

Seattle University

ScholarWorks @ SeattleU

---

International Studies Undergraduate Honors  
Theses

International Studies

---

2021

## Zapatismo and the Decolonial Turn: Liberation and Autonomy in Mexico and Across the Globe (2021)

Yasmin Shirzad  
*Seattle University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.seattleu.edu/intl-std-theses>

---

### Recommended Citation

Shirzad, Yasmin, "Zapatismo and the Decolonial Turn: Liberation and Autonomy in Mexico and Across the Globe (2021)" (2021). *International Studies Undergraduate Honors Theses*. 23.  
<https://scholarworks.seattleu.edu/intl-std-theses/23>

This Latin America is brought to you for free and open access by the International Studies at ScholarWorks @ SeattleU. It has been accepted for inclusion in International Studies Undergraduate Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks @ SeattleU.

Seattle University

**Zapatismo and the decolonial turn: Liberation and autonomy in  
Mexico and across the globe**

A Thesis Submitted to  
The Faculty of the College of Arts and Sciences  
In Candidacy for the Degree of  
Departmental Honors in International Studies

By  
Yasmin Contreras Shirzad

June 2021

This departmental honors thesis by Yasmin Contreras Shirzad is approved by:

*Robert Andolina*

---

Dr. Robert Andolina, Instructor

*Serena Cosgrove*

---

Dr. Serena Cosgrove, Reader

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Professor Robert Andolina, and Professor Serena Cosgrove for providing me with feedback and support throughout the honors thesis process. This paper would not have been possible without their guidance and support. I would also like to thank my peers in the INST-4900 and INST-4960 courses for their feedback and questions about my research. In addition, I would like to thank all the postcolonial and decolonial scholars and activists whose work inspired my own, with special thanks to those in the modernity/coloniality/decoloniality (MDC) collective, who are using their platforms to advocate for justice and amplify marginalized voices. Finally, I would like to thank the Zapatistas, without them none of this would be possible and I am humbled and grateful to have learned from and about them over the course of this research project.

## Introduction

In recent years, the word decolonization has become popular in social and academic settings and internet activism/ discourse; calls for decolonization are inspired by the dire situation of people across the globe, whose lands and labor have been ravaged and exploited by the forces of capitalism and colonialism. In its mainstream use, it often refers to the undoing of certain aspects of colonialism; a quick tap on the hashtag #decolonize yields over 225 thousand results on instagram, and when you add #decolonization, another 30 thousand. This push back against colonialism is not new, postcolonial scholars have been writing about the topic for decades, identifying the ways that the injustices of the modern era have their roots in colonialism and imperialism. The topic is however relatively new to social media and to popular social discourse. Its introduction into the everyday vernacular is due in large part to the rapid spread of knowledge and information that takes place on the internet, the tireless work of postcolonial and decolonial activists and scholars, and, most importantly, the rise of contemporary decolonial movements and rebellions like that of the Zapatistas.

In the face of contemporary issues like racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia and more, it has been the norm to speak of and believe in reform, reform of the systems that perpetuate these dangerous conditions that oppress and marginalize people across the globe. It is understandable why reform is the most sought after solution, even when it is historically one of the most ineffective. After all, for the many people who take any semblance of comfort in the current system, whether due to conditioning or privilege, the idea of revolution and structural change is radical and sometimes violent and can only be condoned as a last resort option. The fact of the matter is that it may be time to rely upon our last resort options in order to imagine a future where we can all live in harmony with each other and with our physical world. Additionally, what many people fail to realize is that this revolutionary change is already taking place in many different places and in many different forms, one of which is through decolonial movements like that of the Zapatistas in Chiapas, Mexico.

This honors thesis analyzes the ideals and practices of the Zapatista movement that originated in Chiapas, Mexico through the lens of decoloniality to demonstrate how the Zapatistas are actively working to liberate their communities from the effects of colonial legacies, capitalist relations, neoliberal policies, and state-sponsored settler colonialist practices in Mexico and across the globe. More specifically, my research questions are: 1) Why have the Zapatistas adopted principles and actions that align with decolonial thought? 2) How does the

Zapatista movement exhibit decoloniality in practice? and 3) What might be the emancipatory potential of decoloniality for the Zapatistas and other peoples?

Zapatismo is an indigenous movement grounded in and based upon the customs of native people of the Chiapas region of Southern Mexico which rejects the values imposed on Mexico through colonialism, capitalism and more recently, neoliberalism. In their place, the Zapatistas aim to construct un mundo donde quepan muchos mundos, or a world where many worlds fit. This coincides with decoloniality and its rejection of the same systems that oppress and marginalize colonized people across the globe. According to decolonial scholar Walter D. Mignolo, decolonial thinking seeks to dismantle the notion of Western supremacy by understanding and analyzing the consequences of colonialism in the past and present and by staying informed about decolonial movements like that of the Zapatistas.

One of the ways that Zapatismo exhibits decoloniality is through practices of delinking: resistance to development projects that displace indigenous people or destroy their environment; removing Zapatista children from the national education system and enrolling them in schools focused on their indigenous identity and history. Another way is by linking up with rebels and activists across the globe fighting for liberation from colonial structures. Crucially, the Zapatista movement does not seek power over others, nor does it offer a blueprint for liberation. Instead, its ongoing resistance has provided hope and support to the people carrying out revolution and fighting for autonomy in their respective homelands.

When studying Zapatismo in an academic context as I plan to do with this research project it is important to mention that “for the Zapatistas, Zapatismo can neither be defined, nor captured in the language offered by modernity.” (Marcos, 1994) For the sake of this project however, I will be attempting to describe and analyze the principles behind the Zapatista movement and how it embodies many elements of decoloniality. By applying a decolonial analysis to the beliefs and strategies of Zapatismo and Zapatista practices, I will demonstrate that decoloniality is not a far off possibility, but is instead a present reality.

## **Theoretical Context**

In order to understand how Zapatismo can be understood as a contemporary decolonial movement there are a number of concepts which must first be explained. First, to understand decoloniality and the need for a decolonial turn, one must have a clear understanding of coloniality/modernity and the coloniality of power. One must also have a basic knowledge of how these concepts are woven into the structures of Mexican society. This is mostly done

through the ideology of *mestizaje*, which sought to unite all Mexicans under a singular, unified national identity. Though the idea of the ‘*mestizo*’ was originally thought to be a push-back against Western intervention and imperialism, it has come to be a nationalistic ideology that promotes exclusion and discrimination against those who do not fit its description. For indigenous Mexicans, the supposedly anti-imperial *mestizaje* ideology is nearly indistinguishable from the ideology of their former colonizers.

### *I. (De)coloniality and the coloniality of power*

The framework of decoloniality borrows ideas and methods from various critical methodologies including, critical race methodology, postcolonial methodology and Indigenous and decolonizing methodologies. One crucial concept in this framework is the coloniality of power, “a concept interrelating the practices and legacies of European colonialism in social orders and forms of knowledge, advanced in postcolonial studies, decoloniality, and Latin American subaltern studies” (Quijano, 2000, pp. 536). With respect to Latin America, Quijano (2007) points out that “the cultural repression and the colonization of the imaginary were accompanied by a massive and gigantic extermination of the natives, mainly by their use as expendable labor force, in addition to the violence of the conquest and the diseases brought by Europeans” (pp. 176).

Quijano proposes that “the model of power that is globally hegemonic today presupposes an element of coloniality (pp. 533)” and that the idea of race is colonial and European. Specifically, Quijano argues that “social relations founded on the category of race produced new historical social identities,” which were “considered constitutive of the hierarchies, places, and corresponding social roles, and consequently of the model of colonial domination that was being imposed” (pp. 534). Mignolo (2011) builds on Quijano’s work by observing that coloniality of power “organizes people around the world by color and territory, and manages the distribution of labor and organization of society” (p. 16). This has spilled over into the post-colonial world, and in doing so, created societies built upon racial hierarchies, which place Western, European people at the top and Indigenous and Black people at the bottom. According to Mignolo, we all fall somewhere within this hierarchy and our privilege is determined by our proximity to either end.

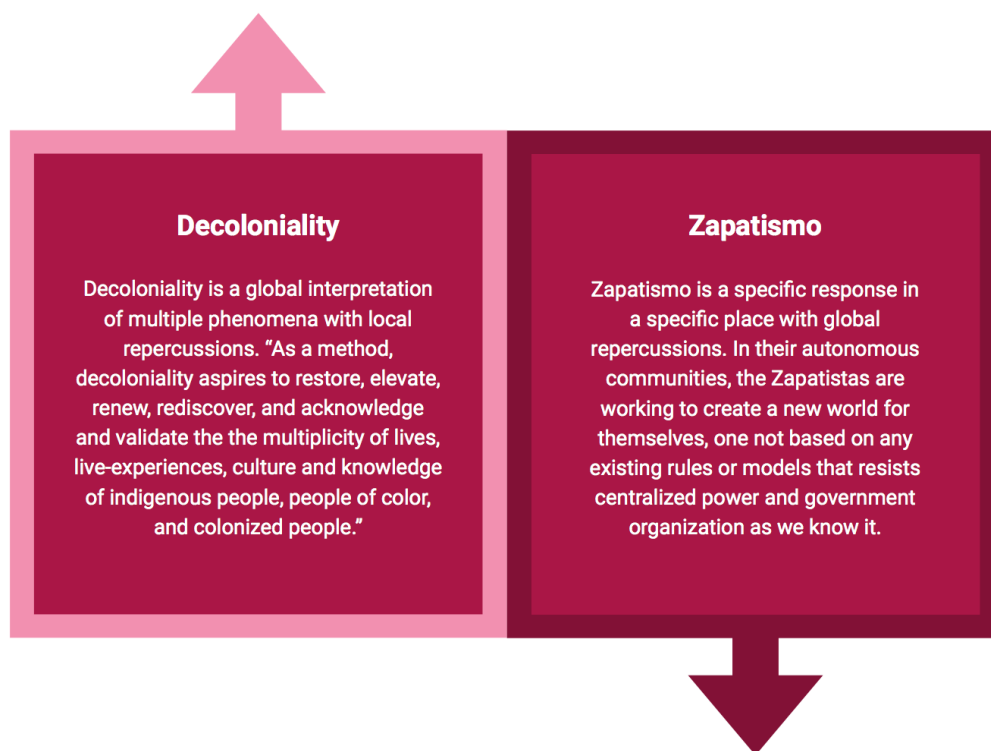
Another central aspect of decoloniality is known as “delinking.” Delinking from coloniality means centering Indigenous, non-Western knowledge, traditions and practices. Anibal Quijano (2007) sets the framework for decolonial delinking, arguing that “it is necessary to extricate

oneself from the linkages between rationality/modernity and coloniality,” ultimately leading to “epistemological decolonization, as decoloniality” (pp. 33). Walter Mignolo distinguishes decoloniality from others such as postcolonial and decolonization. For Mignolo, “decoloniality means first to delink (to detach) from that overall [colonial] structure of knowledge in order to engage in an epistemic reconstitution” (2011, pp. 37). In this sense, “decolonial thinking and doing...open up decolonial options. These, Mignolo believes, are “necessary steps for imagining and building democratic, just, and non imperial/colonial societies in Latin America” (Mignolo, 2017).

In this sense, decolonial analysis is not necessarily a traditional scholarly enterprise (Mignolo, 2017). Decolonial scholars and activists are not working to update or improve a discipline but to pursue their political goals and recover and re-articulate the forms of knowledge that were cast aside by coloniality, as I hope to do through my research. Similarly, the Zapatistas have assured outsiders that they do not follow any revolutionary political models or doctrine; instead, their methods come from their indigenous traditions, their history of resistance, and from their struggle for liberation.

In fact, Mignolo cited the Zapatistas as a movement that managed to generate “a paradigmatic break in the spatial configuration of modernity/coloniality” (Mignolo, 2011, pp. 215). In doing so, the Zapatistas have revealed “that the time has come to look beyond European legacies (...) in order to find diverse possibilities for imagining and building democratic futures” (pp. 217). Through their emphasis on autonomy and participation, the Zapatistas have challenged long-standing narratives on democracy and its origins, so that “no longer does any community or civil organization own the rights over its imposition or exportation; instead it is shared by all those people around the world who care for equity and social justice, and





especially by those who have been or are victims of injustice and inequities" (Mignolo, 2011, pp. 222).

### *I. Race, mestizaje and nation-building in Mexico*

In Mexico, these colonial power structures Quijano refers to have been upheld by the state promotion of mestizaje. The origin of the term mestizo can be traced to the colonial era, where it was used to identify and designate the position and status of mixed-race people, specifically those of Indigenous and European descent, in the colonial caste system. The term has since taken on a new meaning and is now used to refer to all mixed-race Mexican people.

In Mexico, mestizaje functions as both an identity marker and a political ideology that seeks to unite all Mexicans under a singular national identity without racial distinctions. But it was used by post-revolutionary Mexican leaders to justify practices of settler-colonialism under the guise of development and economic progress. The benefits of the decisions and policies of Mexico's mestizo leadership have come at the expense of Mexico's indigenous population. For them, the supposedly anti-imperial mestizaje ideology is nearly indistinguishable from the ideology of their former colonizers. In this sense, the push-back against the current Mexican

government is merely a continuation of Mexico's long history of resistance to colonialism and its devastating consequences for the native population.

Ana Maria Alonso (2004) discusses the origin of the term *mestizo*, a word which could be understood as hybridity, and its development and use in both historical and modern-day Mexico. In the article, Alonso discusses how colonialism, postcolonialism and imperialism have influenced and shaped the *mestizo* identity and identified the ways in which that identity has been used by the state to create a sense of "mestizo nationalism," (...) "that challenged U.S. imperialism and the legacy of Spanish colonialism," but "became canonized as the official perspective although awarding indigenous groups a secondary place in the nation." (Alonso, 2004, pp. 481)

Figueroa (2010) analyzes *mestizaje* in the Mexican context as an expansion of whiteness which, despite its intentionally ambiguous nature, has informed what she refers to as the logic of Mexican racism. Though leaders have done everything in their power to promote *mestizaje* as a unifying, inclusive, racial category, in reality it has been the opposite. For Figueroa, "whiteness [i]s an expression of racism and...privilege in a context where racial dynamics are not explicit or publicly acknowledged" (p. 387). In its efforts to erase racial difference in Mexico by grouping everyone under a singular racial identity, essentially creating a 'raceless' society, what *mestizaje* has actually erased is the history of colonialism and its consequences for the country's indigenous population, which continues to suffer in the present-day. By failing to acknowledge the violent legacy of colonialism in Mexico and instead promoting the idea of a perfect union between the Spanish and indigenous, *mestizaje* fails to take into account the racist ideas and beliefs that colonialism imposed on Mexico, that the majority of the 'mestizo' population has since internalized.

Figueroa proposes that in order to understand colonialism and racism in the context of Mexico, one must first acknowledge and understand: "(1) the ideology of *mestizaje*, (2) the coexistence of a variety of definitions of *mestizaje*, and (3) the ways in which the Mexicans relate to what I have called, *mestizaje* logic." (Figueroa, 2010, pp. 392) In order to do this Figueroa analyzes *mestizaje* "as a hegemonic political ideology, a social and racial promise of equality, and a racialized experience, or racist logic that distributes privilege and exclusion within everyday life." (Figueroa, 2010, pp. 388) For Mexico's indigenous population, this ideology of *mestizaje* is simply a mirror of the ideology of their former colonizers. Though the country's indigenous heritage has been politicized and used to promote an idealized perception of an all-inclusive *mestizo* national identity, indigenous Mexicans continue to face marginalization, discrimination and political and social repression in the present-day.

As a political ideology, mestizaje has upheld many of the colonial power structures that were introduced to Mexico during the colonial era. Where the colonial logic behind the practices of dispossession and elimination are often referred to as settler colonialism in reference to British colonial projects, the term is rarely applied to the Spanish colonization of Latin America. (Castellanos, 2017) This is largely due to mestizaje logic and the re-shaping of a national identity that simultaneously makes everyone and no one indigenous. In this sense, settler colonialism takes on a distinct form in Latin America, one where it can be difficult to distinguish who is a settler and who is indigenous. Even so, many of Mexico's development projects, which mirror settler-colonial projects in other colonized lands, serve the needs and desires of the elite class and mestizos while actively harming indigenous communities. To the indigenous communities of Mexico who continue to face displacement, violence, and discrimination because of their identity as native, neoliberal policies enacted and enforced by Mexico's mestizo leadership bare a strong resemblance to settler-colonial projects around the world.

## Historical and Cultural Context

### I. Indigenous resistance in Chiapas



Though the Zapatista's rebellion officially began in 1994, the story of indigenous resistance in Chiapas began long before that day. There is evidence of human settlements in

Chiapas since 1400 B.C., though the first known settlement, the Mayan city of Palenque, was not established until 600 A.D. Prior to the arrival of the Spanish, Chiapas was a region with a long, well-established history. Pre-colonization, various indigenous groups, first the Mayans and later the Chiapa natives, lived in the region for thousands of years, practicing sustenance lifestyles. Originally part of Guatemala, Chiapas was officially annexed by Mexico in 1841, though by that time they had already been engaged in resistance against Spanish rule since Hernan Cortes first sent tax collectors to the area in 1522. Although the indigenous people of Chiapas tried at length to resist Spanish rule and influence in the area, they were unable to fully resist Spanish colonial rule. It is worth noting however that the process of mestizaje, or the union of indigenous and Spanish blood was not as widespread as in other areas of Mexico, and as a result, indigenous people of Chiapas were able to hold onto and preserve their indigenous identity, heritage and customs to a greater extent than many indigenous groups in Mexico, though this did not save them from experiencing similar forms of exploitation.

In the 1890s, Chiapas experienced an unprecedented economic boom, quickly becoming one of Mexico's most lucrative agricultural regions. Chiapas became Mexico's primary source for coffee, accounting for 40% of the country's annual production. (Rus, Hernandez & Mattiace, 2003) In addition, the state was an essential producer of chocolate, sugar, bananas, tropical fruit, commercial corn and beans, rubber, cotton, and rice. The main driver of this boom was that over the course of the 1880s and 1890s, nearly one third of Chiapas surface area was sold by the Mexican government and control over these areas was placed into the hands of foreign investors from Europe. The investors then established plantations where natives were forced to work. The methods by which they were able to force natives to work their plantations included attempts to force indigenous people into debt and widespread arrests of natives labelled as "tax-evaders" for selling at markets. When these methods proved unsuccessful, plantation owners, aided by the Mexican government, adopted a new approach, one which would intentionally destroy indigenous people's capacity to "feed themselves from their own lands," (Rus, Hernandez & Mattiace, 2003, pp. 21) thus rendering them unable to avoid towns and markets where they would be subject to arrest. In essence, plantation owners sought to "reduce or eliminate native communities landholdings" (Rus, Hernandez & Mattiace, 2003, pp. 21) so that natives would have no choice but to work the plantations, effectively solving the labor shortage that the foreign investors were facing.

"Essentially, radical dispossession, followed by carefully rationed land reform, ensured for almost 100 years that Chiapas' indigenous communities would provide a regularly increasing labor supply to the state's steadily expanding agriculture."(Rus, Hernandez & Mattiace, 2003,

pp. 24) This, combined with little relief from the agrarian reforms of Mexican Revolution of the early 20th century, created a dependency on labor wages from foreign entities and government owned enterprises. By destroying their ability to produce their own food, indigenous people were forced to depend on revenue from outside sources in order to survive and to support their families, essentially barring them from practicing sustenance lifestyles as was their custom prior to colonization. This created widespread poverty and food insecurity and pushed indigenous people away from desirable, arable land and pushed them further and further into the jungle where it was extremely difficult to live and produce their own food. Additionally, by forcing indigenous people of Chiapas to travel for work and specifically in forcing men to leave their families for long periods of time, traditional ways of life were disrupted and it became difficult for indigenous people to retain their customs. Frustration over the hundreds of years spent under these repressive, exploitative conditions and a desire to return to traditional ways of life and live communally in harmony with their community and land would eventually lead many indigenous groups in Chiapas to identify and resonate with the Zapatista struggle for autonomy and liberation.

## II. Origins and rise of Zapatismo in the Lacandon jungle



The aforementioned social conditions of Mexico's indigenous population are the primary motivation behind the Zapatista movement, which is captured by their slogan "Basta!" that translates to "Enough!" in English. When the Zapatista Army of National Liberation declared war

against Mexico's federal government on January 1, 1994, as they announced their intention to advance on Mexico City, they stated that their rebellion was "the product of five hundred years of struggle." (Khasnabish, 2010, p. 30) In "*The First Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle*" the Zapatista's stated that their goal was to "advance on the Mexican capital and depose the federal executive in order to allow the people liberated to elect, freely and democratically, their own administrative authorities," with the ultimate goals of their struggle being: "work, land, housing, food, health care, education, independence, freedom, democracy, justice, and peace." (pp. 111) In *Zapatistas : Rebellion from the grassroots to the global*, author Alex Khasnabish states that "the Zapatistas' declaration sought to legitimize the rebellion as an act of necessity in the face of a system seeking to impose oblivion upon those most peripheral to it." (pp. 105) Khasnabish later discusses the symbolism behind the use of Emiliano Zapata, a hero of the Mexican Revolution, as the iconic figure of the Zapatistas rebellion. Zapata's image pays homage to "the traditions of revolutionary struggle of the Mexican people," while simultaneously "reaffirming the 'Mexicanness' of their movement, and asserting its legitimacy." (Khasnabish, 2010) Khasnabish then states that "as a political philosophy and political practice, Zapatismo emerges out of the lived reality within which it is situated." (pp. 116) Similar to the ideology of decoloniality, "Zapatismo functions as rebel praxis because it embodies and seeks to provoke entirely new ways of thinking about and practising political possibility."

In an interview with Pablo Salazar Devereaux (Haitian Information Bureau), Ana Laura Hernandez (Amor y Rabia/Mexico), Eugenio Aguilera (Nightcrawlers Anarchist Black Cross), and Gustavo Rodriguez (Amor y Rabia/Mexico), Subcomandante Marcos, the most well-known spokesperson for the Zapatistas, details the origins and goals of the EZLN. Marcos discusses the 10 years of preparation that preceded the 1994 uprising, stating that during those 10 years "the theoretical confronted the practical, and something happened - the result was the EZLN." (Marcos, 1994) Subcomandante Marcos then explains how his politics changed after going to the mountains of Chiapas to support indigenous struggle as a result of the confrontation with what he refers to as the indigenous reality. In 1982 Marcos and fellow urban activists from the National Liberation Forces (FLN) arrived in Chiapas and by 1993, with the help and support of indigenous activists, the EZLN was born. Within the EZLN, "there was a mix between students coming from university as political radicals with what indigenous communities had built over 500 years of resistance." (Marcos, 1994)

## **Arguments and Evidence**

## I. Zapatista concepts and principals



When interviewers asked Subcomandante Marcos to clarify questions about the ideology of the Zapatistas, trying to find commonalities between the ideology of the Zapatistas and the ideologies of various theoretical and political revolutionary movements, he responds with the assertion that “the Zapatistas are not Marxist- Leninists, we are Zapatistas.” (Marcos, 1994) According to Marcos, there was neither a theoretical tool nor a political proposal for the indigenous sector and since no revolutionary movement had developed a way of relating to the indigenous movement, the Zapatistas had to create their own. For Marcos, attempts to categorize the Zapatista revolution are useless, “the political and theoretical vacuum that we

brought with us was naturally filled with the indigenous form of thought and organization.”

(Marcos, 1994)

05	<b>Convencer y No Vencer (Convince, Don't Defeat)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Build power by convincing people toward just decisions, rather than repressing people who disagree</li> </ul>
06	<b>Todo Para Todos, Nada Para Nosotros (Everything for Everyone, Nothing for Ourselves)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leaders are not in power to benefit themselves, but to fight for benefits for everyone in the community</li> <li>• Challenges corruption and self-serving norms within the political system</li> </ul>
07	<b>Construir y No Destruir (Construct, Don't Destroy)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Exercise power to build a new world, rather than focusing all energy on destruction or opposition</li> <li>• Zapatista campaigns have focused on making new proposals for a global society without neoliberalism</li> </ul>
08	<b>Queremos Un Mundo Donde Quepan Muchos Mundos (We Want a World Where Many Worlds Fit)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strong communities embrace diversity, rather than suppress those who don't fit into a norm</li> <li>• Recognizes the importance of rights for marginalized groups in the struggle for justice</li> </ul>
02	<b>Proponer y No Imponer (Propose, Don't Impose)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Make proposals for community feedback, rather than imposing rules without community input</li> <li>• Consultas in town hall spaces with the whole community on important issues and decisions</li> </ul>
03	<b>Representar y No Suplantar (Represent, Don't Replace)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Juntas del Buen Gobierno (Good Government Councils) are made up of rotating members of the community who make decisions based on community needs and interests</li> </ul>
04	<b>Antipoder Contra Poder (Anti-power Against Power)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Demonstrate alternative power that challenges traditional forms of power</li> </ul>

The Zapatista's principles are outlined in the above chart. Next to each of the eight listed principles and translations I've included a brief description of how each principle is applied to and practiced within their autonomous territory. One of the principles that I did not include in the chart is the idea of *caminar preguntando*, which means to ask questions while walking. This concept is intended to emphasize humility and the importance of listening and being open to alternative perspectives and experiences, rather than claiming one person's perspective or experience as being universal or superior to another. It is through these principles and practices that the Zapatistas have constructed their society, one which features "bottom-up decision making, bottom-up decision-making, autonomous justice, education and healthcare systems, and cooperative economy." (Briy, 2020) Zapatista territories are organized through self-governance, autonomy and direct democracy, which have helped the Zapatistas to ensure a



more democratic and egalitarian society that provides basic human rights for all of its members. While the Zapatistas are insistent upon the idea that their model is not to be adopted as a doctrine for any particular community, their ideals could be useful to any government that wishes to ensure justice for its citizens.

Even though the Zapatistas have made it clear that their intention is not to impose their model for revolution on the world as a whole, what makes their revolution so unique and appealing to revolutionaries around the world, is that their rebellion is not an attempt to replicate any prior revolutions, nor is it an attempt to gain power. The Zapatistas do not want to overthrow the government to put themselves in its place; instead, they aim to provide a democratic space where society can participate and decide what political path it is going to take. In the interview Marcos discusses how “the revolution that the Zapatistas are proposing isn’t an indigenous revolution.” While the EZLN was born with indigenous demands due to how it developed, it aspires to organize the workers, non-indigenous peasants, students, teachers, and all of the other social sectors in order to carry out a broader revolution. Though the Zapatistas do have their own forms of government, which includes “traditions of community decision-making that must be respected by the government,” (Marcos, 1994) and could provide a good example for a national government, they have no intention of forcing their vision for society on the nation as a whole. Instead, Marcos states that the Zapatistas are proposing “democracy, freedom and justice - justice in order that certain material conditions are satisfied so that people have an opportunity to participate in the political life of the country.” (Marcos, 1994)

According to decolonial scholar Walter D. Mignolo, through their revolution and continued resistance, the Zapatistas managed to challenge the colonial system and “close the cycle of the colonial world,” providing “a paradigmatic break in the spatial configuration of modernity/coloniality” (Mignolo, 2011, pp. 250). In doing so, the Zapatistas have revealed “that the time has come to look beyond European legacies (...) in order to find diverse possibilities for imagining and building democratic futures.” Mignolo refers to the Zapatistas revolution as a theoretical one, which “questioned the macro-narrative of “democracy” (written from the perspective of Western civilization and modernity) and opened new avenues to imagine democratic futures.” (pp. 221) Through their emphasis on democracy as both a tradition and principle, the Zapatistas have challenged long-standing narratives on democracy and its origins and made it so that “no longer does any community or civil organization own the rights over its imposition or exportation; instead it is shared by all those people around the world who care for equity and social justice, and especially by those who have been or are victims of injustice and inequities.” (Mignolo, 2017)

In *“Practicing autonomy: Zapatismo and decolonial liberation,”* author Neil Harvey states that “Zapatismo offers a unique experience that articulates indigenous struggles for autonomy with wider demands for alternative global economic and political relationships.” (Harvey, 2016) In this paper, Harvey argues that Zapatismo can be understood as an expression of decolonial liberation. Through his research, Harvey demonstrates that Zapatista autonomy is constructed through the re-creation of social ties in local, national, and international spaces. In the face of the promotion of the idea of neoliberal multiculturalism by world leaders, the Zapatistas have fought to build and maintain their autonomy, by their own terms. To the Zapatistas autonomy does not follow any existing theory or paradigm; instead, autonomy to the Zapatistas is an evolving process, one which does not attempt to avoid mistakes or problems but tries to talk and work through them through “collective deliberation.” The Zapatistas are working to create a new world for themselves, one not based on any existing rules or models that resists centralized power and government organization as we know it. In their world, the concepts of democracy, liberation and autonomy take on new meanings, with historical significance to their indigenous roots.

The Zapatista rebellion, along with its methods, practices and beliefs are grounded in the belief that an alternative world is indeed possible. Attempts to minimize their movement often focus on what the Zapatista’s do not have or have not had the opportunity to build. By modern figures, the Zapatista’s live in poverty, something their critics often pay particular attention to without realizing that this supposed poverty is nothing new to the indigenous people who now proudly call themselves Zapatistas. The indigenous people of Chiapas knew poverty long before the 1994 rebellion, and understand that the poverty in the region is the direct result of the colonial era policies that sought to destroy native peoples capacity for self-sufficiency. Furthermore, this poverty has not prevented the Zapatista’s from resisting defeat by Mexico’s military, nor has it hindered the construction of autonomous government, health and education systems in Zapatista territories. The success of the Zapatista’s is their ability to resist dependency on the government and their creation of a self-sufficient society, one which has continued to grow since the early days of their rebellion. In a decolonial sense, the Zapatista’s continued resistance and autonomy is an example of delinking from the colonial matrix of power in order to affirm the value of their indigenous customs and practices.

## **II. Zapatista resistance as decolonial de-linking: present-day examples**

## A. No al mal llamado Tren Maya



Today, 27 years after declaring their rebellion against the Mexican government, the Zapatistas remain active in their struggle. True to their origins, they have displayed their continuous resistance to the construction of the “Tren Maya,” an infrastructural development project headed by Mexico’s “leftist” leader, President Andres Manuel Lopez-Obrador, or AMLO for short. (*El Economista*, 2019) The proposal for the train, which is intended to connect the remote tourist destinations of Southern Mexico was announced in September 2018. The Zapatistas have been steady and unwavering in their resistance to its construction, in fear that the construction of such a project would destroy the landmarks and physical environment of various indigenous groups in the area. Laws in Mexico state that indigenous communities must be consulted regarding any government decisions that could potentially affect their territory or lifestyle, such as the construction of a railway through dense forests populated mostly by indigenous people. (Castellanos, 2017) While the government did technically consult the necessary groups, many questions have been raised regarding the consultation process. In response to the criticism, AMLO suggested a referendum which yielded positive results for the government despite heavy critique of its methods. According to the government, the referendum yielded a 92% approval rating for the project, with less than 3% voter participation (*El Economista*, 2019); however these results have been subject to significant criticism by indigenous and environmental groups as well as by the United Nations Human Rights Council. Resistance to the project by the Zapatistas and other indigenous groups has led to delays and court injunctions regarding environmental concerns, which the government have repeatedly contested. Even in the face of such heavy resistance, the construction of the railway remains

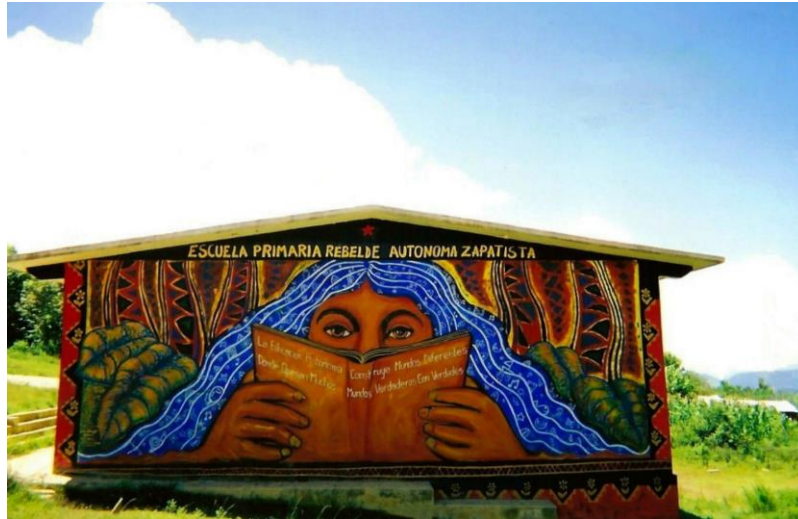
ongoing and as of January 2021, more than 8000 ancient artifacts have been uncovered during the construction. The Zapatistas have stated that as long as the project remains underway, so will their resistance, (*Yucatan Times*, 2020) a statement in line with their mission to defend their lifestyle and environment as well as that of other indigenous peoples against the destructive forces of coloniality.



As the largest infrastructure project proposed by AMLO's administration, the "Tren Maya" is the central component of the current government's National Development Plan (PND). The government has reportedly proposed this plan in order to develop Mexico's Southern region, though many are wary of the environmental and social cost of such a large scale infrastructure project. Indigenous activists have stated that they fear that with the train, will come urban development and mass tourism that could displace indigenous people and destroy their physical environment. For many, the idea of the train brings to mind the case of Cancun, a city which was once home to rural indigenous communities and an impressive natural physical environment and is now a tourist destination consisting of white sandy beaches and privately owned, all-inclusive hotels. (Paley, 2020) For visitors, Cancun is a place to drink, party and enjoy private-access beaches; for locals, Cancun is a city marked by deep social and economic inequality, crime brought on by the tourism industry and environmental degradation. The resistance of the Zapatistas and other indigenous groups to the development projects of AMLO's administration are indicative of a shift in attitudes towards the government; local and indigenous populations are no longer willing to bear the burdens of development and modernity, and they are prepared to resist the displacement and dispossession that accompanies such

projects whenever and wherever they arise. While the Tren Maya is surely the most visible example of indigenous resistance to a proposed development project by the government, there are said to be hundreds of examples of indigenous resistance to various ongoing projects.

## B. 'True Education' as resistance



In 2001, families in the Zapatista communities made the decision to take their children out of the official Mexican education system and to instead enroll them in the Zapatista's autonomous education project, True Education. (Rico, 2014) True Education was formed with the consensus of the Zapatistas 117 individual communities as a result of the cultural and physical violence that Zapatista children experienced in Mexico's official schools. Before the formation of the autonomous education centers and True Education, Zapatista children were subjected to ridicule by peers and faculty for their or their parents' involvement and association with the Zapatistas. Additionally, at these official schools, Zapatista children were taught history from the perspective of the state, which often overlooked indigenous culture, history and identity. At the autonomous education centers, True Education's curriculum is centered around the history and perspective of indigenous people, taking into account the specific needs of each village and community within the Zapatista territory. In these schools, children learn about planting and harvesting seasons, traditional festivals and oral tradition, in order to merge their education with their indigenous upbringing. At Zapatista schools, students are not taught that education is apolitical; instead, "they are taught to think of education as inherently political; they are taught how to fight, to take care of their environment and to take pride in defending their indigenous culture and land." Education within the Zapatista territories is a reflection of the

Zapatista societal organization and as such, there is significant value placed on alternative knowledge in their education system. At Zapatista schools, children are educated in a way that empowers and affirms their identity as indigenous people.

When a European Solidarity Brigade from Scotland was invited to visit Zapatista territory in 2010 to learn from their rebellion and observe their practices they were most impressed by education within Zapatista territories. (Glasgow, 2010) Observations and reflections on the Zapatista education system by the European Solidarity Brigade, demonstrate how the Zapatistas have successfully created an education system that honors their traditions and practices and why it's possible that other groups could follow suit. Since 2001, the year that marks the creation of True Education, which follows a curriculum with significance to the history, culture, and identity of Zapatista children, the Zapatistas have gone on to further advance and personalize the education of Zapatista children with respect to the needs of their families and community. In Zapatista schools, teachers are known instead as 'education promoters' to emphasize the connection between students and those who guide them and to emphasize the absence of a hierarchy that exists in traditional student-teacher relationships. One of the core values of the Zapatistas is that everyone has something to contribute that is unique to their own personal experience, regardless of their age. As such, in Zapatista schools, education promoters are believed to learn alongside their students. The position of education promotor is considered an honor though those who hold the title do not receive a salary but are taken care of by the community and are awarded with room and board. In order to provide a unique and tailor-made educational experience to all children living in Zapatista territories, there are regional differences and variations in the True Education curriculum, with emphasis on knowledge specific to certain areas, or *caracoles*, and their needs and values.

### **C. 'Journey for Life'**

On October 5th of 2020 the Zapatistas announced plans for their "Journey for Life," where they would set sail from Mexico to Europe in order to "discover a world of rebels." (Holloway) On May 3 of 2021, 500 years after the 'conquest' of the Americas, the Zapatistas set sail towards Spain, the first stop of their journey, in the opposite direction that Columbus and fellow conquistadors traveled 500 years prior. Their intention is not to make demands or ask for forgiveness from the Spanish people; instead, they want to engage in dialogue as well as assert that they were not conquered and that they have and will continue to resist and rebel wherever and whenever possible. Spain is merely a first stop in a journey that will link the Zapatistas to

struggles in distant lands and connect directly with other groups fighting for life and liberation under a system designed to destroy them. (Subcomandante Insurgente Moises) The Zapatistas have received and accepted invitations from numerous groups and countries within the European continent including; Germany, Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Catalonia, Sardinia, Cyprus, Croatia, Denmark, Slovenia, Spain, France, Greece, Holland, Hungary, Italy, Luxembourg, Norway, Basque Country, Poland, Portugal, United Kingdom, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Sweden, Switzerland, and Turkey. The seven delegates of the Zapatistas, among them four women, two men and one transgender person, known as 'unoa otroa' in the Zapatista territories, will be met by another group of Zapatistas who will be making their journey by plane. According to Subcomandante Insurgente Moises, the objective of the Zapatistas "Journey for Life" is to "embrace those on the European continent who are in rebellion and resistance, but also to listen and learn from their histories, geographies, calendars and ways of being." The decision of the Zapatistas to embark on such a journey is a testament to their commitment to stand in solidarity with groups engaged in struggle against colonialism, capitalism, neoliberalism, and all other forces that oppress and marginalize people in every corner of the world.

### **Implications and Recommendations**

What the Zapatistas have provided to liberation movements across the globe, above all else, is hope in an alternative world, and the belief that such an alternative is possible. The origins of the Zapatista rebellion, as a protest against the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which they predicted would drive them into oblivion, represents their resistance to the dominant order and their continued rebellion reveals the possibility of social and economic alternatives to the destructive forces of capitalism and neoliberalism. Additionally, the Zapatista rebellion provides a "concrete, tactical example of dedicated resistance to a supposedly inevitable project of capitalist development." (Khasnabish, 2010, pp. 177) The Zapatista's have famously likened their rebellion to a 'fourth world world war,' and "while many have yet to actively enter this war- choosing instead to see systems of political, social, and economic domination under which they live either as natural or unavoidable," (Khasnabish, 2010, pp. 179) their movement has inspired many to engage in resistance and construct alternatives to the current system. This is due in part to the fact that the Zapatista rebellion differs from many movements of the past, which sought to promote their chosen ideology as the

universal best, a perspective which has often failed to account for the specific needs and desires of indigenous people. The Zapatista's have instead sought out to build a society based on their indigenous values, and they encourage other groups to do the same. According to the Zapatistas, the best way to support them in their struggle against the forces of coloniality and neoliberalism is to begin organizing wherever you are, and to build the networks and tools to carry out a decolonial revolution. "In this sense, the Zapatista struggle is a catalyst for rebellion and an inspiring example of social change, not a template to be exported to other contexts." (Khasnabish, 2010, p. 194) This is why as more and more groups begin to resist the domination being imposed upon them, they look to the Zapatista rebellion and its impact with deep respect and admiration.

## Conclusions

Both Zapatismo and decoloniality are responses to the present conditions of colonized people across the globe. As decolonial scholar and activist Walter D. Mignolo states, "all the "bad" things people notice today in the world (war, destruction, racism, sexism, inequalities, injustice, etc) cannot be changed to improve while modernity/coloniality remain in place." (Mignolo, 2017) Decoloniality then becomes the way by which we can work towards creating societies, and a world where these conditions are improved. For the Zapatistas, Zapatismo is a bridge, a path to an alternative way of life that challenges dominant social, political and economic systems. Three of the concepts most central to the Zapatista rebellion are democracy, liberty and justice, though their interpretations of these concepts are based on a perspective which "views the world as a place characterized by multiplicity and diversity, a perspective which in fact is brilliantly articulated by the Zapatista slogan 'queremos un mundo donde quepan muchos mundos' — 'we want a world which holds many worlds.'" (Khasnabish, 2010)

The parameters for what a decolonial world could look like are not clearly defined by the ideology of decoloniality nor that of Zapatismo, instead each is committed to the idea that the rules and systems in decolonial societies must be decided by the inhabitants of said societies. Still, decolonial movements are currently underway across the world, and as colonized people gain clarity and insight on the destructive nature of colonialism, movements like Zapatismo will continue to gain traction as they work towards the creation of more just societies. Though the Zapatistas' impact is felt most deeply in Chiapas, where they have been working tirelessly to build a society that liberates their community from the binds of coloniality, their reach is not



limited to Chiapas, or even to Mexico. In fact, their reach extends far beyond politicized border lines; their movement is in many ways global. They have built relationships with liberation movements across the globe and their movement serves as an inspiration to individuals everywhere, who share the Zapatistas desire to create a better world, a world where, according to the Zapatistas, many worlds fit.

Word count: 6,940

## Bibliography

Alonso, A. (2004). Conforming Disconformity: "Mestizaje," Hybridity, and the Aesthetics of Mexican Nationalism. *Cultural Anthropology*, 19(4), 459-490. Retrieved October 26, 2020, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3651588>

Autonomous Education in the Zapatista Communities: Schools to cure ignorance. (2010, September 06). Retrieved from <https://glasgowchiapassolidaritygroup.wordpress.com/2010/09/06/autonomous-education-in-the-zapatista-communities-schools-to-cure-ignorance/>

Briy, A. (2020, June 25). Zapatistas: Lessons in community self-organisation in Mexico. Retrieved from <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/democraciaabierto/zapatistas-lecciones-de-auto-organización-comunitaria-en/>

Castellanos, L. (2019, December 17). Opinión | La guerra de los pueblos indígenas contra el Tren Maya ya comenzó en México. Retrieved from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/es/post-opinion/2019/12/16/la-guerra-de-los-pueblos-indigenas-contra-el-tren-maya-ya-comenzo-en-mexico/>

Castellanos, M. Bianet. (2017). Introduction: Settler Colonialism in Latin America. *American Quarterly*, 69(4), 777-781. [https://primo.seattleu.edu/permalink/f/2mlme0/TN\\_cdi\\_proquest\\_journals\\_1994439146](https://primo.seattleu.edu/permalink/f/2mlme0/TN_cdi_proquest_journals_1994439146)

Darian-Smith, Eve and Philip C. McCarthy. 2017. [The Global Turn: Theories, Research Designs, and Methods for Global Studies](#). Oakland: University of California Press.

Early and Extensive Interview with Subcomandante Marcos. (1994). Retrieved February 20, 2021, from <https://schoolsforchiapas.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Interview-with-Subcomandante-Marcos.pdf>

Economista, R. E. (2019, December 16). En la consulta sobre el Tren Maya, 92.3% votó por el "Sí" y 7.4% por el "No". Retrieved from <https://www.economista.com.mx/politica/En-la-consulta-sobre-el-Tren-Maya-92.3-voto-por-el-Si-y-7.4-por-el-No-20191216-0034.html>

Harvey, N. (2016). Practicing autonomy: Zapatismo and decolonial liberation, *Latin American and Caribbean Ethnic Studies*, 11:1, 1-24, DOI: 10.1080/17442222.2015.1094872

Indigenous Anarchist Federation. (2020, April 19). Zapatista Governance, Leadership, Community, and Decision Making Principles. Retrieved from <https://iaf-fai.org/2020/04/19/zapatista-governance-leadership-community-and-decision-making-principles/>

Khasnabish, D. A. (2010). *Zapatistas : Rebellion from the grassroots to the global*. London: Zed Books. <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/seattleu/detail.action?docID=488158>

Mignolo, W. (2011). *The darker side of Western modernity : Global futures, decolonial options (Latin America otherwise)*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Mignolo, W. D. (2011). The Zapatistas' Theoretical Revolution. *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*, 213-251. doi:10.2307/j.ctv125jqbw.11

Mignolo, W. D. (2010). Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and Decolonial Freedom. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 26(7-8), 159-181.

Mignolo, W. D. (2017, January 21). Walter Mignolo/Part 2: Key Concepts [Interview by A. Hoffman]. Retrieved from <https://www.e-ir.info/2017/01/21/interview-walter-mignolopart-2-key-concepts/>

Moreno Figueroa, M. G. (2010). Distributed intensities: Whiteness, mestizaje and the logics of Mexican racism. *Ethnicities*, 10(3), 387–401. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468796810372305>

Paley, D. M. (2020, February 03). The Tren Maya and the remaking of Mexico's south. Retrieved from <https://towardfreedom.org/story/the-tren-maya-and-the-remaking-of-mexicos-south-border/>

Quijano, A. (2007). COLONIALITY AND MODERNITY/RATIONALITY. *Cultural Studies (London, England)*, 21(2-3), 168-178. <https://doi-org.proxy.seattleu.edu/10.1080/09502380601164353>

Quijano, A., & Ennis, M. (2000). Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America. *Nepantla: Views from South* 1(3), 533-580. <https://www.muse.jhu.edu/article/23906>.

Rico, A. (2014, January 2). Educate in resistance: The autonomous Zapatista schools. Retrieved from <https://roarmag.org/essays/zapatista-autonomous-education-chiapas/>

Rus, J., Hernández, C. R. A., & Mattiace, S. L. (Eds.). (2003). *Mayan lives, mayan utopias : The indigenous peoples of chiapas and the zapatista rebellion*. ProQuest Ebook Central <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com>

Zapatista Timeline. (2015, October 28). Retrieved February 20, 2021, from <https://schoolsforchiapas.org/teach-chiapas/zapatista-timeline/>

Zapatistas "declare war" on AMLO and the "Tren Maya". (2020, January 03). Retrieved from <https://www.theyucatantimes.com/2020/01/zapatistas-declare-war-on-amlo-and-the-tren-maya/>