

**Author:**

Levi Gahman

**Title:**

Food Sovereignty in Rebellion:

Decolonization, Autonomy, Gender Equity and the Zapatista Solution/Insurgency

**Keywords:**

resistance; decolonization; food sovereignty; autonomy; neoliberalism; Zapatista

**Abstract:**

This article provides an overview of how the Zapatistas are achieving food security through their ongoing rebellion against neoliberalism. I begin with a brief history of the Zapatista Insurgency and proceed by highlighting how food sovereignty can be made manifest through anti-capitalist resistance, Indigenous people's right to self-determination, autonomous education, and equitable gender relations. The piece illustrates how the Zapatista's commitment to defending their Indigenous culture, engaging in place-based education, and struggling for gender justice constitute acts of decolonization and provide creative possibilities for making local food systems more resilient and secure.

## Introduction

*The battle for humanity and against neoliberalism was and is ours,*

*And also that of many others from below.*

*Against death—We demand life.*

Subcomandante Galeano/Marcos

One of the biggest threats to food security the world currently faces is neoliberalism. Despite rarely being criticized, or even mentioned, by state officials and mainstream media, neoliberal policies and practices continue to give rise to unprecedented levels of dispossession, poverty, hunger, and death. The by-products of neoliberalism are so acutely visceral that the Zapatistas called the 21<sup>st</sup> Century's most highly lauded free trade policy, NAFTA, a 'death certificate' for Indigenous people.<sup>1</sup> This is because economic liberalization meant that imported commodities (e.g. subsidized corn from the U.S.) would flood Mexican markets, devalue the products of peasant farmers, and led to widespread food insecurity. As a response, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN), primarily Indigenous peasants themselves, led an armed insurrection in Chiapas (Mexico) on January 1, 1994—the day NAFTA went into effect.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> The Zapatistas, primarily Indigenous Ch'ol, Tzeltal, Tzotzil, Tojolobal, Mam, and Zoque rebels, were rising up against 500 years of colonial oppression. For this piece, I draw from my experiences learning from them, not 'researching' them. Importantly, I neither speak for the Zapatistas, nor do my words do them justice.



**Image 1: EZLN guerrillas circa 1994. (Top: Juan Popoca | Bottom: Ángeles Torrejón).**

Since that time, and despite an ongoing counter-insurgency being spearheaded by the Mexican government, the Zapatista's 'solution' to the problem of neoliberalism, including the food insecurity and poverty it exacerbates, has been resistance. And for the Zapatistas, resistance comprises revitalizing their Indigenous (predominantly Maya) worldviews, reclaiming formerly dispossessed land, emancipating themselves from dependency upon multinational industrial agribusiness, and peacefully living in open defiance of global capitalism. This 'solution' has subsequently enabled them to build an

autonomous, locally focused food system, which is a direct product of their efforts in participatory democracy, gender equity, and food sovereignty.



Image 2: (Left) 'You are in Zapatista territory: Here the people lead and the government obeys.' (Right) Fog blanketing *Oventic*. (Photo: Author)

Food sovereignty (an intensely debated concept) loosely described means that people are able to exercise autonomy over their food systems while concurrently ensuring that the production/ distribution of food is carried out in socially just, culturally safe, and ecologically sustainable ways. For the Zapatistas, food sovereignty involves agro-ecological farming, place-based teaching and learning, developing local cooperatives, and engaging in collective work.

These practices, which are simultaneously informed by their Indigenous worldviews, struggles for gender justice, and systems of non-hierarchical governance and education, have thereby radically transformed social relations within their communities. And it is with these aspects of the Zapatista Insurgency in mind, that I illustrate how collective (anti-capitalist) resistance offers us novel alternatives to the world's corporate food regime.

## Autonomous Education and Decolonization

*Here you can buy or sell anything – except Indigenous dignity.*

Subcomandante Marcos/Galeano



**Image 3: Families in *La Realidad* honoring Galeano, a Zapatista teacher assassinated by paramilitaries in 2014. (Photo: Anonymous)**

The relationship and obligation the Zapatistas have to land is rooted in their Indigenous perspectives and customs. And because exercising autonomy over their land, work, education, and food systems are crucial to Zapatistas, their methods of teaching and learning are situated in the environmental systems and cultural traditions of where they, and their histories, are living. This is evident in the grassroots ('from below') focus they maintain in their approach to education, as well as how they consider their immediate ecological settings a 'classroom.'<sup>2</sup>



**Image 4: One example of a Zapatista ‘classroom.’ (Photo: Dorset Chiapas Solidarity)**

Local knowledge of land and growing food is so central amongst their autonomous municipalities that each Zapatista school often sees *promotores de educación* (‘education promoters’) and *promotores de agro-ecología* (‘agro-ecology promoters’) coming from the same community as their students. Zapatista education is therefore rooted and emplaced within the geographies where people live. This holistic ‘place-based’ focus results in both children and adults viewing themselves as active participants in, and an essential part of, local food systems.



**Image 5: (Top) A Zapatista education promoter with students. (Photo: Schools for Chiapas). (Bottom) 'Council of Good Government – Central Heart of the Zapatistas Before the World' office in Oventic. Tsotsil (Maya) Language. (Photo: Author)**

In order to understand food security, Zapatista students are frequently taught hands-on agro-ecological techniques outside the classroom. This means they learn how to apply sustainable farming techniques while participating in the planting/harvesting of organic crops. This area of experiential and localized education stresses the importance of working the land in order to attain the skills needed to achieve food sovereignty for future generations. It also provides an overview of how transgenic

modifications and privatizations of seeds/plants/life are deemed to be overt threats to, and blatant attacks upon, their Indigenous culture.



**Image 6: Mother Earth nurturing 'seeds of resistance.' (Photo: Author)**

This perspective is held because the Zapatistas are 'People of the Corn', a reality passed down from their Maya origin stories.<sup>3</sup> And given their autonomous education is anchored in defending, protecting, and preserving their Indigenous histories, languages, and ancestral territories, the Zapatistas effectively practice decolonization, the re-establishment and repatriation of Indigenous land, life, and realities, in every aspect of their teaching and learning.





**Image 7: Agro-ecology. (Top Left) Generator depicting an Indigenous origin story: 'They cut our branches, and they cut our trunks; but they cannot cut our roots.'**  
(Photos: Author, Dorset Chiapas Solidarity)

In practical terms, the Zapatistas are decolonizing their food system through applied/experiential learning, communal subsistence farming, collectivizing harvests, refusing chemicals, and equitably distributing labor. This approach thereby provides communities the ability to eschew the logic and profit-motives promoted by capitalist conceptions of 'productivity', in favor of foregrounding their local Indigenous notions of knowledge and nature.'



**Image 8: Collective work. (Photo: Dorset Chiapas Solidarity)**

Through their refusal to participate in the commodification and privatization of learning and land, the Zapatistas have created an integrated system of education and food security that functions as a solidarity economy. This means their efforts in both food and knowledge production/ distribution are guided by an ethical imperative that takes into consideration the health of individuals, communities, and local ecologies alike.

Given what the Zapatistas have created in rural Chiapas, one is left to wonder how local food systems might look if Indigenous people's perspectives and (anti-capitalist) place-based education were implemented into our communities.

## Gender Equity

*Cuando Una Mujer Avanza, No Hay Hombre Que Retrocede*

(‘When a Woman Advances, No Man is Left Behind’)



Image 9: *Compañeras*. (Photo: Tim Russo)

Women do two-thirds of the world's work, produce roughly 70% of its food, and are responsible for over 80% of its domestic (socially reproductive) labor. Despite this, they earn only about 10% of the world's income, control less than 1% of all its land, own less than 1% the means of production, and comprise nearly two-thirds of all its part-time and temporary worker positions.<sup>5</sup> In disaggregate, the vast majority of these statistics apply to women who are rural, working class/poor, racialized/Indigenous, not 'formally educated', and living in the Global South.<sup>6</sup> It thus appears that capitalist exploitation has both a pattern, and preferred target. Interestingly, all of these descriptors directly apply to Zapatista women, yet, it seems someone has forgotten to tell them ...because they do not seem to care.



Image 10: At *La Escuelita*, August 2013. (Photo: Tim Russo)

One of the most groundbreaking aspects of the Zapatista Insurgency has been the strides it has made in destabilizing patriarchy. This social transformation has largely been born out of the indefatigable work ethic and iron will of the Zapatista women. Given their recognition that any struggle against colonialism and capitalism necessitates a struggle against patriarchy, Zapatista women implemented what is known as 'Women's Revolutionary Law' within their communities. The conviction they maintain regarding equality was poignantly captured in a communiqué written by Subcomandante Marcos (now Galeano) released shortly after the 1994 revolt, which states: 'The first EZLN uprising occurred in March of 1993 and was led by the Zapatista women. There were no casualties—and they won.'



**Image 11: Seminar: 'Critical Thought Versus the Capitalist Hydra' (Photo: Dorset Chiapas Solidarity)**

Broadly speaking, Women's Revolutionary Law concretizes the recognition of women's rights to self-determination, dignity, and having their voices heard. More specifically, the laws mandate that women be equitably represented in the guerrilla army (i.e. the EZLN), the *Juntas de Buen Gobierno* ('Councils of Good Government'), efforts in land recuperation (agro-ecological projects/work outside of the home), and the development of food/artisan/craft cooperatives.<sup>8</sup> These laws have restructured everyday life throughout Zapatista territory as it is now not uncommon to see women involved in the public sphere (work outside the home), in addition to seeing men participate in socially reproductive labor (i.e. 'women's work').



Image 12: Women's cooperative. (Photo: Author)

Women's Revolutionary Law has also merged with the way in which the land and local environment is viewed and tended to. As a result of up-ending rigid patriarchal notions of what type of work women 'should do' and 'could not do', as well as undermining regressive ideas that men are less capable of performing emotional labor, household chores, and nurturing children, Zapatista communities now have women exercising more influence over decisions being made surrounding food security and agro-ecological projects.<sup>9</sup>

In recently attesting to the new reality the Zapatistas are constructing, Peter Rosset, a food justice activist and rural agro-ecological specialist, commented on the impact of Women's Revolutionary Law by stating:

Yesterday a Zapatista agro-ecology promoter was in my office and he was talking about how the young Indigenous women in Zapatista territory are different from before ...he said they no longer look at the floor when you talk to them – they look you directly in the eye.<sup>10</sup>

In light of the emphasis the Zapatista's place on gender equity via both recognizing women's struggle, as well as men's responsibility to perform socially reproductive/emotional labor, one can not help but further wonder what agricultural production would look like if these were promoted within the global food system.



Image 13:(Top Left) 'To be a Woman ...Is to be a Revolutionary' (painted by author) (Photo: Author). (Top Right) Zapatista students (Photo: Schools for Chiapas). (Bottom Left) *Compañeras in la milpa*. (Photo: Schools for Chiapas). (Bottom Right)'People of the Corn' (Photo: Author).

## Conclusion

When viewed in its geopolitical context, the Zapatista Insurgency has opened up space for a wide range of alternative ways of re-organizing societies, economies, and food systems. Consequently, what the Zapatistas prove through their resistance (i.e. efforts in autonomous education, decolonization, and gender equity) is that a



recognition of Indigenous people's right to self-determination, in conjunction with anti-capitalist collective work and movements toward food sovereignty, can indeed provide viable alternatives to the world's neoliberal food regime, as well as revolutionize the struggle for food security.

### **Acknowledgements**

I offer my gratitude to the Zapatistas for accepting me into their school, as well as the Mexico Solidarity Network, Dorset Chiapas Solidarity, and Schools for Chiapas for sharing photos and support. I also recognize The University of the West Indies Campus Research and Publication Fund.



**Image 14: One of most important 'seeds' the Zapatistas are nourishing for a better tomorrow... (Photo: Anonymous)**

- 
- <sup>1</sup> Marcos, S & de Leon, JP. *Our Word is Our Weapon* (Seven Stories Press, 2002).
- <sup>2</sup> Anonymous Zapatista. Personal communication, fall 2013
- <sup>3</sup> Ross, J. *¡Zapatistas!: Making Another World Possible: Chronicles of Resistance, 2000-2006* (Nation Books, 2006).
- <sup>4</sup> Lorenzano, L. Zapatismo: Recomposition of Labour, Radical Democracy and Revolutionary Project, in Holloway, J & Pelaez, E (eds) *Zapatista!* (Pluto Press, London, 1998).
- <sup>5</sup> Robbins, RH. *Global problems and the culture of capitalism*. (Allyn & Bacon, 2007).
- <sup>6</sup> Benería, L, Berik, G & Floro, M. *Gender, development and globalization: economics as if all people mattered* (Routledge, 2015).
- <sup>7</sup> Marcos, S. The First Uprising: March 1993. *La Jornada* (January 30, 1994).
- <sup>8</sup> Klein, H. *Compañeras: Zapatista Women's Stories* (Seven Stories Press, 2015).
- <sup>9</sup> Marcos, S. Zapatista Women's Revolutionary Law as it is lived today. *Open Democracy* (July 2014). [online]: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/sylvia-marcos/zapatista-women%E2%80%99s-revolutionary-law-as-it-is-lived-today>
- <sup>10</sup> Rosset, P. Zapatista Uprising 20 Years Later. (Interview) *Democracy Now!* (January 2014). [online]: [http://www.democracynow.org/2014/1/3/zapatista\\_uprising\\_20\\_years\\_later\\_how](http://www.democracynow.org/2014/1/3/zapatista_uprising_20_years_later_how)