



The Ins and Outs of Autonomy¹²

Navigating the Borders and Boundaries of Autonomous Struggles in Mexico

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Abstract

Drawing from processes of autonomous community organization in Mexico, this paper will interrogate and rethink the borders and boundaries of autonomy. Rather than articulating autonomy as some fully separated space with clearly delineated borders, this paper will show how struggles for autonomy in Mexico are constantly navigating their insides and outsides, organizing and inhabiting the border or boundary space. With this, we can begin to re-conceptualize autonomy without state-like borders as something in constant movement. In the same way, we can begin to take seriously the complexities and intricacies of autonomous struggles as they play out in practice.

Keywords: Autonomy, Self-determination, State, Capitalism, Borders, Mexico

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Autonomy, we propose, cannot be conceived as a restrictive self-sufficiency, save for the multiple conditions and influences, which would do nothing more than reproduce the liberal ideal of the rational subject, asserted in its economic, intellectual, and moral independence. On the contrary, autonomy as a political trait of cooperation, is unthinkable without delving into global interaction, connected with many actors and powers of all stripes

Raúl Zibechi

From this perspective, it is not about creating self-contained units but about participating in complex, shifting, relational processes

Nick Montgomery and carla bergman

Autonomous social struggles, spaces, and movements are commonly conceptualized in relation to what they are autonomous from. That is what is outside of them and what they are not. Geographically, this might be theorized as an autonomous zone or a non-state space. In other terms, we might talk about autonomous movements organizing outside the legalities and institutions of the state, the logic of capital accumulation, or the hierarchical and exploitative relationships of heteropatriarchy and colonialism. Autonomy is thus conceived of as a form of self-organization or self-government separate from these forces and organizational forms.

While struggles for autonomy do seek to construct alternative forms of social organization grounded in self-determination, little attention has been paid to the borders or boundaries of autonomy, and how autonomy relates to its outside. Firstly, border studies, queer, and feminist theory have rightly taught us that borders cannot be clearly demarcated and drawn, but are in a constant state of construction, deconstruction, and contestation (Brown 2005; Jones 2009; Daring et al. 2012). In the case of material struggles for autonomy, the politics of domination and resistance are much more complex than the simple exclamation of something being autonomous. This complexity is derivative of the multiple spaces in which an autonomous struggle takes place—political, social, discursive, spatial, ideological, cultural, and so on—and the myriad ways in which forces and influences rupture the fixed or static boundaries sometimes theorized around the concept of autonomy.

A second problematic, directly relevant to the first, is the idea of the border with its roots in the development of the nation-state form. State borders today are products of a seventeenth century political-geographic project producing nation-states that sought to legitimize political power and military force over certain territories. As Rudolf Rucker (1937) reminds us, the construction of nations was driven by the desire for state domination, and directly opposes human tendencies of fluidity, diversity, collaboration, and movement. Thus, the mobilization of autonomy as static separation can fall into the trap of reproducing regional state-like formations that autonomous struggles inherently rupture in practice. A related idea is argued by some theorists of regional autonomy, who contend that autonomy exists inside, and as an integral part of, the geography of

the nation-state (Díaz-Polanco and López y Rivas 1992; Castellanos Guerrero and López y Rivas 1997).

An equally troublesome problem arises when we go all in, declaring borders and boundaries to be solely projects of domination, and rejecting them outright. In the context of community struggles for autonomy it's also important to resist the temptation to fully reject borders taking into consideration the ways they are constructed, contested, and navigated in the practices of autonomous struggles themselves. Chandra Mohanty (2003) drives this point home in relation to feminist struggles:

Borders suggest both containment and safety, and women often pay a price for daring to claim the integrity, security, and safety of our bodies and our living spaces. I choose feminism without borders, then, to stress that our most expansive and inclusive visions of feminism need to be attentive to borders while learning to transcend them. (Mohanty 2003: 1–2)

Autonomous struggles in relation to borders, as Mohanty suggests in her approach to global feminist struggles, engage in the dual process of construction and deconstruction of borders, in the navigation of influences and forces that they receive and reject in their everyday practices. In this way, we might say that autonomous struggles practice what Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson (2013) call “bordering-from-below,” which they argue has been “instrumental to an assertion of the right to self-defense” (Mezzadra and Nielson 2013: 153).

In this essay, I want to explore autonomy and its borders, taking into account the aforementioned complexity of borders and boundaries. While world-systems theorists importantly dispute the idea that autonomous movements are somehow outside the system, I want to argue that autonomies specifically reflect the system's borders. By looking at alternative forms of social organization and reproduction at the borderlands of the capitalist world-system and state power, we can see how autonomies overlap with, navigate, and resist these systems of domination by constituting the border or boundary space.

To contextualize this theoretical discussion surrounding borders and autonomy, I want to engage with different processes of autonomous community organization in contemporary Mexico to investigate the complex borderlands of autonomy as they play out in practice. My discussion of autonomous struggles in Mexico draws from various years of participant observation in the autonomous milieu in central-southern Mexico, my own journey navigating the borders and boundaries of autonomous struggles, as a *gringo*, researcher, organizer, and comrade. I also draw from primary and secondary sources produced by the movements, communities, and their accomplices. Bringing together the theoretical work on autonomies with their material practices on the ground, I want to suggest that autonomies aren't fixed, demarcated, and clearly bordered spaces, but are processes of constant movement, resistance, construction, navigation, cooperation, and solidarity.

The Plurality of Autonomies

Thinking about autonomy and autonomous struggles requires us to think in the plural, of autonomies rather than autonomy (Gasparallo and Quintana Guerrero 2010; Jóvenes en resistencia alternativa 2011). Contrary to the classical proletarian subject produced by the material conditions of capitalism, the subjects of autonomy are characterized by their plurality and their struggles by their locatedness. Autonomies are multiple, derivative of specific social, cultural, and political histories, and often address immediate needs rather than emerging from totalizing historical processes. Claudio Albertani (2011) writes:

The practices of autonomy cannot be captured in political, juridical, or philosophical definitions. There exists workers autonomies and Indigenous autonomies; autonomy can be a youth squat in an undetermined metropolitan area, a collective of rebellious workers, or a community of campesinos in resistance. (Albertani 2011: 49)

As Albertani suggests, autonomy escapes definition, and rightly so. Autonomy is something defined locally, through practice, in a self-determined manner. Albertani puts it as such: “Autonomy is not a sect, ideology or political group, but a pathway of struggle” (Albertani 2011: 49).

Autonomous struggles prefigure alternative political and social relations in their immediate space and time, seeking to escape, negate, or destroy capitalism and the state, rather than participating in their relations or logics in pursuit of emancipation (Jóvenes en resistencia alternativa 2011). Likewise, autonomies are often forged by communities, groups, and peoples who have been historically marginalized, racialized, feminized, or not fully colonized or conquered. These locations of struggle differ from that of the classical proletarian subject, in that autonomies exist and emerge on the borderlands of the capitalist world-system, rather than being firmly embedded within it. As such, autonomous subjects and struggles aren't products of their subsumption into the capitalist world-system, but derive their influence, energy, and vision from alternative histories located at the margins, defining themselves through movement and practice.

Raquel Gutiérrez Aguilar (2015) helps us turn away from the subject produced solely by external forces—the political subject or the proletarian subject—toward subjects defined within and through processes of social struggle. She writes, “Note that I am talking about subjects of struggle and not of social or political subjects. It is the struggles that constitute the subjects, and not vice versa” (Gutiérrez Aguilar 2015: 21). She goes on,

To register who the people are that mobilize and resist, constitutes a very different activity than that of classifying these people into previously established categories. Thus, the struggles are, in each occasion, made up of multiple and heterogeneous subjects of struggle who, from their particularity, imprint their actions with distinctive and relevant characteristics, recovering what they know and constituting originality from there. (Gutiérrez Aguilar 2015: 22)

Aguilar's heterogeneous subjects of struggle are like the subjects of autonomy, not static or homogenized, but subjects and processes in movement. They can't be defined from the outside, according to preconceived theoretical formulas, but define themselves through their everyday practices of organization. Self-definition being pivotal to the politics of self-determination and autonomy.

Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui (2012) deepens our thinking about subjects which are characterized by their multiplicity, movement, and contradiction. Writing against the politics of hybridity in the context of Bolivia, Rivera Cusicanqui employs the Aymara word *ch'ixi* as, "something that is and is not at the same time" (Cusicanqui 2012: 105). She writes,

The notion of Ch'ixi...expresses the parallel coexistence of multiple cultural differences that do not distinguish but instead antagonize and complement each other. Each one reproduces itself from the depths of the past and relates to others in a contentious way. (Rivera Cusicanqui 2012: 105)

Against the flattening out of plurality into a third hybrid subject—the universal subject of the proletarian class struggle, or the hybrid subject of *mestizaje*—*ch'ixi* maintains its historical subjectivity and its sense of multiple beings. It accounts for difference and contradiction, yet maintains a sense of mobility and process which escapes capture and control.

Engaging with Rivera Cusicanqui's use of the concept *ch'ixi*, we can think of autonomous social struggles as subjects, spaces, processes, and movements, which aren't homogenized into an abstract third subjectivity, but maintain a sense of conflict and contradiction that produces energy and movement. The multiple and contradictory character of autonomies is directly related to the contradictory spaces in which they emerge and exist. Autonomies reside between the forces of the capitalist world-system, the politics of state capture and domination, and the located histories, knowledges, and forms of organization embodied by communities and movements in struggle. They organize between the structural and universal approaches of world-systems theorists, and the located and multiple approaches of cultural and/or postmodern theorists. They are never fully inside or outside systems, forces, and spaces of domination, but rather inhabit the border or boundary space. Nor are they purely dictated by the conditions of capital accumulation, or the demands of the nation-state. Autonomous spaces, like state and capitalist spaces, are not pure; something I want to now turn to in the following section.

Autonomies and Their Outsides

If autonomies are located, plural, and multiple, how do we distinguish autonomies from their outsides? Where do we find the borders or boundaries between the autonomous and what the autonomous is autonomous from, between an autonomous struggle and the state, for example, or an autonomous struggle and capitalism? What marks, or what does it look like, at these spaces of differentiation?

To think about the borders and boundaries of autonomies is to simultaneously think about the borders and boundaries of spaces, systems, and logics of domination which autonomies seek to resist. The state, both as an idea and as a material effect, is produced through certain practices of bordering. For Pierre Clastres (1987, 2010) the state emerges in human society as a separate organ outside of society, exercising power over it. Thus, the state is produced through the bordering off of state from society, where the state imposes order from above, wielding power which has been denied from society through the very process of bordering.

Timothy Mitchell (1991) suggests something similar. For Mitchell, the existence of the idea of the state is produced and reinforced through the border drawn between state and society. If we want to understand the state, we must take seriously the way the state has continually demarcated the difference between state and society, producing itself as a concrete unit. Mitchell writes,

the boundary of the state (or political system) never marks a real exterior. The line between state and society is not the perimeter of an intrinsic entity, which can be thought of as a freestanding object or actor. It is a line drawn internally, within the network of institutional mechanisms through which a certain social and political order is maintained. (Mitchell 1991: 90)

The idea of the state is predicated on the line drawn between state and society, a line which defines the state, and its opposite, society. Thus, the state is reliant upon a certain spatial and discursive ordering of reality, producing the state and society as cohesive objects separated from one another, creating both by marking their line of distinction, their borders or boundaries.

Geographically, the state is also grounded in certain bordering practices, with the nation-state and state sovereignty being bound directly to a marked national territory surrounded by a militarized and fixed border (Elden 2013). Some scholars have argued that the era of globalization has meant the diminution in the significance of the nation-state and the border, yet it seems to be just the opposite. With the ongoing insistence on the construction of walls to mark national territories, the ever-increasing militarization of borders to mediate the flow of migrants worldwide, and the ongoing bordering practices which extend beyond national borders and are enmeshed within society, all speak to the ongoing bordering practices of states (Brown 2010; Walia 2021).

Regardless of the intention of states to produce through practices of bordering the idea that their territory and sovereignty are natural, fixed, undoubtable, and ever present, the reality is much different (Novak 2011). States never maintain strict control over their territories as all sorts of human practices and forms of organization work locally beyond and sometimes against the logic of state sovereignty. Veena Das and Deborah Poole (2004) put this well in talking about the margins of the state:

Located always on the margins of what is accepted as the territory of unquestioned state control (and legitimacy), the margins...are simultaneously sites where nature can be imagined as wild and uncontrolled and where the state is constantly re-founding its modes of order and lawmaking. These sites are not merely territorial: they are also, and perhaps more importantly, sites of practice on which law and other state practices are colonized by other forms of regulation that emanate from

the pressing needs of populations to secure political and economic survival. (Das and Poole 2004: 8)

Das and Poole's margins are the spaces of ongoing state-making—they are spaces of encounter and conflict where the state's logics seek to subsume local or resistance logics. To put it in our terms, the margins of the state can also be understood as the spaces where autonomous logics and processes clash with the logics and processes of the state and capital. These are sites of tension, contestation, and conflict. These are the borderlands of autonomy.

The bordering practices of states are entrenched with, and further entrench, the bordering practices of other expressions of domination such as capitalism, racism, heteropatriarchy, colonialism, and so on. Frantz Fanon (1963) says the colonial world is a Manichean world, divided into two. Karl Polanyi (2001) describes the great transformation, the separation of the economic from the political, essential to the historical development of capital accumulation. Feminists stress the politics around the production of the division between the public and the private spheres (Landes 1998). We could also think about the borders produced between the citizen and non-citizen, between the domestic and foreign, the legal and illegal, etc. As Harsha Walia (2021) puts it, "Borders are not fixed or static lines; they are productive regimes concurrently generated by and producing social relations of dominance" (Walia 2021: 6).

For world-systems theorists, resistance movements must always be contextualized within the capitalist world-system. Rather than seeing autonomous practices as forming or existing outside the capitalist system, world-systems theorists stress that capitalism is a global system, and that autonomous practices emerge from within that system seeking to build spaces of escape. In writing about what they call "exilic spaces," Andrej Grubačić and Denis O'Hearn (2016) write,

Nor should the autonomy of these spaces and territories be exaggerated. World-capitalism does not allow a complete outside. As such, exilic spaces are paradoxical: they are simultaneously inside and outside of the system, extra-state, but intrasystemic (Grubačić and O'Hearn 2016: 46).

Recognizing the global character of world capitalism is important, but mustn't be overstated. State and capital domination is never complete, and must be continually expanded, reinforced, and reproduced. Autonomous movements enact limits on the world-system to impose its order, discipline, and control, embodying practices that refuse and resist capital and state domination. In this way, autonomies demonstrate the borders of the capitalist world-system and state power, overlapping and navigating complex relations with these systems, yet consolidating their capacity for self-organization and self-determination at the margins of them.

Amidst the bordering practices and territorial, spatial, and conceptual organization produced by systems of domination, alternative forms of social and political organization and reproduction constantly emerge and exist. These autonomous spaces, movements, and logics are not pure, clearly demarcated, or statically bordered, but are forces of resistance in movement. Raúl Zibechi (2011) writes,

Autonomies are not consolidated spaces, impenetrable to domination. On the contrary, they are time-spaces in dispute, interpenetrated by the other, so the image of a besieged fortress doesn't work to describe the real ongoing conflict, since they are gelatinous territories, with imprecise, porous, and changing limits. (Zibechi 2011: 239)

The boundaries of autonomy are boundaries in dispute. They are not hardened off borders but spaces where varying practices, logics, and forms of organization are present. Seeing the boundaries of autonomy in this way, we can better account for the complexity of a struggle toward autonomy. A process of movement, contestation, and navigation.

René Zavaleta (2009) uses the concept *abigarrada*, or motley, to describe the unarticulated, mishmashed societies of Latin America, where there simultaneously exists a plurality of forms of organization, decision-making, and authority. While the postcolonial nation-state has sought to monopolize political authority and homogenize society, the ongoing presence of multiple societies animates the motley condition described by Zavaleta, and impedes the project of the postcolonial state. Working from Zavaleta's concept of *abigarrada*, Luis Tapia (2010) writes,

The notion of the motley social formation rather serves to think about the coexistence and disjointed overlapping of various historical times, modes of production, conceptions of the world, languages, cultures, and different structures of authority. (Tapia 2010: 100)

Tapia is theorizing a disarticulated overlapping of different spaces and logics that exist in Latin American societies. Societies where state sovereignty, the nation-state form, and the relations of capital accumulation aren't fully articulated, but are intermixed with alternative expressions of sociality and existence.

Geographers working on Latin America have theorized something similar to Zavaleta (2009) and Tapia (2010), addressing the intersectional and relational character of territories, questioning the simple lines drawn between state territory and autonomous territory, and directing us toward a multiscalar and multiple approach to territory and territorial struggles (Ulloa 2010; Clare, Habermehl, and Mason-Deese 2018; Halvorsen 2019). Clare and their colleagues write, "it is important to recognize how territories intersect and relate. Returning to the idea of multi-territoriality, multiple territories of multiple types coexist, sometimes in harmony, or in tension" (Clare et al. 2017: 311). Rather than thinking of autonomous space and state space, or autonomous space and capitalist space, as binary differentiations, the context of Latin America requires us to think about the multiple territories that exist at multiple levels which are present and interact in complex ways.

What we have then is a multiplicity of territories of domination and resistance that overlap and intersect, collide and clash. The borderlands and boundaries of these spaces are not solid or static, but are porous, shifting, and in constant movement and flux. Sylvia Marcos' (2013) work on Indigenous feminisms helps us move beyond the idea of clear lines of demarcation between

dichotomies, suggesting rather the porosity of borders and boundaries. Using the individual body as an example, Marcos writes,

In the traditions of organized Indigenous women, the body has characteristics very different from those of the modern anatomical and biological body. The exterior and interior are not separated by the hermetic barrier of the skin. Between the outside and the inside exists a permanent and continuous exchange. The material and the immaterial, the exterior and the interior, are in permanent interaction and the skin is constantly traversed by flows of all kinds. (Marcos 2013: 21)

Like Marcos' idea of the body drawn from her work with Indigenous women in southern Mexico, autonomies are characterized by borders and boundaries that are porous, in permanent interaction between their insides and outsides. The interior and exterior are not clearly defined, but are in constant movement and flux, exchange, interchange, and resistance.

Refusing Domination, Building Solidarity

Thus far I have traced a conception of autonomies in the plural, self-defined, and in constant movement, with shifting and porous borders and boundaries. Like Cusicanqui's (2012) *ch'ixi*, these autonomies are characterized by contradictory elements, and exist within and between contradictory spaces, rupturing conventional dichotomies upheld by systems of domination, and maintaining the free movement necessary for autonomous organization. This conception of autonomies escapes various other understandings of autonomy, two of which I want to briefly engage with so as to continue this interrogation of the borders and boundaries of autonomies.

Firstly, certain currents of Marxism have criticized autonomous struggles for their small scale, isolation from other struggles, and incapacity to organize on a global level necessary for revolution. We can see this in Marx's original conception of the French peasantry, as potatoes in a sack, whose material conditions were incapable of producing class consciousness (Tucker 1978). We can also see this in neo-Marxists like David Harvey (2000), who have criticized autonomous struggles for focusing on localized cultural characteristics rather than globalizing economic forces. This critique, once again, assumes a false idea of what the borders and boundaries around autonomies really look like, and how they really function.

Against the critiques of autonomy as self-enclosed isolated struggles, autonomies often embody alternative ways of building solidarity, amongst difference and sameness, between locations and histories, to articulate alternative forms of social relation and radical solidarity. As I have suggested above, the boundaries which separate the autonomous from what it is autonomous from are not strict lines of demarcation, but complex spaces of struggle, confrontation, navigation, etc. At the same time, the boundaries between autonomies themselves are spaces of articulation, organization, solidarity, and mutual aid.

Recognizing the importance of solidarity grounded in location and difference, feminist theorists have been pivotal in helping us think about organizing through plurality as a strength rather than as a weakness. Contrary to the idea that revolutionary subjectivity is only produced

through the development of certain material conditions, feminist theorists have shown that solidarity is something actively developed from the agency of the peoples and communities involved. Chandra Mohanty (2003) speaks of solidarity in such a way:

I define solidarity in terms of mutuality, accountability, and the recognition of common interests as the basis for relationships among diverse communities. Rather than assuming an enforced commonality of oppression, the practice of solidarity foregrounds communities of people who have chosen to work and fight together. Diversity and difference are central values here—to be acknowledged and respected, not erased in the building of alliances. (Mohanty 2003: 7)

Difference in this sense is to be recognized and valued, in developing alternative forms of relation and solidarity, based on diversity, and not abstract unification. As Audre Lorde (2009) suggests, “Our differences are polarities between which can spark possibilities for a future we cannot even now imagine” (Lorde 2009: 204). The articulation of solidarity across difference is a process of self-determination, and pivotal to the politics of autonomous struggles.

A second conception of autonomy which I feel to be problematic is the argument for regional autonomies conceived of as fitting within the geographical and discursive mappings of the nation-state. A variant of this might be the multicultural and recognition politics being promoted in the last few decades by governments throughout much of Latin America. The idea being that states can recognize the multicultural or plurinational character of society, and afford special rights or recognition to such peoples and practices. All of this works from the idea that nation-states must exist, and that regional autonomy, multiculturalism, or recognition politics can help improve and democratize these states.

Theorists of regional autonomy in Mexico, for example, have sought to position Indigenous autonomy as part and parcel of the modernizing and improving of the Mexican nation-state (Díaz-Polanco and López y Rivas 1992). Resisting what they consider to be a conservative concern that autonomous struggles might be threatening the existence of the Mexican nation-state, these thinkers claim that autonomous struggles don’t threaten the Mexican state or nation, but rather have the capacity to strengthen it. Héctor Díaz-Polanco and Gilberto López y Rivas (1992) suggest as such: “Therefore, the regime of autonomy arises within the modern nation-state and is part of it. The autonomous entity is not something that is placed outside or against the nation-state, but is an integral and indissoluble part of it” (Díaz-Polanco and López y Rivas 1992: 161).

For these theorists, autonomy has only arisen with the arrival of the nation-state. Prior to that, autonomy didn’t exist. It’s not that autonomy is an isolated or self-enclosed space, but that it is part of the nation-state and democracy. By granting recognition to the autonomy of Indigenous communities, autonomy becomes part of the state, and in the service of improving it.

However, articulating autonomy as part and parcel of the nation-state, as something which strengthens its democratic character, positions autonomy into the spatial and discursive mappings of the state. It assumes the borders and boundaries of the state, while reinforcing the necessity of the state and the state form in social life. In doing so, it fixes autonomy into a certain location,

ignoring the self-organization of autonomous struggles and the self-determined ways in which they navigate their locations, borders, and boundaries.

The same can be said for the politics of recognition, which have expanded greatly in recent decades in Latin America with moves toward multiculturalism and plurinationality. While seemingly emancipatory moves, recognition politics can serve as tactics of state power, folding self-organized peoples and movements into the political project and geography of the state. The struggle for autonomy is converted into the demand for recognition. Thus, the positioning of autonomy into the borders and boundaries dictated and maintained by the state (Coulthard 2014; L. Simpson 2017).

Writing in the North American context, Audre Simpson (2017) suggests a politics of refusal, hinting at the way in which Indigenous peoples might articulate their own ways of living in the world that resists the mappings of state and capitalist power. Simpson writes, “Refusal rather than recognition is an option for producing and maintaining alternative structures of thought, politics and traditions away from and in critical relationship to states” (A. Simpson 2017: 19). Simpson points out that Indigenous resistance to the colonial state is the ongoing navigation of the myriad ways the politics of recognition, brute force, and essentialization continually attempt to undermine movements for self-determination—a movement for the self-articulation of who Indigenous people are and how they relate to others.

A politics of refusal, as Simpson suggests, is the ongoing navigation of self-determination. It is the refusal to be administered by the various terms of the state. It is thus the observation and navigation of where boundaries are drawn, what influences are useful, and what influences are necessary to be refused. It is a politics of autonomy that doesn’t essentialize the categories of inside and outside, or autonomous and the other, but a politics of self-articulation, of the ongoing emergence of autonomous politics of self-management.

In a similar vein, John Holloway (2010) suggests that moving beyond capitalism requires us to first crack it, which starts with its refusal. He writes, “The break begins with refusal, with No” (Holloway 2010: 17). He continues,

the No is backed up by an other-doing. This is the dignity that can fill the cracks created by the refusal. The original No is then not a closure, but an opening to a different activity, the threshold of a counter-world with a different logic and a different language. The No opens to a time-space in which we try to live as subjects rather than objects. (Holloway 2010: 19)

For Holloway, refusal is an opening to another way of being. It resists the subjectivity imposed upon us by capitalism and the state, and opens up the space for the embodiment of different ways of organizing and relating to one another.

If we think of autonomy as beginning with the politics of refusal, with the unwillingness to participate in the spatial and discursive organization mapped out by the state and capital, colonialism and patriarchy, we see how spaces of freedom and spaces of autonomy can open up. Thus, fundamental to the struggle for autonomy is doing away with the dichotomies and binaries

produced by the state, capitalism, etc. and regenerating historical alternatives and developing new forms of relating to one another. Vilma Almendra (2017) suggests this in writing about capitalism:

The separations that have been imposed on us historically, since they tore the human being from the womb of Uma Kiwe to convert us into work and commodity, continue to be sophisticated in breaking the fabrics of life, ancestral and present, that remain. They transform and challenge capital. Then, from hegemonic power, they reaffirm dichotomies that are the prolongation of the separations that have led us to the confusion and fragmentation that we live today in the territories. Hence the need to recognize them, address them and try to overcome them from every day and long-term practices inspired by the territorial struggle. (Almendra 2017: 272)

The arrangements organized from above, the divisions, borders, spaces, and boundaries are part of the geography of domination. Struggles for self-determination and autonomy are engaged in overcoming the dichotomies and binaries produced to administer and maintain relations of domination. It is refusing the borders produced by states and capital, colonialism and patriarchy, navigating and developing new relationships grounded in new geographical and discursive configurations.

Raúl Zibechi (2010), in his study of Indigenous movements in Bolivia in the early 2000s, shows us what organizational forms that resist the dichotomies of states and capitalism look like. Zibechi argues that during this wave of revolt, Indigenous communities and societies in movement actively resisted the borders and boundaries imposed by states and capital through their forms of organization. He writes,

We are dealing with social machinery that prevents the concentration of power or, similarly, prevents the emergence of a separate power from that of the community gathered in assembly. There is no separation between economy and politics or between society and state. (Zibechi 2010: 16)

According to Zibechi, Indigenous movements in Bolivia organize themselves in such a way that power is dispersed throughout the social body, and the divisions which produce the state are actively resisted. Luis Tapia (2019) suggests the same when writing about the differences between the organizational forms of community, and the organizational forms of the state. Tapia writes, “Community is, at once, a social form and a political form. One of the characteristics of this form of organization is that it doesn't establish strong or rigid borders between both dimensions” (Tapia 2019: 89).

Drawing from Indigenous conceptions of boundaries and territories, John Brown Childs (2007) suggests the idea of boundaries instead of borders, “as locations that are both opened up to the world while also offering sanctuary to those within them” (Brown Childs 2007: 165). He writes, “Such understandings of the ‘boundary’ that demarcates while also facilitating openness to others are to be distinguished from the ‘border’ with its tonalities of closure, guards, barbed wire separatism, and state sponsored imposition” (Brown Childs 2007: 165). He continues, “This is a place of negotiation, reciprocity, and mutual respect among peoples coming from different

locations. For those who used this term, a boundary could mean both the recognition of distinctive communal locations and the constructive interaction among them” (Brown Childs 2007: 166). Brown Childs’ idea of the boundary offers us a way into thinking about what self-determined autonomous borderlands might look like. Resisting the borders of the state which seek to position and shape state subjects, autonomous movements develop other ways of organization and relating to one another amongst themselves.

Anarchist geographers have been important in moving us beyond the territorial organization of states and capital, suggesting ways to think about processes of territorialization which are not derivative of, and don’t reproduce, systems and relations of domination (Ince 2012; Springer 2012). These theorists have also helped us think about the ways in which communities and movements carry out their own bordering practices, territorializing against and beyond territories of domination. Anthony Ince (2012) writes,

Everyday anarchistic bordering practices, far from producing homogeneous territory (singular), regulate and facilitate permeation and cross-fertilisation between territorialities (plural), precisely thorough territorial acts of inclusion and exclusion. Thus autonomy is partly facilitated by creating such permeable membranes between spaces, creating a constellation of negotiations, connections and divisions that reinforce and fuse autonomous territorialities. (Ince 2012: 1661)

Ince suggests we center the anarchist principles of anti-authoritarianism and prefiguration as a means to move us toward alternative conceptions of territorialization which are directed toward liberation and against domination. For Ince, anarchist territorial practices are about the navigation of their borders and boundaries, building solidarity and organization on one hand, and negation and refusal on the other.

The question of autonomous bordering is directly linked to the question of self-defense, a pivotal component to autonomous struggles and social struggle more generally. Self-defense requires the setting of borders and boundaries, barricades and road blockades, but not just that. Self-defense, as Geo Maher (2021) suggests, is “about new, community institutions born of the struggle” (Maher 2021: 180). The refusal of the state and capital isn’t the end of an autonomous struggle, but it is the construction and strengthening of alternative relations, institutions, forms of organization, which are part of the very process of resistance.

Autonomous Struggles in Mexico

Shifting gears from the theoretical discussion of autonomies above, in this section I want to explore some of the expressions of autonomy emerging from below in so-called Mexico. By engaging these struggles with some of the theoretical points I have already discussed, I want to continue the discussion of the borders and boundaries of autonomies, maintaining focus on their plurality, contradiction, and movement.

In Mexico there is a multiplicity of practices, processes, and subjects of autonomous organization and struggle. There are neighborhood assemblies and formations of neighborhood

organization, community assemblies, collective work, and communally held land, forms of armed self-defense, security, and justice. There are self-organized health clinics and schools, radio and media projects, practices of production and distribution. There are struggles against political parties, extractive industries, state violence, femicides, and forced disappearances. These processes are enacted by a diversity of political actors including students, feminists, Indigenous peoples, workers, campesinos, housewives, children, grandparents, and so on. These different subjects and processes of struggle interact with their insides and outsides in dynamic and complex ways.

A confluence of factors, elements, forces, and processes emerge in different historical moments and material contexts bringing life to these autonomous struggles. Movements and organizational processes develop and take shape from unique histories. Some derive influence and inspiration from other struggles. Others begin as responses to material threats and develop into more integral movements for self-determination and autonomy. Many have longer histories of resistance against colonization, neo-colonial land grabs, and mega-development projects. The influence of historical figures such as Ricardo Flores Magón, Emiliano Zapata, or Pancho Villa have a strong presence in many struggles (Stephen 2002).

Indigenous peoples are at the forefront of autonomous struggle in Mexico. As Gustavo Esteva (2015) suggests, “While to label the struggles against colonisation as autonomous would be to colonise the past, these resistances evidently had an autonomic character, in the sense that we give the word today” (Esteva 2015: xiii). Indigenous communities have continued this struggle, seeking to maintain their *usos y costumbres*, or their traditions and customs, including their forms of political, territorial, and cultural organization against the homogenizing forces of the state and capital.

Struggles for land and territory are pivotal to autonomous struggles in Mexico and throughout Latin America, where processes of dispossession, privatization, and plunder threaten Indigenous territories and Indigenous ways of life (Composto and Lorena Navarro 2014; Lorena Navarro and Fini 2016). Land defense against megaprojects and extractive industries often prompt processes of community resistance, leading to heightened autonomous activity and organization (Composto and Lorena Navarro 2014; Lorena Navarro and Fini 2016). Furthermore, territory is the foundation from which alternative organizational forms take shape, and from which autonomy is put into practice (Zibechi 2007; Halvorsen 2019).

The Zapatista uprising in 1994 put autonomy on the map in Mexico. Following failed dialogues with the Mexican state, the Zapatistas turned from seeking recognition of their autonomy to building autonomy in practice. With the formation of autonomous municipalities, good governing councils, self-organized healthcare, education, production and distribution, the Zapatista territories have become a reference in autonomous struggles worldwide, and a lasting influence and source of inspiration within Mexico (Zibechi 2012; Fernández Christlieb 2014).

The Zapatista movement has continually navigated the complex borders and boundaries of their autonomy, existing at once both inside and outside of the Mexican nation-state. The Zapatista Army of “National” Liberation, as their name suggests, articulates their struggle in national terms. A common slogan used by the Zapatistas and the National Indigenous Congress (CNI), “Never

more a Mexico without us,” positions their struggle as one of inclusion into the Mexican nation-state. The presence of the Mexican flag in actions of both the Zapatistas and the CNI, also shows the complex ways in which Mexican nationalism is mobilized within these struggles.

At the same time, the Zapatistas have been at the forefront of building regional and global organization and solidarity, through their *caracoles*, festivals of resistance, caravans, the “other campaign,” the national and international sixth. These practices rupture the borders and boundaries of the Mexican nation-state, while also undermining the critique of autonomies as isolated, localized spaces. As Jérôme Baschet (2017) puts it,

The experience of the Zapatista rebels indicates that it is possible to escape the false alternative between the localist asphyxia and abstract universalism. With their call to construct a world where many worlds fit, they draw a horizon of encounters whose planetary dimension only makes sense if it is thought of from the irreducible specificity of places and experiences. (Baschet 2017: 70)

The practices engaged by the Zapatista struggles resists conventional assumptions about autonomy. Rather than fixing autonomy in some local space, and arguing for the necessity of the global revolution, the Zapatistas rupture the divisions between the local and the global, developing alternative ways to think about social organization and social struggle through practice.

In October of 1995, representatives from various communities gathered in a regional assembly in the town of Santa Cruz El Rincon, in the state of Guerrero, to found a system of self-organized community police forces. Drawing influence from different histories of productive cooperatives, guerrilla struggle, Indigenous customs and traditions, and the organization around the 500-year anniversary of the so-called Spanish conquest of Mexico, it was ultimately the context of extreme marginalization and unbearable violence in the region which led different communities to get organized and arm themselves in self-defense.

What began as self-organized community police forces quickly developed into a regional coordination of security, justice, and reeducation, in the Montaña and Costa Chica of Guerrero, known as the Regional Coordinator of Community Authorities- Community Police, or the CRAC-PC. The community system is grounded in community, regional, and general assemblies, where the communities themselves direct the course and activity of the coordination. Furthermore, the different roles played in the community system have been incorporated into the already existing cargo systems of Indigenous and campesino communities of the region, where the positions are rotative, participation in them is seen as a service to the community and not to self-interest, and participants are continually responsible to the command of community assemblies (Matias Alonso, Aréstegui Ruiz, and Vazquez Villanueva 2014; Horta Cruz and Aburto Espinobarro 2016).

The CRAC-PC has strategically avoided direct confrontation with the state. Rather they have coordinated with the state on various levels, from soliciting funding for equipment, registering their weapons with the state, and even collaborating on patrols and operations with state forces. Resisting incorporation into the state, the CRAC-PC has demanded respect for their community

system, but not recognition nor incorporation (Matias Alonso et al. 2014; Horta Cruz and Aburto Espinobarro 2016).

The CRAC-PC has faced difficult challenges derived from both inside and outside the community system. The quick expansion of the CRAC-PC, for example, has brought both internal conflicts as well as constant state repression in the form of assassinations and arbitrary detentions. Furthermore, the state has continually attempted to coopt participants in the community system, fearing the growing self-organization of the communities. Other self-defense groups have presented themselves as part of the CRAC-PC to gain from their social legitimacy, but might have other interests in mind that don't align with the organizational practices of the community system. Furthermore, the state and media have continually portrayed community police forces as being affiliated with narco groups, seeking to undermine the legitimacy and success of the community system in addressing pressing issues of violence and marginalization in their communities. These challenges again reflect the complex borderlands of autonomous struggles, where they navigate different forces of repression and cooptation, along with the difficult task of building organization and solidarity across communities and regions.

The community of Eloxochitlán de Flores Magón, in the Sierra Mazateca of Oaxaca, is another expression of autonomous organization in Mexico. The birthplace of the anarchist Ricardo Flores Magón, the Indigenous Mazatec people of Eloxochitlán have mobilized an interesting mix of libertarian thought derived from the Magón brothers, along with the traditional Indigenous forms of communal organization that have long been practiced in the Mazatec region. In the 1990s, accompanied by comrades from Spain and Mexico City, the community began to organize discussions, workdays, and cultural events around the history of Ricardo Flores Magón and resistance in the region directing themselves on a pathway toward autonomy. Around the same time in the late 1990s, the community better organized their community assembly, seeking to work toward the self-determination of the peoples of the municipality and away from the caciquil and political party structures that had long held influence in the municipality (Lucha Comunitaria 2016). The struggle of Eloxochitán de Flores Magón exemplifies the importance of location in understanding the dynamics of autonomous struggles, and the multiple lines of history from which they draw their influence.

In 2009, the Indigenous Nahua community of Santa Maria Ostula recuperated over 1,000 hectares of traditional land on the Michoacán coast, which had been overtaken by local landowners and organized crime groups. In the face of extensive state repression and organized crime violence, the community reorganized its community guard—a self-organized police force—seeking to defend the community from the various forces of dispossession and exploitation in their territories. The recuperation of their territory has developed into a more integral struggle for political and territorial autonomy, grounded in the communal guard, community assemblies, and the defense of their communal territory (Ventura Patiño 2020).

Alongside the implementation of autonomy in practice through the organization of self-defense forces and decisions made in community assemblies, Santa Maria Ostula has also sought legal recognition of their communal territory on the Michoacán coast, engaging the state's legal

system. Most recently, on June 21, 2021, legal representatives for the community submitted a petition to the Supreme Court of the Nation, seeking “adequate demarcation, delimitation and effective legal protection of communal lands and standardized norms in cases of encroachment on communal properties by small landowners” (Paredes 2021). In this way, the complex borderlands of autonomy and the state are evident in the struggle of Santa Maria Ostula, where varying tactics of struggle cut across the simplified dichotomies of legal and illegal, state and non-state, institutionalized and non-institutionalized, and so on.

The same is the case for the Indigenous Purépecha community of Cherán K’eri in the state of Michoacán, who rose up in response to a climate of insecurity and illegal logging of their communal forests carried out by organized crime groups affiliated with local politicians. On April 15, 2011, the community, led first by women, set up road blockades at the entrances of the town to administer the movement of people in and out of their territory. From this, forms of neighborhood and communal decision-making emerged, including councils of youth, women, and elders who participate actively in community assemblies. The *ronda comunitaria*, or community round, has taken on the role of communal policing and forest protection, running patrols in the forest to protect it from illegal logging by drug cartels. Similarly, reforestation projects have been initiated to replant the forests with seedlings and starts that are collectively run by members of the community. A community radio station, community library, and various community-based businesses have emerged to strengthen the community’s movement toward autonomy and address the most demanding issues facing the community (Autoría Colectiva 2017).

Together with the different practices of autonomous organization enacted in everyday life in the community of Cherán, the community has also engaged in and won a legal battle at the federal level for state recognition as an Indigenous municipality which can organize and elect its authorities according to their self-organized customs and traditions. The community also coordinates on various levels with the state, receiving state and federal funds for the municipality, and coordinating on productive projects. Cherán’s struggle for autonomy once again shows how communities actively navigate complex relationships between their insides and outsides, exemplifying the convoluted borderlands of autonomies (Pérez Ponce 2017).

The Indigenous Ch’ol community regenerating their practices of self-government grounded in assemblies and based in the territorial space of the Ejido Tila (Saucedo and Gutiérrez Arias 2016). The declaration of an autonomous municipality in 2007 in San Juan Copala, Oaxaca, rescuing their community assemblies in resistance to the violence brought by political party interests in the region (Gasparallo and Quintana Guerrero 2010). The formation of community assemblies in Nahuatzen and other towns of the Purépecha plateau, against the violence imposed by political parties and their ways of doing politics. The long history of resistance in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec of Oaxaca, which has been grounded in struggles to recuperate the people’s customs and traditions against political party influence in the region (Manzo 2011). The Yaqui resistance to a natural gas pipeline in their territory directly linked to their struggle for political and territorial autonomy. The expressions of social struggle which engage or intersect with

autonomous politics are many in Mexico, and their histories, locations, and forms of organization multiple.

These different struggles have often sought out ways in which to weave together their autonomous processes, spaces, and movements with others, again exemplifying the porosity of their borders and boundaries characterized by relations of solidarity and mutual aid. The National Indigenous Congress (CNI) is one such example. The CNI emerged in 1996 as a space of dialogue and organization between Indigenous communities and Indigenous struggles throughout the country, following the Zapatista uprising just two years earlier. A resolution from the first meeting of the National Indigenous Congress reads:

The National Indigenous Congress is a space constructed for everyone so that we find our people, so our hearts can speak, so our words can grow and our struggle can be channeled, and it is a form that serves one another to strengthen our peoples and to achieve our common objectives. (Congreso Nacional Indígena 1996)

The National Indigenous Congress is considered a home of Indigenous peoples in resistance in Mexico. It is a space of articulation where Indigenous communities in resistance can better see and know each other, organizing between different communities in resistance, and weaving together local struggles.

The plurality of movements and struggles in the Mexican state of Oaxaca have been at the forefront of different articulations of solidarity which rupture the boundaries of local community struggles and show the complex articulations enacted on the insides and outsides of autonomy. In 1990, the cross-community organization, Indigenous Organizations for Human Rights in Oaxaca (OIDHO), was formed to demand the rights of Indigenous peoples through self-organization within and between Indigenous communities. Drawing influence from the legacy of Ricardo Flores Magón, the articulation has sought to embody the principles of autonomy, anti-authoritarianism, and anti-capitalism in a mission to develop a new way of doing politics. Against the idea of isolated community struggles, OIDHO offers a different version of their politics:

We also seek congruence between the political practice of our communities and the work we carry out with other organizations and communities, because we don't agree with those communalist postures that want to reduce the historical experience of Indigenous resistance and struggle to small isolated communities, while Indigenous peoples of all times have constructed alliances far beyond our communities and including beyond what others call our first nations. (OIDHO 2012: 107)

OIDHO's politics directly contest the notion that Indigenous struggles for self-determination are inherently isolated and small-scale. One of the fundamental characteristics of OIDHO is exercising alternative forms of interrelation between communities and organizations into collective spaces of dialogue, coordination, and struggle.

In 1997, the Popular Indigenous Council of Oaxaca-Ricardo Flores Magón (CIPO-RFM) was formed as another attempt to construct alternative forms of organization within and between

Indigenous communities and organizations in the state of Oaxaca. The council came together with the participation of various Indigenous organizations previously walking their own individual paths of struggle, forming an “alliance with Magonista spirit where the autonomy of the organizations is respected” (OIDHO 2012: 100). The council has supported participating communities on a variety of levels from helping establish self-organized productive projects, alternative media, and educational workshops in the communities, to seeking solutions to agrarian problems. Another example of autonomous solidarity articulated from below, CIPO-RFM has embodied the creative ways in which communities and organizations relate to one another, in building relationships of solidarity amidst different autonomous spaces and processes (CIPO-RFM 2003).

In 1998, the organization Committee for the Defense of Indigenous Rights (CODEDI) emerged from a post-electoral conflict in the community of Santiago Xanica in the Sierra Sur of Oaxaca. Throughout the years CODEDI has organized and developed into a cross-community organization that currently encompasses around 40 different communities throughout the state of Oaxaca. In 2013, the organization recuperated hundreds of hectares of territory in the Southern Sierra mountains of Oaxaca, of which previously pertained to a coffee plantation. The ex-finca is now organized as a training center where communities which participate in CODEDI carry out volunteer work on a rotative basis. From there they bring their newly acquired skills back to their communities to continue developing autonomous capacity within the different communities of the organization (Castillo Farjat 2021).

In 2006, what was conventionally a yearly teachers’ occupation of the central plaza of Oaxaca city turned into a widespread social rebellion following state repression on the teachers’ encampment. From the resistance emerged the Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca (APPO), a coordinating body made up of a multiplicity of organizations and individuals, which sought to maintain its plurality against homogenization, organizing in assemblies with the participation of many different political persuasions. “Students, teachers, anarchists, marxists, churchgoers—everyone was invited” as one participant described it (Marcos 2008: 77). The movement engaged all sorts of autonomous practices including the takeover and self-management of radio stations, self-organized security forces, and an impressive number of barricades which converted into collective spaces of organization (Esteva 2010).

There are many other examples of cross-community, cross-movement organization whose practices and discourses engage or intersect with autonomy. For example, the Popular Indigenous Council of Guerrero-Emiliano Zapata (CIPOG-EZ), the Indigenous Zapatista Agrarian Movement (MAIZ), the Assembly of Indigenous Peoples of the Oaxacan Isthmus in Defense of Land and Territory (APIIDTT), the Union of Indigenous Communities of the Northern Zone of the Isthmus (UCIZONI), Council of Autonomous Oaxacan Organizations (COOA), and the Supreme Indigenous Council of Michoacán. All these different articulations, coordinators, congresses, and so on have sought to move beyond their located struggles, navigating their borders and boundaries, showing that autonomies are plural, in movement, with complex borderlands. Some of these

endeavors have had tremendous success, while others have fallen into the traps of hierarchy, authoritarianism, clientelism, or cooptation by the state.

At a more local level, the everyday practices of communal self-reproduction in many Indigenous and campesino communities is another way to think about the (re)articulation of alternative relations to capitalism and the state. One might look at the practices of communal work, often called *tequio* or *faena* in Mexico, where relations of mutual aid and collectivity are articulated against the liberal individualism of the state and the wage relationship of capital (Martínez Luna 2016). We can also point to the communal control of territory and alternative conceptions of the relations between human beings, plants and animals, community and regional assemblies, and communal festivities. These different forms of relation and community reproduction, known in Oaxaca as *comunalidad*, embody alternative forms of relation, mutual aid, and solidarity, which point to social collectivities which resist the mappings of state and capital (Martínez Luna 2013; 2016).

Other examples might be movements toward the reconstruction of traditional relations between pueblos, the expansion of regional coordination between self-organized communities, and the ongoing international solidarity efforts which break through the borders constructed by domination. These different practices and processes of self-organization and struggle engage alternative relations and alternative borders, that aren't dictated solely by the state, capital, and other forces of domination. These alternative social formations, relations, and collective subjects are continually articulating themselves from below, navigating their complex borders and boundaries.

Conclusion

In the discussion above, I've explored the way in which autonomies are located, and their processes are forged from a mix of exterior forces, internal energy, and diverse histories. I've suggested that autonomies are in movement, and are characterized by certain practices that animate their processes. I've hinted that autonomies work spatially, responding both to internal and external forces. I've continually suggested that the divisions that demarcate autonomous from its outside are constantly changing, continually contested, and in a state of constant flux. Lastly, I've argued that autonomies are plural, multiple, and not reducible to a single axis.

Autonomous movements, spaces, practices, and processes, emerge and exist at the interstices of the capitalist world-system and the politics of state domination and control. They organize at the margins of these systems and spaces of domination, interacting with local/global forces and developing their own practices of resistance in everyday life. Furthermore, autonomies are continually moving beyond their immediate locations, overcoming borders and boundaries, organizing and articulating themselves with other struggles for self-determination and autonomy at regional and global levels.

Thinking about the borders and boundaries of autonomies thus requires us to move away from the binary thinking of the West, which constructs oppositions and dichotomies producing and

maintaining certain relations of domination. It requires us to think through multiplicities and layers, cracks, openings, misfittings, shades, and porosity, where processes of autonomous organization emerge from below and are not imposed or recognized from above. We must be able to recognize the simultaneous presence of borders and porosity, of locatedness and movement, of being simultaneously inside and outside. As Glissant puts it, “The possibility of each one at every moment to be both solidary and solitary” (Glissant 1997: 131).

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