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Revolutionary grounds: political ontology of Zapatista land relations

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Abstract. *This study explores Zapatista communities' relationship with the land and their participation in transnational networks of coffee distribution, focusing on the political ontologies behind their resistance to capitalist destruction. The research highlights how their collective fight challenges privatization and extractive economies by analyzing their approach to land through the lens of political ecology and anthropology. Rooted in indigenous ontologies blended with anticapitalist ideologies, the Zapatistas' rejection of private property and their creation of autonomous territories represent a radical stance in the ongoing struggle for indigenous rights and agrarian*

reform in Mexico. Ethnographic fieldworks with both Zapatista producers and European solidarity networks reveal tensions between autonomy, processes of political subjectivization, and resistance to commodification, as well as the risk of romanticizing indigenous and peasant movements. The research contextualizes these dynamics within broader challenges posed by increasing violence, state repression, and organized crime in Chiapas. The findings contribute to ongoing debates about the commons, indigenous autonomy, and the contradictions of participating in transnational markets. By integrating insights from anthropology, political ontology, and social movement studies, this research offers a deeper understanding of how Zapatista communities and their allies strive to build sustainable economic lives, underlying their significance in reimagining dignifying alternatives to current predatory capitalism.

"A specter is haunting Latin America, the specter of modernity."[1]
(Escobar 2015: 61)

1. Introduction: history of a peasant and indigenous uprising

Revolutionary struggles in Latin America have long been characterized by guerrilla movements seeking agrarian reforms, the protection of peasant and indigenous rights, and the reconstitution of territories under communal control. These struggles stem from deep-rooted inequalities around land ownership and use, shaped by colonial histories and neoliberal capitalist reforms that continue to exacerbate poverty and marginalization in rural areas. Beginning in the early 20th century, the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920) represented a defining moment for agrarian reform in Latin America, with figures such as Emiliano Zapata and Pancho Villa leading armed peasant uprisings. Central to this revolution was the issue of land distribution, where Zapata famously advocated for the return of lands to indigenous communities. Zapata's vision was institutionalized in the Mexican Constitution of 1917, which officially recognized

[1] Unless indicated differently, translations from original texts in Spanish and Italian by the author.

a form of communal land under the *ejido*[2] system. However, subsequent neoliberal policies under the presidency of Carlos Salinas de Gortari, culminating in the 1992 constitutional reforms, questioned and almost dismantled these protections. This opened the door to land privatization, particularly through the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which intensified the dispossession of indigenous and peasant territories. These neoliberal reforms set the stage for the uprising of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) in 1994, an indigenous revolutionary organization that declared war against the Mexican government in defense of indigenous self-determination and against global capitalism.

Zapatista communities built their fight around the concept of autonomy, which includes the progressive collectivization of land and natural resources. The Zapatistas envision their territories not as private nor as public property, but as "the common and non-property" (EZLN 2023), a radical reappropriation of land based on indigenous ontologies and anticapitalist political imaginaries. This emphasis reflects a constant effort to seek the collective benefit of communities, challenging both state-centric and capitalist models of land ownership. In this context, their rebellion is a fight for land but also a broader struggle against the global forces of neoliberalism and ecological destruction.

From a decolonial and postdevelopmentalist perspective, their fight was able to raise critical questions about who has the power to determine the land rights of indigenous and peasant communities. Western legal frameworks often fail to recognize indigenous ways of relating to land, which are grounded in interdependence and reciprocity rather than individual ownership and interests. This debate about land and autonomy is reflected in ongoing struggles across Latin America, where indigenous and peasant communities fight against *megaproyectos*: large-scale development projects like mining, oil extraction, dams, agribusiness, and monocultures that threaten their territories. These projects – often backed by state and private economic interests – are justified in the name of development, yet they lead to forced displacements of entire communities, environmental devastation, and increasingly normalized violence. The control of land in Chiapas is further complicated by the widespread presence of organized

[2] Originally established during the Mexican Revolution as an attempt to promote collective landholding and agricultural practices. This system allows community members to use and benefit from a piece of land, though they do not privately own it: the Mexican State must officially recognize and allocate the land through legal frameworks.

crime and paramilitary groups, exacerbating the "low-intensity war"[3] between Zapatista communities, the Mexican government, and non-state actors.

Indigenous and peasant communities resisting extractivist capitalism in Mexico face constant threats, as environmental and land defenders are systematically subjected to violent repression. Amnesty International's 2023 report "Mexico: Land and Freedom? Criminalization of people defending land, territory and the environment" describes this as part of a broader strategy to discourage and dismantle movements in defense of the land. This is achieved through the ambiguous application of law, the criminalization of dissent, and the militarization of disputed territories - processes often backed by authorities entangled in the same economic interests as the companies exploiting local resources. In this "hostile environment that constantly includes stigmatization, harassment, attacks, assaults, forced displacement, disappearances, and murders" (Amnesty International 2023), Mexico remains one of the most dangerous countries in the world for activists defending the land, the territory, the people who inhabit it, and the environment. This is particularly evident in regions such as Chiapas, where Zapatista communities continue to struggle daily for their collective survival. This situation is further exacerbated by tensions with groups belonging to organized crime[4], threatening Zapatista communities over the control of their territories. In a recent statement, the EZLN (2024) denounced violent aggressions legitimized by local authorities "instructed by these bad governments to grant the aggressors papers that prove their ownership of the dispossessed land". In this context, agreements between criminal groups and the different levels of government are used "to grant "legal" character to this plunder" (EZLN 2024), and the land is strategically mobilized institutionally as an entity over which rights need to be formally recognized to exist.

International solidarity networks, including BRICO (international brigades of human rights observers), play a crucial role in protecting these communities by monitoring human rights violations and amplifying indigenous voices at the global level. However, these solidarity movements sometimes risk romanticizing

[3] This refers to the ongoing conflict between the EZLN and the Mexican government, characterized by strategies of counterinsurgency rather than open military confrontation. Although repression, surveillance, and paramilitary violence remain common, these strategies also include more subtle tactics designed to undermine Zapatistas' autonomy without triggering international condemnation. Despite these silencing efforts, the Zapatistas and their solidarity community have long been exposing both visible and hidden forms of structural violence and state repression.

[4] Zapatista communities define groups involved in drug trafficking as *disorganized* crime: in the Zapatista vision, the *organized* ones are autonomous communities. Organization, in this context, is a notion infused with deep political significance.

and homogenizing indigenous struggles, projecting a universalized image of indigenous peoples as naturalized protectors of nature, while obscuring the complex realities of their political and social struggles. The political ecology of Zapatista territories and land relations is a mix of both indigenous ontologies and anticapitalist ideologies, strategically mobilized as a tool for resistance. This research investigates how their fight for autonomy is reappropriated by European radical left activists, often idealizing Zapatista practices while participating in transnational networks of solidarity, particularly through Zapatista coffee distribution. The tensions between these different interpretations of indigenous autonomy and land use are at the center of this inquiry, contributing to current debates in political ecology and anthropology.

2. Fighting for autonomy: land, contested territories, and the commons

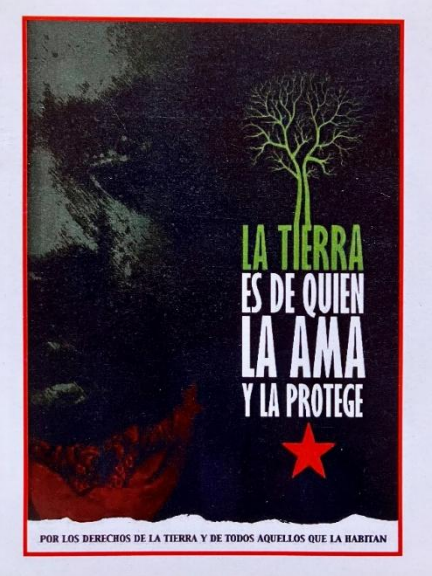

Figure 1. "The land belongs to those who love and protect it. For the rights of the land and all those who inhabit it". (Anonymous postcard, October 2024, San Cristóbal de las Casas, personal archive).

The image in the background represents Emiliano Zapata, the famous hero of the Mexican Revolution. Paraphrasing Zapata's slogan, "the land belongs to the ones who work it", these words are often used by the Zapatistas in their fight for collective peasant rights and self-determination, strategically mobilizing an intrinsic connection between indigenous peoples and the land they work and inhabit. The "strategical use of ethnicity" (Apostoli Cappello 2013) is the result of the exclusion historically experienced by indigenous communities, reappropriated as a tool for inclusion and political subjectivation despite (and also thanks to) activists' essentializations. These considerations brought Apostoli Cappello (2013: 16) to conceptualize international Zapatismo as a "cultural artifact" fed by "an entire galaxy of neo-indigenisms that inspire alter-globalization movements and the lefts of the world, primarily nourishing their political and poetic imagination, as well as their mythological repertoire".

The struggle for autonomy is the central axis of the Zapatista rebel experience, particularly their fight over land rights, which they frame as a form of resistance against neoliberal capitalism and state control. By engaging with key Marxist and neo-Marxist scholars, as well as contemporary literature on political ecology, this section examines the theoretical and scholarly debates surrounding the concepts of autonomy and the commons. The aim is to explore how the Zapatistas' relationship with the land challenges dominant economic structures and values and represents a radical rethinking of land relations. The Zapatista vision of autonomy is inextricably tied to their relationship with the land as a collective resource as well as a non-human actor. In contrast to neoliberal economic policies that prioritize privatization and individual property rights, aiming to manage and dispose of nature as a passive entity, the Zapatistas assert a radically different ontology. The concept of *lo común* (the common) aligns with indigenous ontologies of land that emphasize reciprocity, communal stewardship, and the non-commodification of natural resources (EZLN 2023). Land, for the Zapatistas, is not merely an economic asset to be exploited but a vital source of life and sustenance, woven into the social and political fabric of communities.

The idea of the commons has a rich intellectual history, particularly in Marxist thought. Marx (1887) critiqued the enclosure of the commons as one of the fundamental processes of primitive accumulation under capitalism. Later scholars, such as Negri and Hardt (2009), expanded on this by arguing that the commons offer a strategy of resistance to capitalist modes of production and accumulation. In their classic *Commonwealth*, they conceptualize the commons as both material and immaterial: ranging from natural resources to knowledge and social cooperation. The Zapatistas' approach to land can be understood as an

embodiment of a broader struggle, where autonomous territories in the Mexican Southeast serve as inspiration: a living example of a non-capitalist commons experience, resisting both state and corporate violations. In the Zapatista context, the commons are a lived reality that extends far beyond a merely theoretical construct. Autonomous territories operate under the principles of *autogestión* (self-management), where land is collectively worked and governed directly by communities in resistance. Current debates in political ecology emphasize the need to rethink resource governance beyond the dichotomy between state and private ownership. Ostrom (1990) has shown that small rural communities can effectively manage common resources without resorting to privatization or state control. While his work is widely recognized for analyzing how it is possible to create sustainable systems without external intervention, it's essential to avoid framing this as a blind validation of indigenous practices. From a decolonial and anthropological perspective, indigenous and peasant communities like the Zapatistas have long managed their territories and resources based on their own cosmologies, political systems, and social relationships, independent of (and even explicitly refusing) external scholarly approval or Western frameworks. Rather than needing validation from external theories, their practices stand as examples of a restless fight for autonomy and resistance, directly challenging Western notions of governance and ownership.

Zapatista autonomy entails a rejection of the Mexican state but simultaneously a profound reimagining of political and socio-economic organization. Central to autonomy is the land, which the Zapatistas have reclaimed and restructured according to their own principles. As Zapatista spokespeople have repeatedly articulated, the fight for land is inseparable from their broader struggle for dignity, justice, and self-determination. The *ejido* system was a key target of neoliberal reforms in the 1990s, leading to widespread dispossession and the alienation of indigenous and peasant communities from their ancestral lands. In Zapatista territories, the land ceases to be viewed as private property and is consciously constructed and inhabited as communitarian and relational space, reflecting a cosmology that considers nature as intertwined with human life. In this context, land is an economic resource as much as a sacred entity, infused with historical ancestral meaning. This cosmology mirrors the sacralized visions of Liberation Theology[5], where the fight for land and autonomy is seen as a

[5] Liberation Theology, which emerged in Latin America in the 1960s, is a Christian movement advocating for social justice, emphasizing the need for the Church to stand with the poor and marginalized against systems of oppression like capitalism and imperialism. In Chiapas, Zapatista communities adopted elements of this theology, blending it with indigenous worldviews, particularly in relation to land.

divine struggle for dignity and survival, and its exploitation by capitalist forces is seen as sinful. Zapatista discourse often frames the defense of land as both a material and spiritual battle, echoing the theological concept of land as a gift to humanity, which should be equitably shared and protected. Zapatism and Liberation Theology share a deeply intertwined relationship, both rooted in the pursuit of justice for the oppressed, particularly indigenous and peasant communities. The blending of these ideologies in Zapatista practice reaffirms land as both a site of resistance and a space for building alternative and egalitarian societies in direct opposition to neoliberal capitalism. This fusion of indigenous cosmologies with Liberation Theology generates a sacred narrative for their struggle for autonomy and justice.

The Zapatistas' radical stance on land ownership – what they have recently defined "the common and the non-property" – goes beyond traditional notions of communal landholding. They envision a system where land is not owned in the legal or capitalist sense, where it's not granted to indigenous peoples by "a law whose existence and fairness we ignore" (EZLN 1994), but treated as a shared resource for the collective good. This redefinition of land relations is deeply embedded in indigenous worldviews, where the earth is infused with agency, and human beings are seen as stewards rather than owners of nature. In this sense, the Zapatista territories, land is constantly decommodified so that it can become the basis for collective autonomy.

Political ecology provides a crucial framework for understanding the Zapatista relationship with the land, as it examines the intersections between environmental issues, power relations, and economic systems. Escobar (2008) highlights how indigenous movements in Latin America often frame their struggles in terms of defense of the territory and fight for life, where land is seen as integral to identity, culture, and survival. He argues that these movements challenge the capitalist state as well as Western ontologies that separate humans from nature, commodifying natural resources. Zapatista communities, in their defense of *lo común*, are promoters of this broader wave of indigenous and peasant movements that resist capitalist extractivism and advocate for alternative, more equitable forms of relations with the environment. Recent literature on the commons, particularly in the context of political ecology, has highlighted how collectivizing resources can serve as a form of resistance to capitalist expansion. As Rosset and Giraldo (2017) argue, agroecology constitutes a "territory in dispute" between social movements and institutional forces, offering communities the opportunity to transform food systems and defend land as a commons. At the same time, they caution that without vigilance, such initiatives

risk co-optation and depoliticization, illustrating the delicate balance between sustaining collective control over resources and resisting the pressures of capitalist incorporation. Harvey (2012) considers that the enclosure of the commons is a key feature of neoliberal capitalism, which seeks progressive widespread commodification, from land to water to intellectual property. The Zapatistas' refusal to submit to these processes reflects a broader struggle over the right to self-determination and the protection of local ecologies from predatory capitalist exploitation and destruction. This research builds on these theoretical foundations by examining the specific ways in which the Zapatistas' approach to the commons and their relationship with the land offers a perspective that is still able, after more than 30 years, to inspire experiences of autonomy and resistance worldwide.

3. Cultivating autonomy: Zapatista coffee networks as paths towards sustainable economic lives

The Zapatista struggle is not an isolated case; it is part of a broader global movement for autonomy and resistance against capitalism. The Zapatistas' commitment to autonomy, communal lands, organization, and resistance has inspired countless social movements worldwide, from peasant uprisings to anti-globalization protests in Seattle and Europe. However, as these movements become transnational, new complexities arise. In the case of Zapatista communities, their international alliances have helped sustain their fight for autonomy, but they have also led to the romanticization and simplification of their struggle. European supporters often idealize Zapatista communities as protectors of the land, depicting them as the embodiment of a pre-capitalist ecological utopia. While this narrative has mobilized significant support, it risks flattening the diversity and complexity of the Zapatista experience, turning rebel indigenous peasants from Chiapas into symbols rather than actors in their own fight. Such portrayals obscure the profoundly political character of Zapatista practices: their defense of land and commons is the result of conscious collective choices, decades of patient organizational processes, and evolving strategies of resistance. To reduce their struggle to an innate or "natural" ecological stance would entail an act of depoliticization, erasing the deliberate political project through which Zapatista communities slowly construct autonomy and lucidly confront capitalism.

The Zapatistas' approach to land, autonomy, and the commons challenges dominant capitalist models and state control. However, the practical

implementation of these principles – particularly in the context of international solidarity and economic exchanges – reveals tensions and contradictions that are central to understanding the broader significance of the Zapatista struggle. Their relationship with the land is a central element of their political identity, a source of political subjectivization, deeply intertwined with socio-economic practices. By examining Zapatista coffee production and distribution through a political ecology lens, this research uncovers multiple layers of meaning embedded in the Zapatistas' relation to land and how it intersects with activists' representations circulating through global solidarity networks.

This research is based on a combination of fieldworks carried out between 2015 and 2025 in both Chiapas and across several European solidarity networks engaged in Zapatista coffee distribution. The methodological approach integrates participant observation, in-depth interviews, and direct engagement and collaboration with European activist collectives. In Chiapas, ethnographic research focused on the internal dynamics of Zapatista coffee cooperatives and their relations with solidarity actors, with particular attention paid to how production and the collective work of the land are organized according to Zapatista principles. The aim was to understand how these cooperatives engage with the Zapatistas' broader political and ethical stance regarding land and to explore the everyday practices and challenges faced by coffee producers. In Europe, the research concentrated on the solidarity networks that have emerged to support Zapatista economic autonomy through coffee distribution. These networks operate within a politically charged arena, where the production and purchase of Zapatista coffee are seen as acts of resistance against capitalism and concrete construction of economic alternatives. Participant observation at key solidarity events – during assemblies, debates, fundraising campaigns, festivals, and other public events – provided insights into the political motivations and ethical justifications behind the European collectives' involvement in this form of alternative trade.

> "The coffee wage laborers don't harvest it with dignity; they harvest it in exchange for a wage. It's a different thing for someone to love the land." (Spanish activist distributing Zapatista coffee, February 2016, personal conversation).

Zapatista coffee cooperatives participate in a deliberate attempt to create an alternative economic system that aligns with their political ideology. Land is not a commodity to be exploited; it is part of a broader ecological system that must be respected and nurtured. In this sense, coffee production within Zapatista territories is an economic activity but also a deeply political one, tied to the broader struggle of autonomous communities against a particularly destructive

phase of capitalism. The Zapatista *lucha por la vida* (fight for life) is directly opposed to the aggressive and ravaging advancement of market forces: "capitalism destroys, the people build" (EZLN 2015).

Nevertheless, the need to engage in globalized markets (even alternative ones) presents inevitable contradictions. While Zapatista coffee producers and their European allies reject capitalist exploitation, they must face the realities of participating in transnational economic networks. This can generate inherent tensions between anticapitalist ideals and the practical need to sustain the communities through a form of exchange that inevitably involves different kinds of intermediaries. Throughout the network, constant efforts are made to carefully select, whenever possible, each actor involved in distribution, so as to better align each step with varying levels of ideological commitment. Zapatista coffee is marketed internationally as more than just a neoliberal and individualistic form of ethical consumption: buyers are encouraged to view their purchase as a collective political act of solidarity with the Zapatista cause. This framing raises questions about the strategies implemented so that this form trade can escape the logics of commodification and whether it risks co-opting the Zapatista struggle into a form of radical "political consumerism" (Micheletti, Stolle, and Forno 2003).

> "We say it's dignified because we work it collectively."
> (Zapatista coffee producers, June 2016, collective conversation)[6]

In conversations with Zapatista coffee producers, many underlined the importance of resisting capitalist exploitation by working the land collectively. However, they also acknowledged the challenges of exporting the product internationally. The costs and bureaucratization associated with transnational trade put significant pressure on these cooperatives, particularly when it comes to certification processes. To meet export requirements, they had to formalize a few cooperatives which, legally, cannot declare their land as "common" or "non-property," but are compelled to frame it in categories recognized by the Mexican capitalist state they oppose on a daily basis. Official organic labels are contested as neocolonial control devices through which governments and big international agencies arbitrarily overdetermine peasants' practices. The colonial heritage is mobilized as a tool of resistance against the generalized standardization of supposedly sustainable agricultural practices imposed by the very same actors that paved the way for foreign corporations to access and threaten the survival of ancestral lands and their peoples. In contrast, relations with the European

[6] Translation from Spanish by the author.

solidarity activists are built on trust, a key element around which the quality of this rebel coffee is socially constructed. Many producers and distributors dreamt and wished for a self-certification process. Some coffee labels openly state that the product is harvested according to the highest organic standards, without applying official green labels. In certain European countries, this coffee becomes much harder to sell if it's not formally certified, a reason that pushed a few cooperatives to accept and pay for the certification.

The Zapatistas' participation in transnational trade through coffee distribution speaks to the intersection of autonomy and economic collective action. On one hand, the refusal to engage with mainstream capitalist structures aligns with the commitment to land autonomy and indigenous sovereignty. Yet, the reliance on coffee exports to support the communities in resistance creates unavoidable dialectical entanglements with some of the market forces that anticapitalist movements oppose. The Zapatistas emphasize the importance of community self-determination and maintaining control over their resources. The tension between asserting autonomy and participating in transnational economic networks leads to ongoing debates within producers and activist circles about the ethical implications of their economic practices. While many supporters in Europe rally around the slogan *todos somos indígenas* (we are all indigenous), this celebration of their solidarity with Zapatista struggles doesn't eliminate inevitable asymmetries and economic disparities between producers and buyers who hold purchasing powers. The successful marketing of Zapatista coffee as a symbol of ethical and political economic action, while providing financial support, also risks reifying peasant and indigenous identities in ways that friction with principles of self-determination, potentially commodifying Zapatista relations with their land.

These tensions can be viewed through the lens of political ecology, where Zapatista communities must continuously negotiate their control over autonomous territories against neoliberal market dynamics. Zapatista coffee trade, while serving as a form of resistance, raises critical questions about the role of solidarity in a world where market forces often dictate terms of engagement. What does reciprocity mean in the context of this rebel coffee trade? How are existing power structures contested and subverted? These dynamics are compounded by the broader socio-political context in Chiapas, where ongoing conflicts with criminal groups and state forces exacerbate the challenges of sustaining the fight for autonomy. In this context, Zapatista coffee producers find themselves in precarious situations, where violence and intimidation can disrupt their efforts to cultivate and transport the coffee, further complicating their pursuit of autonomy. In summary, Zapatista coffee distribution represents

an important arena for asserting autonomy and engaging with alternative networks of solidarity. Simultaneously, it also reveals the complexities and contradictions inherent in being part of transnational markets. The ongoing challenge for the Zapatistas lies in finding a balance that allows them to resist exploitation while also ensuring their communities' survival and cultivating relationships with the international solidarity community. As they continue to forge alternative pathways for economic exchange, they remain committed to redefining the terms of engagement with both their land and transnational markets, repeatedly emphasizing the importance of autonomy and collective well-being over profit.

4. Discussion: for a decolonial political ecology of resistance

> "Colonial laws remade indigenous worlds by constituting land as an alienable object, as property, displacing alternative understandings of territory in order to justify racialized inequalities grounded in systemic violence." (Sieder 2024)

In recent years, Latin American social sciences, particularly within decolonial and ecological frameworks, have shifted their focus towards the territory as a key actor in indigenous, peasant, and anticapitalist struggles. Escobar (2018) argues that indigenous and peasant communities in Latin America understand territory as a physical space but also and most of all as a socio-political entity that is central to their identity, autonomy, and collective well-being. In this context, the territory actively contributes to shaping resistance against capitalist exploitation, instead of merely serving as a passive and neutral setting for human action. Mignolo (2011) and Quijano (2000) emphasize that reclaiming control over the territory is an act of decolonization, as indigenous and peasant movements fight for land rights and for the right to live according to their ontological frameworks. This perspective sees territory as intrinsically tied to cultural, spiritual, and ecological dimensions, challenging the extractivist logic of capitalism that reduces land to commodified property. In ecological and anticapitalist struggles, the notion of territory extends beyond its geographical boundaries to encompass a relational space where human and non-human actors coexist in reciprocal relations. Svampa (2019) highlights how indigenous movements frame their struggles against mega-projects as environmental resistance as well as broader confrontations with global capitalism's destruction of communal life. As such, the territory becomes a site of political action, reimagination, and subjectivization, where alternative forms of existence and resistance can flourish, deeply questioning the roots of capitalist modernity.

This research highlights how the Zapatistas' vision of the "commons" and "non-property" emerges from centuries-long struggles for land rights, deeply rooted in Mexico's agrarian history, from Emiliano Zapata's revolutionary demands for land reform to the enduring experience of Zapatista autonomous territories. By conceptualizing land as a communal resource rather than a commodity, the Zapatistas challenge dominant neoliberal narratives and present an alternative in praxis, able to inspire anticapitalist experiences worldwide. Their fight speaks to broader global movements for autonomy and resistance to extractive economies, especially in Latin America, where struggles against megaprojects, resource extraction, and land dispossession are intensifying. From an anthropological and political ecology perspective, the Zapatista experience embodies an urgent and transformative rethinking of human-environment relations, one that promotes environmental sustainability as inseparable from social justice and structural political change.

Certain European experiences risk romanticizing the Zapatistas' relation with the land, viewing them as stewards of nature who intrinsically embody an ethical alternative to capitalist exploitation. Such idealization can homogenize and oversimplify the complexities of their organized fight for life against destructive and predatory capitalism. The risk is to hide the political agency of "peoples in movement" (Zibechi 2012), striving daily to build alternatives that have been long and profoundly studied and discussed. This research shows that, despite these risks, Zapatista communities maintain a firm commitment to autonomy and continue to negotiate their role in the global market on their own terms. The Zapatista approach to land draws attention to a critical tension in the broader discussion of the commons. While their resistance to privatization and the struggle for self-determination echo both Marxist and decolonial critiques of capitalism, they also raise questions about how alternative economic systems can be sustained within our contemporary globalized capitalist world.

This study has examined the Zapatista movement's relationship with land and coffee production through an anthropological and political ecology framework, focusing on how Zapatista economic practices intersect with transnational solidarity networks, particularly within European radical left activisms. The analysis has revealed the depth of the Zapatista commitment to autonomy, their unique relationship with the land, and the challenges they face when politically engaging with transnational economic networks while resisting neoliberal capitalism. This final chapter reflects on the key findings, outlines their significance, and discusses future research directions.

5. Conclusions: challenges, limits, and future research directions

An essential component of the analysis has been the broader socio-political context within which Zapatista communities live and politically operate. As highlighted throughout the study, the Zapatistas contend with the pressures of global capitalism while also facing internal threats from the Mexican government, paramilitary groups, and organized crime, particularly around control of land and resources in Chiapas. The ongoing "low-intensity war" and violent conflicts over land rights place Zapatista communities at constant risk, threatening their fight for autonomy. These threats are not isolated to the Zapatistas but reflect a broader pattern of violence and dispossession faced by indigenous and peasant communities across Latin America, particularly in regions targeted by megaprojects. This aspect of the Zapatista struggle shows the importance of solidarity movements beyond consumption and market integration to include direct and coordinated political action as well as advocacy for indigenous rights.

This study contributes to the ongoing scholarly debate about the intersections between political ecology, autonomy, and indigenous resistance. It extends the literature on the commons by examining how Zapatista communities enact the concept in praxis, particularly in the context of transnational solidarity networks and anti-global activism. Additionally, it advances the discussion on the contradictions inherent in alternative economic models, using Zapatista coffee distribution as a case study to explore how social movements engage with global markets while resisting capitalist logics. However, this research also points to several areas that require further exploration. There is a need for more detailed investigations into the internal dynamics of Zapatista coffee cooperatives, particularly how decisions about land and production are made at the community level. More comparative studies across other indigenous and peasant movements in Latin America could shed light on the diverse ways in which communities resist land dispossession and build autonomous alternatives. Ultimately, the escalating violence and criminalization of land defenders, particularly in Chiapas, should be a focal point for future research. Understanding the complex dynamic between local resistance, global markets, and state repression will be crucial for social movements envisioning sustainable and equitable futures.

The Zapatista struggle keeps offering an inspiring example of how communities can resist capitalist exploitation, assert their self-determination, and construct concrete systems of autonomy. Their relation with the land, framed through the lenses of the commons and non-property, challenges dominant neoliberal narratives and provides a *semilla* (seed) for change: a growing inspiration for

sustainable, just alternatives to capitalist predatory development. Yet, as this study has shown, these efforts are fraught with tensions and contradictions, particularly when engaging with transnational markets through coffee distribution. In this sense, the research has highlighted the complexities of building alternative economic and food systems in a globalized world. Rebel coffee distribution reveals the difficulties of subverting daily capitalist structures while inevitably remaining entangled in their pervasive reach. Drawing on the Zapatista experience, this article contributes to the interdisciplinary debates on sustainability that *Visions for Sustainability* seeks to foster. The Zapatistas' political ontology of land relations exemplifies how agroecological care, collective autonomy, and resistance to capitalist exploitation are lived practices that sustain communities under constant pressure. To the violent, destructive forces of the capitalist system of death, Zapatista men and women respond with a *Fight for Life* that is able to reclaim nature as a revolutionary subject. Their struggle makes clear that sustainability cannot be reduced to technocratic solutions or market-based "green" mechanisms but must be understood as a profoundly political process linking earth, territorial sovereignty, life support systems, everyday social practices, and economic alternatives. Zapatista communities continue to represent an unparalleled example for countless initiatives around the globe who — *from below and to the left*[7] — are committed to collective transformative action and solidarity beyond borders, showing that a different possible world can be envisioned and enacted starting from our relationship with the land.

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[7] *Abajo y a la izquierda* is a Zapatista slogan that expresses clearly their political orientation: a commitment to grassroots, bottom-up, horizontal organization ("from below") and radical solidarity with fellow anticapitalist movements ("to the left"). It signals a stance of resistance against dominant powers and also an ethical-political vision grounded in collective struggle.

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