fact has been used to denounce it as a threat to the nation and as an unreachable utopia. Some demand that this proposed alternative make itself explicit and submit itself to public consideration. But there is no reason why it should be so. A movement of this type has no reason to **fulfill** some ideal or to offer an alternative utopia to the illusory one that the government and the parties offer. It is enough for the alternative to give free reign to its own forces and to create conditions so that it can proceed to construct a new society, from its own social base and with everyone's participation.²⁶

By giving new meaning to the **nation** and to **nationalism**, among other things by the re-appropriation of its symbols, the proposal clearly poses its radical divorce from the State, that is, from the juridico-political design of the nation-State, in order to create other options. **Patriotism**, in a truly democratic context, represents the feeling that maintains people united, not the misplaced passion for institutions that dominate people. "Political virtue--democratic patriotism--is the commitment, the knowledge and the ability to be for the whole, and it is a necessary condition of democracy" (Lummis, 1996, p. 37). Democratic patriotism would permit a redefinition of national sovereignty, and a defense of it, in an era of globalization of the the economy.

The transforming action does not require one to adopt as an assumption a future vision of "society as a whole". On the contrary, it is necessary to break radically with the tyranny of globalizing discourses that offer visions of this type. "Society as a whole", now or in the future, is nothing but the result of a multiplicity of initiatives and processes that are unpredictable for the most part. At

the most, it could be seen as a horizon or rainbow-type perspective: like a rainbow, it has brilliant and diffuse colors, and is always unreachable (Foucault, 1979).

These political conceptions are not only expressed in the Frente. They have manifested themselves in diverse popular movements concentrated in precise claims, like El Barzón. They have also given form to all sorts of political groupings, some of which recently adopted the formal condition of political associations, stemming from the electoral reforms. With diverse goals and different orientations, these groupings are coming together in an effort that comes from the grassroots, from the Indian peoples, from the campesino communities and the barrios. They are coming together to begin to give reality, in a new way, to the old dreams of deep Mexico, inside which autonomy holds a central place.

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ENDNOTES

1. Every nation-state is an invention. The quality of the invention depends on the circumstances in which it is produced, and on the condition of the inventor. Its value and efficacy, as a legal and political rule by which to regulate social order, derives from the level to which this is (or is not) rooted in the society which it is to organize. It is not the same for a national society to decide to adopt the form of a nation-state, in the French manner, or for a group of culturally different peoples to decide to federate themselves into a nation-state, in the Swiss manner, or for a nation-state to be constituted from above and outside by a colonial power, as occurred in a good part of Africa, with the well-known consequences.

2. Luis Villoro ("La idea de nación", in: Planificación, January 1984, pp. 10-16) has shown how Clavijero and the illustrated Criollos of his generation conceived the idea of nation as a reaction to the black legend that circulated in his time in Europe about men and nature in America. Clavijero was bent on showing that Americans (people from the American continent) were equal to the Europeans, by using brilliant arguments ad hominem that apply to the Europeans the same logic that they had used to denigrate the Americans. By using this logical operation, Clavijero wanted to achieve something more: to provide the nation that he conceived with a paradigm equivalent to that of the Greeks and Romans, through the rational reconstruction of the indigenous past. Despite his research efforts, or as an expression of these efforts (trapped in the categories and the mentality of his time), his Historia Antigua de México is clearly an invention that fulfills a political and intellectual role very efficiently. Despite the fact that this research adheres to the scientific norms of the end of the 18th century, or rather because of that fact, it cannot escape the prejudices and the subjectivity of the person carrying it out.

3. Comisión Nacional para la Conmemoración del Sesquicentenario de la República Federal y el Centenario de la Restauración del Senado, "Presentación", January 1974, in: Acta Constitutiva de la Federación, edited by the Commission.

4. The expression "imaginary Mexico" is unfortunate, as Bonfil himself recognized towards the end of his life; it would be more appropriate to talk about "fictitious Mexico". Insofar as the expression "deep Mexico", it has suffered a clear impoverishment in the use given to it by the media and by daily conversation. This may explain the irritation that it causes in certain sectors and which Octavio Paz has expressed accurately. It appears to him that it is "a vague denomination of an even vaguer idea" (O. Paz, "Agravio y Desagravio", in Vuelta, no. 235, June 1996.) This irritation is out of place. "Deep Mexico" is a precise technical category, theoretically delimited. There exist discrepancies as to its pertinence and value, from the same or other theoretical conceptions, but it cannot be qualified as "vague", that is, of "indeterminate meaning or use". As a sociological and anthropological category, it can form part of a disciplined and rigorous analysis of reality and be the object of empirical studies that put its usefulness to the test. Currently, it fulfills an efficient function as the emblem of explicit political positions.

5. For a long time, wide sectors of these majorities gave up their will to these dominant projects because of the relative "benefits" that these offered. They were happy enough not to be among the marginalized, who for their part did not have enough capacity or strength to confront simultaneously the dominant minorities and these strata of majorities who had allowed themselves to be seduced by the minorities. The ranks of the marginalized, who under the current version of the dominant project are in fact doomed to extinction, are now being strengthened by the disposed and disposable from the relatively prosperous majorities who have lost in these years a good part of the "winnings" to which they had surrendered themselves. One and the other both feel the urgency now of joining forces to react to the ever-more fulfilled threats they are facing.

6. The resistance of deep Mexico always hindered the full realization of the project of imaginary Mexico, which generated an incessant and often unbearable tension. The efforts to end the dispute always failed, generating unstable balances, based on compromise formulas. The most recent effort was that of the administration of President Salinas, who thought that the principal obstacle to his project was in the supporters of the regime that he was dismantling. He completely underestimated the depth and character of the old historical dispute. It appeared to him that he could end it with his reforms to Article 4 of the Constitution, which timidly and ambiguously recognizes the Indian peoples and the pluricultural nature of the nation.

The reaction brought on by the Zapatista uprising revealed the magnitude of this error. Far from dissolving, the counterposition was made more evident than ever. The two sides in conflict, affirmed by the motives and reasons that define the manner of being in each of their worlds, is on a clear collision path. Those who represent imaginary Mexico today, as well as their economic and political allies and their social bases, are firmly encased in variations of a vision that they consider to be not only the best, but the only national project. In deep Mexico, on the other hand, consensus is growing and ever-more articulated projects are being enriched, explicitly opposed to the former project and dedicated to giving shape to a new project.

7. This classification of Mexican society does not exclude or avoid the classifications made by a conventional Marxist-type class analysis; it goes beyond that analysis. Although one could argue that imaginary Mexico is in general associated with the interests of capital and that deep Mexico is associated with the interests of workers, they are not defined by their opposition in economic interests. Rather, they are defined by a cultural determination, due to the civilizing matrix inside which these two groups of Mexicans are inscribed and inspired. Inside both sectors, there is reproduced a class structure.

8. El Colegio de México, Diccionario Básico del Español de México, México: El Colegio de México, 1986.

9. In the western project, man assumes with arrogance the role and function of God and adopts the function of creating the world, of which he feels he is the center. The Mexican elites gave the divine function over to the Western project itself; to an already-created project, to whose service they offer themselves, feeling thus that they fully acquire the quality of co-creators, of modern Western men, although in this as in so many other things, they end up being strictly pre-modern.

10. Few things define the North American spirit like the term frontier, which far from defining a limit or a boundary --an element of all frontiers-- in the United States is seen as a challenge: as an invitation to push beyond. When the territorial expansion appeared to have reached its limit, the term was switched smoothly to refer to technological or industrial feats.

11. Some propose this task due to the necessity of giving coherence to the fundamental charter, since the changes that have been introduced into it have created important contradictions. Others consider that it is necessary to adjust it to the change in the position of the factors of power, that is, they want it to reflect the current political situation more adequately. Still others see it as one of the central steps in a process that tries to reconstitute Mexican society itself, to re-form its basis for functioning, and they want this to be reflected in the Constitution.

12. On the one hand, they express the greater weight of Indian peoples in this relationship, as much because of their greater capacity to articulate and express their demands in a unified manner as because of the alliances that they have managed to create with other social sectors who are willing to back them up. On the other hand, these reflect the need for one part of the dominant structure, the Federal government and the Congress of the Union, to attend to these demands. The provisional and limited character of that commitment is not only due to the circumstances under which it was formulated in San Andrés. It is also due to the decisive fact that the legal and institutional implications of the agreements, their implementation, are to be formulated and approved by representative organs in the Executive and Legislative branches. These organs are constituted with manifest vices and deficiencies that are widely recognized. These organs are influenced by factors of power in which the Indian people are not represented adequately: others continue to speak for them, preventing their voice from being heard.

13. During the Revolution, all the revolutionary factions met in the city of Aguascalientes to discuss a new Constitution. The Convención de Aguascalientes, as the meeting was called, did not reach an agreement among all the factions, but paved the way for the Constitution of 1917.

14. I use the term here to refer to a historical project whose political design is based on people's power--an expression that is actually a translation of the greek word democracy. In contrast with formal or representative democracy, in which the people formally **hold** power but do not maintain or exercise it, the political bodies in radical democracy are conceived and operated in such a way that political power can be in the hands of the people. For more on this matter, see Lummis, 1996 and Marx, 1970. According to my hypothesis, this is the orientation--clearer every day--that popular democratic will is taking. This became apparent, for example, in the Special Forum for the Reform of the State, convened by the EZLN in 1996.

15. An ample analysis of the concept can be found in: Jean L. Cohen and Andrew Arato, Civil Society and Political Theory, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992. See also: Adam Ferguson, An Essay on the History of Civil Society, 4th ed. Farnborough: Gregg International Publishers, 1969, and "Civil Society?", in Lummis, 1996, pp.30-37.

16. This line of thought leads one to affirm that "the United States has had the most complete **civil society**...perhaps the only one in political history." (Daniel Bell, "American Exceptionalism Revisited: The Role of Civil Society," Public Interest, no.95 [September 1989] 56 48). This affirmation is in open contradiction with the current use of the term, even regarding the United States. In this respect, it has been pointed out that the disarticulation of civil society, its virtual inexistence, explains much of the problems facing that country. There, as in a good part of the middle class of Mexico and of other places, the normal social conditions determine that individuals can only act and express themselves politically in the form of masses, and they lack social spaces in which they can exercise their own form of government: they have to depend on their representatives. For a discussion of liberal ideals and civil society, see: Robert A. Dahl, Who Governs? Democracy and Power in an American City (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961); Seymour Martin Lipset, Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1960) and Daniel Bell, The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties, rev.ed. (New York; The Free Press, 1962).

17. Private enterprise, especially in the form of the large corporation, generally emerges from society, more than from the State. It can even manage to bring the State under control, more than the State bringing it under control. This is what has led many to put private enterprise under the category of civil society. Nevertheless, as has been demonstrated clearly in the process of privatization, the transfer of functions from the State to private enterprise is nothing but a change in the way of administering the nation-State. The form of administration is decided on by a committee of stock-holders; the transfer does not pass these functions over to the people. The opposition that may exist between private enterprise and the State is not antagonism (such as that which exists in civil society). Rather, it is a mere conflict of interests between stock-holders: strictly speaking, one cannot exist without the other. The enterprise itself is not an autonomous creation of the people, even if one of its members founded it. The people cannot express their power there, neither in direct form in the heart of the enterprise, nor through the illusory "consumer sovereignty" in the market. Even the unions, even if constituted through full initiative of the laborers, have the sphere of the enterprise as a clear limit to their existence. This sphere, the sphere of capital, defines them: they must base their organization on the organization that capital gave them upon hiring them. Their organizational and political force is annulled when capital itself takes away their condition of being workers, with the closing or moving of the enterprise. Under current conditions, this fact has been transformed into a decisive weapon in the hands of transnational capital in order to impose conditions of less work or lower salary on its workers. In addition, in Mexico the unions have been for many decades one of the main instruments of corporate control from the State. In order to incorporate itself into "civil society"--in the current sense of the term in people's movements--the unions have to separate themselves from the logic of capital and of their habitual economic demands, in order to join the autonomous struggles of people with their independent organizations.

From another perspective, it is necessary to keep in mind the hypocrisy of the so-called liberal when dismantling the State. They continue to need the State in order to control the population and to regulate the market, be it as a police or military body or as a State lender of welfare services. These represent today, in this era of full globalization and free trade, between one-third and one-half of the GNP of industrialized countries.

18. Andrés Aubry gave even more precision to the current meaning of the term, within people's movements, by tracking down the historical context from which it emerged. For him, the expression alludes to a new semantic of social transformation, which includes new concepts and commitments. **Insurgence** replaces **guerrilla**, as a form of designating radical initiatives that come from the people. Increasing emphasis is being put on the **civil** component of the struggle, and this component thus enters a new phase: civil society, civil uprising, civil resistance. The expression **national liberation** cuts across the entire process and gives legitimacy to the guerrilla, to the goal of the insurgents, the alternatives to development and the peaceful struggle of the civil society. In the decade of the 1980's, after the failure of the government and the parties to manage the crisis, people politicized themselves in the villages and the barrios; he stresses that their organizations are always **independent**. Their initiatives do not derive their power from a leader or an ideology, but from an **organization**, to which they give significant names: union, alliance, block, coordination, convergence, front. Aubry stresses, as does Monsiváis, that the 1985 earthquake revealed to the world the creativity and maturity of these independent organizations, of the "civil society". He goes on to describe the government reaction to their appearance: cooptation and repression. His analysis leads up to January of 1994, when the Zapatistas announced their Enough! "after having tried everything to put legality into practice," and seek the awakening of the people and the "independent organizations". The Zapatistas affirm that they are not a guerrilla, as much due to their number as due to their subordination to a non-military structure; more than taking power, they want to be catalysts of civil society in order to modify the system of government. In Mexico, Aubry concludes, the reappropriation of democracy has created a shifting of concepts. Ever since the 1917 Constitution, sovereignty was made to reside in "the people", an expression that either clarifies the concept of nation or is its alternative. People's movements in the last decade and in particular those of 1994 reflect a continuation of this shift. (Aubry, 1994, p. 9)

19. It does not cease to be interesting that this open and democratic proposal is accused of being fundamentalist by both the left and the right. Roger Bartra, for example, recently warned that "fundamentalist tendencies" in those who are reviving old ideas like autonomy "which refers to the possibility that communities or regions with a high proportion of indigenous people be administered through local forms of government, adapted to the ethnic singularities of the population." For him, this represented a "patrimonial" solution -- in the meaning that Weber gives to the word -- that guarantees "the control of power to a specific class within the population" (Bartra, 1996, p. 12).

20. An intervention in the third meeting of the National Plural Indigenous Assembly for Autonomy (ANIPA), held in Oaxaca in August 1995. As Robert Vachon has pointed out, claims like the one made by the Yaqui leader, inscribed in contemporary autochthonous tradition, should not be presented as **autonomy** but as **ontonomy**: "The idea of self-management (from the Greek **autos**: itself) is based on a vision of autonomy that is homocentric-individualistic-rationalist, which is antithetical to the traditional autochthonous vision of ontonomy, which is cosmocentric-communitary-mythical" (Vachon, 1993, p. 5).

21. Separatism is appearing as a real group or caste tendency, but it does not come from people's demands for autonomy. The Coordinator of the PRI in the Congress of Chiapas, Walter León

Montoya, recently reflected this when he said: "We people of Chiapas are thinking about ... separating ourselves from Mexico." He warned that "there is a strong tendency to say to Mexico: leave us alone, we will resolve our problems and we will see whether we continue or whether we separate from Mexico" (El Financiero, June 12, 1996).

22. Roger Bartra is right when he notes that this notion of autonomy "has been welcomed by various sectors of government who understand that the indigenist policy of an integrationalist nature has reached a dead-end street" (Bartra, 1996, p. 12). But his argument threw out the baby with the bathwater, by using it in an allegation for "modern democracy" in the face of the threat of "aggressive fundamentalist tendencies" linked with "new forms of postdemocratic legitimization." His text is a good example of the democratic fundamentalism of the type that was warned about in the Spanish transition: "When democracy affirms itself as taboo for the tribe, it begins to negate itself, to institute itself as a naked form of dominance, as brute injustice with no goal other than perpetuating a state of things that is unacceptable for so many people. Is this not our particular type of fundamentalism, a **democratic fundamentalism**? Does it not tout itself as the only true path, instead of one more among a series of possible or desirable paths? Does it not share with other fundamentalisms an analogous pretension to have the definitive truth and the unrenounceable victory? Is it not fueled by identical aspirations of universality and a criminal zeal towards expansion? Does it not adorn itself with the same blindness with respect to itself? Is there not a belief in Democracy with the same **illusion** that others believe in the Koran or the divine nature of the empire?" (Archipiélago, 1992).

23. A commentary made in the IndoAmerican Symposium of Jaltepec de Candoyoc in 1994, according to the version transmitted to the author by Adelfo Regino.

It is useful to examine this decisive question in more detail. In the modern English tradition, **self-government** and **local autonomy** have come to become equivalent and express the form in which the operation of the local units are articulated with the state administration. **Decentralization** was the tool used by the centralist State to impose itself on the independent exercise of local liberties, to tighten their control and make their administration more efficient. In England, the enclosure of the commons affected the material foundation for the existence of hamlets and parishes. Their social and political foundation was dissolved with the reform of the Poor Laws in 1834. The intervention of central power was completed with the laws on Municipal powers (1835), sanitation (1848), compulsory (1876) and free (1891) schooling, and finally culminating in the law on local government (1888). Administrative decentralization, self-administration (the local election of officials) and democracy (citizen participation in the orientation of state policies) allowed centralized administration to be **integrated** in to local life. At the same time, the increasing complexity of this administration continually weakened the decentralized management of local matters, and accentuated their dependence on the administrative center. (Cammeli, 1981).

These traditions, in their continental European version, were implanted by the Spanish in the territory that is Mexico today. They were implanted as an instrument of domination. The municipality had a clearly centralist character, as a decentralized way of exercising colonial administration, and this exclusive and vertical character was maintained in independent and revolutionary Mexico. The resistance of Indian peoples to that institution, hostile and foreign to them, led them to consolidate

and enrich their own style of non-formal local government, constituted as something completely opposed to the centralist institutions. When, over time, some Indian peoples took over some of these government bodies--in certain areas, and never completely--they tended to rework them and to convert them into a hinge in their relationship with the state in which all their contradictions with the State were reflected.

Their current struggle is not seeking more democratic access to State structures, rather it searches for more respect for styles and designs that leave the State far behind. To oppose democratic **decentralization**, which is nothing but a longer leash for the dog, they propose **decentralism**, to have an authentic government of their own, instead of **self-government**, a euphemism for the democratic integration of everyone into the state apparatus. Decentralization has as an assumption a notion of power that centralizes it in the peak and from there delegates areas of competence vertically downwards. Decentralism, on the other hand, seeks to keep power in the hands of the people, to bring back a human scale to political bodies and to build, from the bottom up, mechanisms which delegate limited functions within spaces of consensus, in order to regulate the interaction of local bodies and to fulfill certain specific tasks for the local bodies and for the whole.

24. Cargo is imposed as a responsibility and an obligation, with no return benefits, on the person designated through community assembly.

25. Between 1988 and 1995, Mexicans lived an experience that allowed them to appreciate directly the **limits** of representative democracy, more than its lack or its vices. In 1988, an unexpected electoral victory was bargained away. In 1994, Mexico held one of the cleanest and bulkiest elections in the country's history, despite the fact that it held with an unequal process, as was recognized even by its main beneficiary, President Zedillo. The result of this form of expressing "popular will" was not a doorway to hope, but to a cliff. The threats made against the political opposition, in order to encourage "the vote of fear", were completely fulfilled by the triumphant candidate as soon as he reached power.

26. "The working class did not expect any miracle from the Commune. The workers do not have any utopia ready to implement **par décret du peuple**. They know that in order to achieve their own emancipation, and with it a superior form of life ... they will have to go through lengthy struggles and through a whole series of historical process. They do not have to fulfill any ideals, only to give free reign to the elements of a new society ..." (Marx, 1970, p. 72).