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Politics Beyond the State in Chiapas and Northern Syria. Alternative Forms of Sovereignty on the "Margins" of the Nation-State*

Abstract

This article compares the political projects of the Zapatista movement in southern Mexico (Chiapas) and the Kurdish liberation movement in Northern Syria (Rojava). The comparison is aimed to explore alternative approaches to political community based on their critique of the nation-state. The paper argues that the political tenets advanced by these movements unmakes sovereignty by destabilising the exclusionary, racialised and gendered premises underpinning the formation of modern states. Through autonomy and grassroots democracy, their aim is to foster a post-national order within the very structures of the state. Thus, the analysis challenges normative and Eurocentric views of sovereignty from the perspective of both movements. Methodologically, the article employs a qualitative approach in the form of a comparative historical review, in combination with framing analysis.

Keywords

Zapatista autonomy, Kurdish freedom movement, Chiapas, Rojava, Sovereignty

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Introduction

In states such as Mexico and Syria, multiple systems of non-state sovereignty contest state power from various dimensions and scales. By comparing the emergence of the Zapatista movement in Chiapas—on Mexico's southern border—and the Kurdish freedom movement in Northern Syria, or *Rojava*—in Kurdish, Western Kurdistan— this paper analyses how the foundations of Westphalian state sovereignty are challenged from its so-called "margins" or peripheries. It frames both Zapatista and Kurdish movements as alternative forms of sovereignty aimed at creating a post-national social order.

The main purpose of the paper is to explore how, through grassroots democratic structures, the Zapatista and Kurdish Liberation movements contest the foundations legitimising the state. In that sense, the discussion challenges normative views on popular sovereignty and the state from the perspective of both self-rule experiences. From a historical perspective, the paper focuses on state-society relations in the Lacandon Jungle of Chiapas and Jazira in Northern Syria during the early decades of the twentieth century. The blurred presence of the state in these border areas facilitated the emergence of new forms of politicisation and mobilisation among the Maya and Kurdish peoples, thus paving the way for the subsequent emergence of the pro-Maya Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) and the pro-Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD).

The article builds on findings of previous research (Castillo-Quiñones 2024), expanding the study to focus on the political organizing views advanced by both movements. It highlights frames of their political discourse challenging the principle of popular sovereignty. Debates on the normative character of sovereignty were identified in research on modern colonialism (Mbembe 2003; Reyes and Kaufman 2011), globalisation (Bonilla 2017; 2013) and state-society relations (Migdal 2004). Relevant to the discussion presented in this article were understandings of domination as something that is never the result of a single imposition, but rather the outcome of multiple agents competing to exercise social control. Movements such as the Zapatista and Kurdish use these contradictions and fissures within the state to undermine its regulatory policies and advance their own alternative political aims.

Anthropologists have shed light on how sovereign power is distributed across multiple sovereign formations (Hansen and Stepputat 2006). When analysing state-society relations, for instance, Roseberry asserts that hegemony takes its shape through struggle, not consent: "The state claims the power to name;

to […] print maps with state-sanctioned labels. Community residents can recognize the right but refuse the name, among themselves (cited in Hernández 2001, 102). Axel (2023) takes the case of *Rojava* to describe how the concept of popular sovereignty is contested by the Kurdish movement in Northern Syria. Bauder and Mueller (2023) define indigenous sovereignty as a more relational form of self-determination, radically opposed to the Westphalian conception of sovereignty as control over a defined territory. Following this line of reasoning, the article argues that the political proposals of both movements help to theorise alternative forms of authority and governance, distinct from the disciplinary and regulatory logics underpinning the exercise of modern sovereignty.

The study used a comparative methodology, looking at state-society relations in Chiapas and northern Syria from a borderland's history approach (Hämäläinen and Truett 2011). Borderland historians demonstrate how border areas and borderlanders become the centres of influence, movements and tensions that transform sovereignty into new forms (Tejel and Öztan 2022, 6). In that sense, borders are conceived here as both zones of violence and securitization (Soleimani and Mohammadpour 2023), but also as shelters (Altuğ 2020) and a potential resource for those living in its proximity. Thus, this paper contributes to an emerging literature on the study of borders that suggests interpreting the "centre" through the lens of the "periphery" (Migdal 2004).

The concept of sovereignty is explored in Zapatista and Kurdish political discourse using framing analysis. It follows social movement scholars who have emphasized framing devices as phenomena capable of creating universes of meaning (Snow and Bendford 1992; Snow 2005). Data was collected by identifying specific collective action frames—that is, action-oriented sets of beliefs and meanings (Benford and Snow 2000)—in official texts and ideological sources of inspiration of the EZLN and PYD. The discussion focused on the ethics of Tseltal and Tojolabal Maya peoples that influenced the Zapatista project. In the Kurdish freedom movement, the framing was done by examining the PYD's proposal on administrative decentralisation and grassroots democracy.

Sovereignty, States and Borders

In this work, sovereign power is understood as the dividing line states constantly drawn to "take care of the intellectual and physical capacities of populations considered relevant, while creating conditions that allow others to die" (Mora 2023, 42). Foucault terms this process *biopower* which, linked to current

capitalist rationale, seeks to perpetuate colonial practices and racialised niches entrenched in the nation-state. This section critically assesses the notion of sovereignty by challenging its use as a neutral descriptor of forms of governance and spatial ordering. In contrast, the approach advanced here presents the classical principle of popular sovereignty as a normative ideal rooted in colonial power relations (Agamben 1998; Foucault 2003; Mbembe 2003) and indigenous land dispossession.

The Modern State and Borders

The modern sovereign state has been defined as vested with a form of power that is singular, absolute, and territorially bounded within ethno-national borders (Bonilla 2013). This view assumes sovereign power as vertically integrated into the nation-State. However, evidence shows that states coexist with enduring forms of non-sovereignty (Bonilla 2017), informal (Hansen and Stepputat 2006) or multiple (Bertelsen 2009) sovereign formations limiting their power. At the international level, the phenomenon is framed with a varied production of categories such as "weak" or "failed state," used as a cover for the deployment of foreign interventions.

Within the state, modern sovereignty perpetuates the idea of a single, indivisible national community, whose sovereign power enables it to decide on the life and death of those other non-sovereigns deemed enemies or undesirables (Hansen and Stepputat 2006, 301). Dominant national communities enact sovereignty as a discursive device to rationalise colonial domination and legal regimes of exception, whilst non-sovereign subjects are incorporated into the national realm only insofar as they renounce their historical distinctiveness. Sovereignty, thus, functions as a masked demand for the "self-annihilation of these subaltern subjects and their particular historical differences" (Reyes and Kaufman 2011, 512).

Therefore, sovereignty is understood here as an uneven and fragmented discourse, rather than a stable capacity (Bonilla 2017). Although most modern states claim effective legal sovereignty over a bounded territory and its population, in many post-colonial societies the sovereign power has been historically fragmented and distributed among many forms of local authority (Hansen and Stepputat 2006; Migdal 2004). This study suggests that, historically, the reach and efficacy of the state have tended to blur in border areas.

Borders are conceptualised here as arenas of struggle (Kaufman 2014) characterized by weak central surveillance. Furthermore, borderlands are zones

of incessant flows where individuals can elude domination (Tejel and Öztan 2022), either by mobilising sections of the local population, fostering cross-border cooperation networks or constituting alternative forms of local governance. In response, the state frames borderlands within the spectrum of "border security" to justify their transformation into zones of exception (Soleiman and Mohammadpour 2023).

Borderlands thus acquire a dual role insofar as it becomes a source of securitisation, but also an important resource for politicisation. This paradoxical character of borders is regarded as a metaphor of the ambiguities of nation building (Baud and Van Schendel 1997, 242). Dismissed by their inhabitants as markers of identity, borders are a constant source of political mobilisation, as they become refuges for those fleeing state persecution, or zones where the state's blurred presence allows local populations to resist or circumvent central power. Thus, the emergence of Zapatismo in Mexico and the Kurdish political movement in Syria can be framed as an outcome of the state's colonialist relationship with its border regions.

Popular Sovereignty and Colonial Rule

The concept of sovereignty can be tracked back to the European Enlightenment and the theoretical elaboration on the limits of divine power (Axel 2023). During the religious wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, sovereignty was a discursive weapon wielded by both monarchist Catholics and anti-monarchist Protestants to restrict or reinforce royal power. Eventually, sovereignty replaced the role of religion in legitimizing rule. For instance, political theorists, such as Bodin, used it as an ascriptive tool to extend the authority of France's Valois rulers, "shrunken by years of religious strife" (Ferguson and Mansbach 2007, 13). The centralization of absolutist power led to the institutionalization of sovereignty and strengthened the state's capacity vis-à-vis other non-state forms of political authority (Ibid).

In the eighteenth century, the precept was reformulated to construct, in the figure of parliamentary democracy, a system opposed to monarchical absolutism. The democratisation of sovereignty led to the establishment of a public law—secular —articulated in the idea of collective sovereignty (Foucault 2003). Out of this process emerged the notion of popular sovereignty as a uniform social body—the people—, territorialised in the idea of a nation bounded by borders. In the nineteenth century, the nation was conceptualised as a racially homogeneous entity, whereas the principle of popular sovereignty,

enshrined in legal codes, vested the state with the protection and unity of the sovereign people-nation.

The link established in the nineteenth century between biological evolutionism and the discourse of power led to the social construction of race as the unifying element of the nation. Sovereignty became a mechanism to "control the biological and life processes of man [...] and to ensure that they are not only disciplined but also regularised" (Foucault 2003, 246). To function, nation-states had to racialise and culturally homogenise its populations for the sake of internal coherence and the appearance of sovereignty to the outside world. In this regard, Oommen refers as "ethnification" the state's attempts to integrate the various nations within its territory into a common cultural stream (quoted in Burç 2024, 28), thereby legitimising the production of a racialised Other *vis-à-vis* the sovereign *ethnie* (i.e. the people).

Therefore, sovereignty became the capacity of the modern state to dictate the lines of inclusion-exclusion within the *polis*; that is, those who are constituent members of the people and those who are not. Agamben (1998, 177) identifies a similar problem when analysing the framing of sovereignty as the will of the people: "it is as if what we call 'people' were in reality not a unitary subject but a dialectical oscillation between two opposite poles: on the one hand, the set of the People [the sovereign citizens] as a whole political body, and on the other, the subset of the people as a fragmentary multiplicity of needy and excluded bodies [the wretched, oppressed and defeated]." Rifkin (2012) pointed out three categories of citizenship resulting from the colonisation of Indian nations in the United States: people, non-people and peoples. Those who fit the ideal body of the people are recognised as citizens, whereas the rest of the resident population—the non-people—are excluded from meaningful participation while remaining under state control. Reflecting on the juridical status of indigenous populations, the author identifies a further category, i.e. *peoples*. The institutionalization of the nation, however, required reducing the indigenous peoples to "a unitary subject" by delegitimising and illegalizing their self-governing polities (Rifkin 2012, 80–83). That is, sovereignty was the normative vehicle that invalidated any nuanced territorial imaginary of the nation. Non-sovereign peoples, such as the Kurds and the Mayas, were not totally excluded, but neither fully incorporated into the sovereign realm of the nation-state.

Colonialism provided the "legal technology" for the creation of such lawful regimes of difference (Bonilla 2017), whilst discourses on sovereignty codified practices of conquest and settlement. In that sense, Agamben (1998, 19) points

to the *exception* as the originary form of law. Modern states tend to codify non-dominant ethnicities as exceptions in the sense of considering their lands and traditional organizing systems as being outside the normal functioning of the law, yet internal to the space of the nation (Rifkin 2012, 86). In this sense, the conquest of so-called "savage peoples" never meant their exclusion *per se* of the sovereign realm, but rather their forced inclusion as the negation of civilization and laws. Thus, the exercise of sovereignty leads to the subdivision of humans into a "superrace" of dominating sovereign groups and a "subrace" of non-sovereign Others in need of external domination (Reyes and Kaufman 2011, 511). The Kurdish and Maya peoples exemplify how a language of exception enabled not only the colonization of their territories but also their racialization and cultural assimilation within the state.

In sum, sovereignty resolved the paradox of asserting national authority over groups whose existence as peoples preceded national borders. Sovereignty was thus intended to monopolise for the state the uncontested right to define the contours of the legal and administrative order. However, historical evidence shows that indigenous peoples were not simply swallowed up by the central powers that invaded and colonised them (Hämäläinen and Truett 2011). Drawing on an analysis of state formation from its margins (Das and Poole 2004), the following section explores how the situated practices of the Kurdish and Maya peoples continually leverage the ambiguities and ambivalences of the state in its borderlands to resist or circumvent its regulatory effects while advancing their own political interests.

Zapatismo and the Kurdish Liberation Movement: Alternative Forms of Sovereignty on the Margins of the State

Although Zapatismo and the Kurdish liberation movement formally emerged in 1994 and 2012, respectively, their roots can be traced to much longer-term processes of state formation in Mexico and Syria. In the early decades of the twentieth century, the rise of modern nationalism in both countries fostered racialised hierarchies that emphasised the biological and cultural superiority of the dominant ethnic group.

In Mexico, the ideology of *mestizaje* generated arguments about the cultural improvement of indigenous populations through the adoption of modern ideas termed as whitening technologies (Stepan 1996). Since the early 1930s, certain cultural practices of indigenous peoples were inscribed in racialised codes that

ultimately led to their continued inferiorisation. In Chiapas, such dehumanising expressions resulted in definitions of Maya populations as flawed, in contrast to essentialised depictions of their glorious ancestral history. In mandate Syria, growing awareness of a Kurdish political identity in the Jazira region prompted the labelling of the Kurdish population as an obstacle to Syrian nation-building. Pan-Arab nationalism defined the Kurds as foreigners who became part of the so-called *shuʿubiyyun*, i.e. "people who did not allow themselves to be arabised" (Tejel 2009, 41).

Despite the enforcement of modern policies, neither the Mexican nor the Syrian state managed to constitute themselves as a monopoly of authority, but rather as a fragmented field of power with multiple sovereign formations competing for social control. Moreover, modernizing policies and the growth of state structures along its borders triggered the emergence of mobilisation patterns that slipped under the state's radar. In that sense, this section highlights the long-term effects of agrarian reforms in the Lacandon region of Chiapas and in the Jazira, in northern Syria.

The Lacandon Jungle: Land Reform, Rural Exodus and Politicisation of the Mayan Peoples in Chiapas

This section suggests that the emergence of Zapatismo has its historical roots in two key factors: the agricultural policies implemented in Mexico in the 1920s and the settlement of indigenous peoples in the Lacandon Jungle. The settling of the Lacandon began after 1930 due the exhaustion of large property lands for distribution in Chiapas. The regime emerging in Mexico in the 1910s and 1920s led to the adoption of a new agrarian legal code centred on replacing the agricultural *finca* system through land redistribution policies. Land reform was aimed at transforming living conditions in rural areas, but also at concentrating indigenous peoples to facilitate their economic and political control. As stated in 1934 by a local government official: "Chiapas urgently needs to join the activity of the indigenous race to that of the rest of its population, in such a way that it becomes an element for organized production and is controllable by the government" (Hernández 2001, 28). Local landowners and *cacicazgos* (chiefdoms) turned land redistribution in Chiapas into an inefficient and corrupt process. The end of the finca era only came to Chiapas after 1970, although it did not mean the dismantling of the racial order of Chiapas society (Mora 2023, 135).

Faced with population growth in Los Altos region of Chiapas, local and federal authorities promoted a rural exodus to the jungle between 1950 and 1960. According to Jan de Vos (2021, 25), "instead of distributing the land owned by large [Chiapas] landowners among the peasants, the latter were invited to occupy vacant national land [in the Lacandona], while at the same time opening it up to private initiative by capitalist investors." The state then attempted to assert its sovereignty by curbing land occupation or threatening eviction, while the Maya people pressed for the regularisation of the newly occupied lands. Mostly former peons on the estates, the new settlers did not intend to return to the status of *acasillados* (workers living on the finca) on a government-owned latifundium. On the contrary, the political formation of Zapatista communities took place in opposition to figures from the *finquero* period such as the *mozo-indígena* (servant-Indian) and *mozo-patrón* (servant-master) relationships, recreated by the Tseltal and Tojolabal Mayan peoples to explain past conditions of oppression, which overlap with those persisting in the present.

At the same time, the arrival of priests imbued with liberation theology and left-wing activists helped to reinforce a political consciousness that was already emerging among the Mayan communities in the jungle (Castillo-Quiñones 2024, 48). In turn, the struggle for legal land tenure led to the pursuit of forms of political organisation (De Vos 2021, 36). Crucially, decisions in these communities were made in democratic assemblies according to customary practices of the Maya peoples. In tandem with these factors, the diffuse presence of the state in the Lacandon Jungle contributed to the emergence of a political identity which dismantled the official indigenist narrative aimed at integrating indigenous peoples by means of forced acculturation.

In the 1970s, the adoption of multicultural discourses and policies in Mexico left untouched the vertical relationship between government institutions and indigenous peoples. In Chiapas, multiculturalism was aimed at defending "a hidden latifundism by giving priority to technification of land use over land distribution" (Hernández 2001, 102). By that time, the Lacandona had become a space of competition for a mosaic of political interests. Missionary churches, left-wing movements, landless peasants and the state all sought to turn the jungle into a source of economic exploitation or social control.

The EZLN emerged in that tumultuous context as the armed wing of the National Liberation Front (FLN), a Marxist guerrilla movement that since 1978 had focused its political work in Chiapas due its border location with Central America. The sense of exhausting all legal means in the struggle for

land had led more Mayan communities to join the ranks of the EZLN. Moreover, the co-opting of several of their communal leaders ended up radicalising many youths in the jungle communities: "And *los vendidos* [co-opted leaders] began to practise pure centralism, which was anything but democratic. What is customary is that everyone can give their opinion and speak and say what they think in front of everyone at the assembly. [Yet] If they heard someone voicing disagreement, they would immediately interrupt: 'no, this young man is mistaken; what he says does not hold.' [Thus,] the assemblies came to address only matters aligned with the government's interests. And we withdrew from that until we left them on their own. And we began to convene clandestinely" (Rovira 1994, 38). The neoliberal reform of Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution put an end to agrarian distribution, convincing the Mayans to revolt in 1994 (Mora 2023, 191–204). By 1993, leadership of the EZLN had been assumed by a predominantly indigenous command that renounced the seizure of power (De Vos 2021, 295). The initial objective of a Marxist revolution was rapidly replaced by the struggle for grassroots democracy and autonomy. The framing of Zapatismo as an indigenous democratic force was amplified after 2001, following the EZLN's establishment of de facto autonomy in the territories under its control.

Jazira in Northern Syria: Agricultural Modernization, Arabization and the Politicisation of the Kurdish Populations

In Northern Syria, the formation of a specific political culture among the Kurds was associated with the arrival of Kurdish refugees in Jazira during the French mandate period (1918–46). Throughout the 1920s, thousands of Kurdish nationalists fleeing the Kemalist regime's coercive measures found refuge in the Jazira. Eager to contain the rise of Arab nationalism in Syria, the arrival of these political activists and intellectuals was welcomed by French authorities anxious to settle "loyal" populations to ensure a buffer zone with Turkey. Some French officers were cognizant of the potential of the Kurds in the colonization project of Jazira and in the resolution of frontier disputes with Turkey (Tejel 2009, 29). By 1930, Jazira had become a "space of evasion" where Kurdish nationalism could flourish and spread throughout the Levant, sheltered from Turkey's hostile sovereignty (Altuğ 2020, 48).

In this period, Kurdish activism was favoured by the almost non-existent presence of the state in Jazira. Syrian identity was an abstract concept caus-

ing its inhabitants to feel abandoned by the political centre. In addition, some Kurdish tribes considered the region an "ex-imperial space" and, as such, an extension of Kurdistan under the control of a colonial power (Tejel 2009, 33). However, the Kurds did not react uniformly to nationalist activism. While Kurdish refugees were more engaged in the nationalist movement, Kurds already established in Syria for several generations were less receptive to Kurdish nationalism (Tejel 2009, 36).

During the French mandatory administration, Jazira de facto escaped Damascus's control. The French fragmented Syria into "administrable blocks," where several sectarian statelets were formed according to European orientalist representations (Ouahes 2020). As a result, Jazira became a battleground between Turkish, Kurdish and Arab nationalists. Turkish authorities attempted to influence the border's layout in order to contain Kurdish activism, framed as a threat to both internal and cross-border security. For their part, Kurdish intellectuals were encouraged by the French authorities to focus their activism in Jazira, where they formed nationalist organisations such as the Khoybun League. Syrian nationalists from Damascus reacted sharply against the Kurdish-French connection (Tejel 2009, 23–35), framing Jazira as a peripheral region loyal to the mandatory power, while likened the refugees to "parasites" (*ṭufaylī*) infiltrating through uncontrollable borders (Altuğ 2020, 54).

Franco-Kurdish collaboration ended in 1936 after the signing of a Franco-Syrian treaty foreshadowing the independence of Syria. In reaction, Kurdish and Christian notables in Jazira formed a political movement demanding administrative autonomy after the withdrawal of French troops. Kurdish actors in the movement highlighted the Kurdishness of most of the population of Jazira to counter Damascus' centralist claims. Although the mandatory period ended without satisfying Kurdish demands, nationalist activism in Jazira had succeeded in generating a certain degree of cohesion among many Kurds fearing the aggressive policies that an Arab nation-state might pursue against non-Arab populations.

Post-colonial statist development in Syria started with the Ba'athist regime and its socialist experiment (Cemgil and Hoffman 2016, 58). Similarly to Mexico, agrarian reform plans were fundamental in the quest for sovereign control of the territory. After removing the old class of notables from power, agricultural modernisation programmes were used in the 1960s and 1970s to produce an Arab imprint on the rural regions of the country (Jongerden 2022, 596). According to Tejel, the Kurds in Jazira were especially affected by the

agricultural "miracle" of the 1950s. Large-scale mechanized grain production was implemented, causing the rapid development of the region but also the marginalization of certain groups, the majority of which were Kurds (Tejel 2009, 38–39). Northeastern Syria was transformed in a monoculture farming area, while the processing of the same agricultural products was located outside the region (Jongerden 2022). Some authors refer to these policies as a form of internal colonisation through de-development (Mohammadpour and Soleimani 2020) or peripherization (Türk and Jongerden 2024).

In the 1960s and 1970s, agrarian reforms took a radical shift by associating them with the northern border Arabisation policy. Ba'athist pan-Arab nationalism framed the Kurds as a threat to the Arab nation. The concomitant location of Jazira with other parts of Kurdistan prompted the government to design ethnic cleansing measures to reaffirm the Arab character of the border. Lands of Kurdish farmers were widely expropriated and Arab families settled on "model" farms in Jazira (Tejel 200, 61–62), as part of the "regime's hydro-civilization mission" in the region (Cemgil and Hoffman 2016, 58). Yet the border had become an area of daily movement, not only of goods and people, but also of political principles and revolutionary ideas. Since the 1950s, the border city of Qamishli in Jazira had become an epicentre for left-wing Kurdish activists affiliated with the Syrian Communist Party (SCP) (Tejel 2021). Furthermore, uneven development and marginalisation had forced the Kurds to move to larger cities, where they discovered new avenues for mobilisation through trade union movements.

Northern Syria had thus become fertile ground for the establishment of the Kurdistan Workers, Party (PKK). Similarly to the FLN in Mexico, the PKK was a Marxist guerrilla movement aimed at creating a socialist Kurdish state. Taking advantage of Turko-Syrian rivalries along the border, the PKK negotiated with Hafez al-Assad for a safe haven in northern Syria and Lebanon's Beqaa Valley. The PKK gained the support of politicised Kurds and peasants in Jazira who were willing to protest against state-led dispossession policies associated with agricultural modernisation. In 1998, the Syrian government succumbed to Turkish pressure and expelled PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan from its territory. Nevertheless, Northern Syria remained an area of influence for the PKK, culminating in the establishment of the Democratic Union Party (PYD) in 2003.

The economic liberalization of the 1990s and 2000s in Syria continued along the path of dispossessing Kurdish peasants and enforcing Arabization (Jong-

erden 2022, 598). In contrast, the PYD extensively increased its mobilization capacity beyond its traditional strongholds after the Qamishli revolt in 2004. In the context of the Syrian civil war, the PYD succeeded in establishing a de facto autonomous region in Northern Syria. Under the banner of democratic confederalism, the movement presented a multi-ethnic and multi-religious decentralized scheme as the political formula not only for a post-Assad Syria, but against what it defines as the tribal rigorism prevailing in the region.

Politics beyond the State in Chiapas and Northern Syria

This section frames Chiapas and northern Syria as political spaces where alternative forms of non-state sovereignty destabilise the state's homogenising policies. Ideologically, both movements attempt to recreate a moral society enshrined in a pluralized view of the nation. The discussion briefly analyses two elements upon which Zapatismo and the Kurdish liberation movement have envisioned a post-national administrative paradigm: the politicisation of everyday life and grassroots democracy. The social system they suggest is framed in opposition to universal or uniform conceptions of the polis as a single sovereign community. Both movements propose abandoning sovereignty as the ontological foundation of power and authority, whilst advocating autonomy as the basis for legitimacy and political order. Sovereignty is therefore challenged not by seizing power, but by dispersing it through the everyday practices of community self-organization and democratic assemblies.

Kuxlejal Politics and Democratic Confederalism

In the case of the Zapatista movement, autonomy emerges from the Tseltal and Tojolabal ethic of the *kuxlejal*. The word *kuxlejal* can be translated as "life-existence" (Mora 2023, 19) and refers to the Tseltal ideal of a harmonious state of life—*lekil kuxlejal* (good life). Thus, *lekil kuxlejal* constitutes a moral foundation for peace in everyday life through a seamless integration between society and nature (Paoli 2003, 73). Similarly, Tseltal scholar Juan López Intzin (2013, 77) explains the concept as the aspiration for a "dignified-full-just life, which encompasses all spheres of existence." Within the Zapatista movement, this language becomes a terrain of political struggle, where the horizon and aim of autonomy are framed as the quest for a dignified life. Furthermore, the territorialisation of autonomy exceeds the notion of borders by spatialising

struggle and giving rise to "a self-organised collective subject" that is not mediated by sovereign power relations or the state (Reyes and Kaufman 2011, 519).

The practices of Zapatista autonomy reflect the search for this ideal through the politicisation of everyday life in communal democratic spaces. According to Mariana Mora (2023, 61–69), decision-making in autonomous municipalities is conditioned by ordinary activities such as working in the cornfield, in the women's production collectives, rituals associated with sowing and harvesting, etc. Although not in a politicised fashion, this relationship with the environment can also be seen in rituals of the Mayan populations of Yucatán, such as the *huajicol*, associated with the agricultural cycles of the region. However, in Zapatista communities, the right to political participation is determined by involvement in collective land-based work. In this sense, *kuxlejal* politics also shapes a constructed meaning of territory, not defined by borders, but by a sense of presence and belonging that emerges from the reproduction of everyday actions. The EZLN itself defines collective work as the *ethos* of Zapatista autonomy: "Collective work is based on agreement [...] to do work on collective land [...]. The profit or benefit is for the collective. It is usually used for festivities, mobilisations, the acquisition of health equipment, training of health and education promoters, and for the movements and maintenance of authorities and autonomous commissions."

The notion of sovereignty derived from this model does not rest on the idea of a single nation contained within borders. Instead, Political organisation is based on collective memories of the struggle for land, out of which an "indigenous political identity emerges in relation to a particular geographic space, but not to specific [bordered] parcels [of it]" (Mora 2023, 233). Thus, the sense of territory is not associated with property, a sovereign ethnicity or fixed spatial contours. From the Zapatista perspective, territory is: "a non-property that is used in common. It doesn't matter if you are Zapatista, partisan, Catholic, Evangelical, Presbyterian, atheist, Jewish, Muslim, black, white, dark, yellow, red, woman, man, other. The land can be used collectively." Zapatismo is therefore not framed merely as a localised rebellion, but as a transnational democratic revolution against the consequences of neoliberal governance for non-sovereign peoples.

In that sense, Zapatismo undermines the principles that legitimise sovereignty through processes of indigenous re-territorialisation based on—non-capitalist—notions of common property and communal work. Since the 1990s,

Zapatismo has set out to reformulate indigenism in terms of a conglomerate of ethnically distinct groups but politically bonded by a history of grievances. In a communiqué, for instance, the EZLN recreates the story of an ancient Mayan Tsotsil god, *Votán*, who is reincarnated in the figure of Emiliano Zapata—the popular hero of the Mexican Revolution—to become "custodian and heart of the people." Calling this figure Votán-Zapata, the story show how indigenous metaphors have been used to challenge state legitimacy without aspiring to taking power, or promoting the idea of a single ethnic Mayan nation. Crucially, the Zapatista idea of the exercise of power is rooted on what they called rule by obeying (*mandar obedeciendo*). Unlike state sovereignty, this formula draws on grassroots self-organisation practices through assembly, effectively preventing the concentration of power by distributing responsibilities and encouraging collective work (Reyes and Kaufman 2011, 516).

Similarly, the Kurdish freedom movement in Northern Syria does not seek to establish a Kurdish nation but to decentralise the state through grassroot democracy. For that, the movement proposed democratic confederalism as a non-state administrative paradigm based on radical democratic governance, whose supervision and execution are implemented by multi-structured council groups at the local level (Öcalan 2017, 24). According to Gunesser (2021, 8), the model of a democratic nation aspires to the eradication of the accumulation of power and capital by the structures of a democratic, ecological, and gender-liberated society. In that sense, democratic confederalism is framed not as "an alternative state, but an alternative to the state" (Gunesser 2021, 51). The central tenet of the paradigm points out that the heterogeneous structure of society inevitably conflicts with any form of centralised government (Öcalan 2017, 22). Consequently, decentralisation is the ultimate aim of the project, and democratic autonomy the formula for achieving it.

These ideas were put into practice in Northern Syria by the PYD, while avoiding any association of its political project with an ethno-national agenda. As the movement moved into territories with predominantly non-Kurdish populations, the term Rojava also expanded to denote more than an ethno-cartographic entity. In 2016, the territories under PYD control were renamed as Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (DAANES) to reverse any linkage with an exclusively Kurdish project. In the PYD's strategic discourse, the political meaning of Rojava was shifted to refer to a transnational revolutionary project associated with women's liberation, grassroots democracy and ecological living. Framing the Rojava revolution not merely as

a Kurdish project, but as part of a global struggle against capitalist modernity, ultimately alienated some nationalist strands of the Kurdish movement in Syria. However, the reframing of the more ethno-nationalist referents of the project did not mean denying the Kurdish national identity within the autonomous administration. The Kurdish nation is included within the idea of a democratic nation, understood as "the democratisation and radical decentralisation of nation-state governance" (Sunca 2020, 10).

Thus, decentralisation is proposed as the framework within which peoples can exercise their right to self-rule in a democratic nation. That is, social order does not emerge from the dissolution of a particular identity within a supra-institutional structure; on the contrary, any social contract emerges from the recognition of the singular and irreducible nature of the groups that constitute a society. In this respect, the DAANES social contract states as follows: "We, the daughters and sons of North and East Syria—Kurds, Arabs, Syriac Assyrians, Turkmen, Armenians, Circassians, Chechens, Muslims, Christians and Yazidis—in our awareness and belief of the duty upon us from the martyrs, in response to the demands of our peoples to live in dignity […] came together to establish a democratic system […] without racist tendencies, discrimination, exclusion or the marginalization of any identity."

Jongerden and Knapp (2016) argue that this social contract does not produce a state or sovereign power, but rather the idea that politics emanates from consensus among social groups self-recognised as equals. The ultimate aim is to create an alternative notion of sovereignty that is not grounded in an inclusion-exclusion political dichotomy, yet in cross-border alliances of democratic confederated peoples. By conceptualising autonomy as administrative decentralisation and the dispersion of power, rather than its centralisation, both Zapatismo and the Kurdish movement contribute to exploring, within the very structures of the state, an alternative form of social organisation that unmakes sovereignty and, in the words of Reyes and Kaufman (2011, 515), "completely bypasses the sovereign and its necessary relationship of command and obedience."

Zapatismo and Rojava: Society beyond the State?

Analysis of the Zapatista and Rojava self-rule models reveals alternative forms of sovereignty based on the notion of stateless self-determination. In both experiences, power is not concentrated in an ethnos recognised as sovereign, rather it is dispersed among local councils through democratic mecha-

nisms. Thus, both movements have reframed self-determination as the struggle for democracy; that is, building a grassroots democratic society has been prioritised over sovereign statehood. In Rojava, democratic confederalism also calls for an anti-statist form of governance based on participatory democracy, with feminism and environmentalism as key guiding values (Shahvisi 2021).

The Kurdish liberation movement incorporated the paradigm of social ecology and women's liberation as the foundations for democratic confederalism. Accordingly, the ecological crisis and patriarchy are rooted in the development of hierarchical structures that emerged with the rise of the nation-state. The building of local direct-democratic assemblies was envisioned to contest capitalist social-property relations, along with hierarchies intrinsic to nation-state formation (Hammy and Miley 2022). In this sense, Rojava's economy was conceptualised as a community-based project centred on cooperatives (Öcalan 2017, 38), in line with an ecologically driven "social economy," where profit and capital accumulation are not completely rejected but minimised (Aslan 2021, 207).

In terms of gender emancipation, democratic confederalism has developed a feminist epistemology known as *jineology*, or the study of women (*jin*). According to Shahvisi, *jineology* differs markedly from those prevailing forms of feminism in the West, focused on atomistic individual identities (Shavisi 2021, 1005). In contrast, Rojava's ideology focuses on intersectionality while addressing the challenges posed by male domination. Dirik warns that post-struggle societies often revive traditional gender roles in order to return to conservative normality (2018, 148). To combat this, the creation of women-only spaces was crucial to countering masculinity in Northern Syria. For Shavisi, these spaces are a natural extension of the decentralisation of governance, deriving from the political principle that spaces will not be liberating while men dominate rather than share them (Shavisi 2021, 1012–14).

In the case of Zapatismo, Mora presents a similar argument on the importance of women-only spaces as environments for politicization. Although often relegated to the margins of the Zapatista autonomy project, women's production collectives function as intergenerational spaces where Tseltal and Tojolabal peasant women reflect on their lives "in relation to their families, the men in their community and the state" (Mora 2023, 64–65). The politicisation occurring in these sites generates a sense of belonging radically opposed to ethno-national identification with a sovereign entity. On the one hand, Espinosa refers the feminist emphasis on politicising social reproduction activities as

part of popular feminism in Mexico (Espinosa 2009), while others associate it with Marxist feminism. Mora, on the other hand, points out that the *kuxlejal* politics of Zapatista women are distinguished by promoting a political pedagogy based on "experience and the communal politicisation of domestic spheres" (Mora 2023, 248), thus destabilising the category of indigenous women fostered by the sovereignty discourse in Mexico.

The association of Zapatista autonomy with the politicisation of everyday life also generates an ecological discourse of caring for the territory. According to Flores (2017), indigenous discourses do not focus only on environmental preservation, but rather on claiming usurped lands and on the indigenous communities' subjective attachment to natural spaces. Although it would be mistaken to essentialise indigenous peoples as millenarian ecological and democratic societies, the Zapatistas' practices of autonomy have incorporated alternative forms of development based on sustainable agriculture. This is how someone who participated in the movement from its inception expressed it: "For us indigenous peoples, when we talk about a community's territory [...] everything within that area: springs, trees, caves, wells, sacred sites, etc., all the wealth that is there has been cared for by them for a long time: grandparents, parents [...] And then, when the government [comes and says:] 'we are going to build a road here', what happens? They knock down and destroy sacred places that the peoples have cared for over many years [...] Furthermore, in the Constitution [...] these sacred places are not considered [nor] is the peoples' conception [of the territory] where the three levels of the universe are respected: the underground, the ground, and the sky [...] So, what lies beneath the ground [...] all those resources are something that must be managed within the community itself."

Zapatismo denounces the dominant environmentalist discourse as a pretext for the gradual de-territorialisation of indigenous peoples. In contrast, the Zapatistas' ecological discourse demands recognition of indigenous peoples as human beings *indesplazable* from the space they inhabit (Flores 2017), and capable of creating their own environmental strategies and discourses. Following the Zapatista uprising, the EZLN proclaimed their own Revolutionary Agrarian Law. Groups benefiting from this law had to renounce all government support, including the use of fertilisers. The abandonment of agrochemicals led to a transition towards agroecology, which in turn resulted in the gradual integration of women into agroecological projects (Gómez 2022). These autonomous practices enable us to envisage an alternative social order beyond the regulatory and patriarchal logic of sovereign power.

Conclusion

The Zapatista and Kurdish liberation movements propose a political formula to overcome sectarian politics by decentralising the state and radically democratising society. Through autonomic practices, they open up the possibility of thinking and theorising on a stateless social order that overturns the logic of sovereign power. In both cases, the notion of political community has no exclusive ethno-sectarian contours, but a shared history of dispossession and internal colonialism. Ethnic or national identity is not denied but rather integrated into the communal impulse emerging from the politicisation of everyday collective activities, and the radical involvement of society in self-governing structures.

The idea of political community emerging from both projects is distinguished by orienting autonomous practices not towards the destruction of the state, but the erosion of its sources of legitimacy. Since autonomy is framed as a collective—rather than nationalist—affirmation of territory, the ethnocentric and highly centralised logics characterising nation-states become inoperative in a model of democratic autonomy. In this sense, both experiences aim to destabilise racialised premises embedded in the classical conception of popular sovereignty, while transcending the colonial structures inherent in the formation of the state.

Finally, findings in this paper support a move beyond traditional accounts on borderlands and state politics. The historical analysis of the politicisation processes outlined here fits into a growing scholarship that seeks to reinterpret state formation processes from the perspective of the so-called peripheries, rather than from the centres of power. Critical engagement with the Zapatista and Kurdish political projects may contribute to the development of new social contracts designed to decentralise politics and prevent the concentration of power in political contexts marked by authoritarianism and, more broadly, by the persistence of racialised discourses and colonial structures of power.

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Notes

1 *Fincas* (estates) are privately owned properties of land dating back to modes of property and labour under Spanish colonial rule in Mexico.

2 In the context described, the social niche of the *mozo*, peon or servant, is a racialised trope dating back to life on the estates of Mexico, which labels indigenous people as subjects born to work and obey, in contrast to the *mestizo* or *ladino* (white inhabitant) master, who is born to give orders (Mora 2023, 131–45).

3 The FLN justified its decision by stating: "Our purpose is to lead the people in a long revolutionary struggle to shake off capitalist domination... and to initiate it... by taking advantage of the geographical and strategic factors that have been duly assessed by our commanders (De Vos 2021, 284).

4 EZLN. "Vigésima y Última Parte: El Común y la No Propiedad," *Enlace Zapatista,* 20 Dec. 2023, https://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/2023/12/20/vigesima-y-ultima-parte-el-comun-y-la-no-propiedad/.

5 EZLN. "Vigésima y Última Parte: El Común y la No Propiedad," *Enlace Zapatista,* 20 Dec. 2023, https://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/2023/12/20/vigesima-y-ultima-parte-el-comun-y-la-no-propiedad/.

6 EZLN. "Votán-Zapata, Guardián y Corazón del Pueblo," *Enlace Zapatista*, 10 Apr. 1995, https://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/1995/04/10/votan-zapata-guardian-y-corazon-del-pueblo//.

7 EZLN. "Chiapas: la treceava estela. Cuarta parte: un plan", *Enlace Zapatista*, 21 Jul. 2003, https://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/2003/07/21/chiapas-la-treceava-estela-cuarta-parte-un-plan/.

8 "Europe has Turned the Kurdish Question into a Tool for its Own Interests", *Academy of Democratic Modernity*, 24 Jul. 2021, https://democraticmodernity.com/blog/europe-has-turned-the-kurdish-question-into-a-tool-for-its-own-interests.

9 "The Social Contract of the Democratic Autonomous Administration of the North and East Syria Region, Preamble", https://www.aanes-rep-eu.com/ (accessed 10 Jan. 2025).

10 Personal communication with anonymous, 27 Feb. 2023.

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