Local Communities and Global Resistance
Social Change and Autonomy
Struggles in the Americas

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Introduction: New Languages of Resistance to Globalization

Over the last twenty years, we have witnessed an abundant growth of research on globalization. Within this vast body of work, studies have analyzed regional economic integration and debated the shifting role of the nation-state (Robinson 2001; Wade 2003), the globalization of production (Gereffi and Korzeniewicz 1994), and global citizenship (Sassen 2005). By the late 1990s, social movements had emerged as a central research topic of globalization (Keck and Sikkink 1998; Smith and Bandy 2005; Della Porta and Tarrow 2005) that included a prolific body of scholarship on the impact of neoliberalism on Latin American social movements (Esco-bar and Alvarez 1992). However, it wasn’t until the Battle of Seattle in 1999 that a global (but diverse) “movement of movements” (Mertes 2004) emerged, working to understand, combat, and possibly transform the “globalization project” (McMichael 2000; Epstein 2001). Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s “Empire” (2000) was widely read in leftist academic and activist circles and was considered the most “optimistic” reading of globalization. Their descriptions of the cacophonous revolts of the “multitude” included all movements from the Hamas of the Gaza Strip to the Landless Movement of Brazil (without making much distinction between the two). However, their reading of the current global climate, while innovative, lacked an empirical analysis of social movements and of the structure...
of global power (an analysis of America’s hand in structuring globalization was especially lacking). Although many embraced these new concepts, others doubted that their analysis would lead to the construction of any viable global political organization out of this amorphous “multitude” (Arrighi 2002).

The Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN), however, punctuated the headlines of the global news media, throwing the “new world order” into a tailspin while challenging the theoretical abstractions of “global civil society” and the “multitude.” The resulting concrete case study included the seedlings of an actual political program. In 1994, the EZLN uprising against the Mexican state was a game changer. The EZLN, or Zapatistas, in one brief moment shifted the terms of the debate about the possibilities for resisting and transforming the globalization project (Ross 1995). The Zapatistas challenged long-held beliefs about identity, race, relations of power, and the role of the state in social transformation. They defied the established notion that, to transform society, a revolutionary movement must seize the state apparatus and reorganize society from above. Instead, they argued that society can only be transformed from below at the community level (Marcos 2006). They believed that by changing relations of power at the micro level, eventually the state would have to respect the “dignity” of their struggle and to “mandar obedeciendo” (rule by obeying). The EZLN articulated the “right to be different,” the demand for “dignity,” and the “struggle for autonomy” (Esteva 2006). Shortly thereafter, “Zapatismo” became a transnational, “transcultural,” and “translocal” political vision engaging with discourses of autonomy, global justice, indigenous rights, and democracy while challenging Western notions of democracy and politics (Escobar 2010; Holloway 2010). The Zapatistas developed, in effect, a “grassroots postmodernism” (Esteva and Prakash 1998). When the EZLN burst forth into global politics, they challenged both the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the political legitimacy of the Mexican state (Barry 1995; Collier and Quaratiello 2005; Harvey 1998). Scholars and activists alike flocked to understand this “new kind of revolutionary movement” and credited the Zapatistas with catalyzing the global justice movement (Wood 2005; Starr 2005).

In 1996, within a few years of their emergence, the EZLN brought together thousands of activists from around the world, in the jungle of Chiapas in the hopes of creating a global strategy of resistance to corporate globalization. Shortly after, many of those same participants incorporated Zapatista discourses and practices of autonomy and consensus in their own movements, thus helping to set the stage for the Battle of Seattle and the creation of the World Social Forum in 2001 (Starr 2005). Although many scholars argue otherwise, the Zapatistas never claimed to have originated