

The current effervescence of indigenous political movements witnessed throughout the world and especially in Latin America since the 1980s has occurred within a trend towards the recognition of the multicultural composition of societies (Sieder 2002, 1). A majority of recent social movements demand recognition of racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual diversity for various ends. Many academics argue that these social movements also manifest a rejection of national popular struggles of socialist bent, which failed to articulate a politics of diversity. They situate the trend towards multicultural recognition within a so-called post-socialist era that began with the end of the Cold War. However, an identity politics that advocates for the rights of particular groups or individuals in ways that do not challenge structural inequality may be consistent with neoliberalism's emphasis on the formation of entrepreneurial and individualistic subjects ~~and a weak state.~~ *A socialist organization of indigenous peoples in Mexico, the Frente Democrático Oriental de México "Emiliano Zapata" (FEDOMEZ) is challenging neoliberal multiculturalism by rejecting the individualist and entrepreneurial model of indigenous development in favor of socialism, based on collectivism and communal property.* The popular form of their struggle, which relies on national alliances among what they identify as the class of "the poor", stands in the way of neoliberal multiculturalism's obliteration of the idiom of class as well as its censure of popular mass-based struggles. Coupled with FEDOMEZ' long-term vision of socialism as a total reformulation of government as "un gobierno del pueblo" or a government of the people- their project represents a conceptually and numerically significant challenge to neoliberal discourses of democracy, state, and multiculturalism. On the other hand, FEDOMEZ departs from the Left's modernizing and universalizing tendencies by articulating the specific oppression of indigenous peoples within the capitalist system and

by demanding cultural equality and autonomy for indigenous peoples.

This paper does not suggest that socialism is the best or only platform of resistance against neoliberalism. It wants to highlight socialism's specific potential to serve as a counter-hegemonic discourse, as defined by the members of FEDOMEZ. In the process, it also hopes to refute the proclamations made by many academics today that socialism has been eclipsed by recent identity-based movements.

Certain transformations in the historical trajectory of American global hegemony are crucial to understanding the logic behind what is increasingly called neoliberal multiculturalism. Boaventura Sousa de Santos argues that neoliberalism is an orchestrated response to the perceived crisis of democracy of the 1970s, in which instead of deepening democracy, [governing elites](#) decided to shield democracy from an overload of social claims made on the state. Their solution was the market rule: decentralization ~~rather than~~ [instead of](#) a central state; an expert system ~~rather than~~ ~~rather than~~ popular participation; the private sphere rather than the public; [and](#) the market rather than the state (Santos 2005, 34).- Neoliberalism stripped democracy of any positive right to social distribution so that

democracy became fully compatible with capitalism, and to such an extent that they became the twin concepts presiding over the new global model of social and political affairs (Santos 2005, 40). **End of quote**

———Charles Hale traces the way “neoliberal multiculturalism” *harmonizes capitalism with a respect for difference* (Hale 2004, 18) by offering a minimal package of cultural rights founded on the concept of identity as a product of individual choice, which is self-actualized through individual opportunity. Neoliberal multiculturalism defines racism as individual acts of discrimination while it eliminates structural inequality from the

national agenda.— These policies aim to steer indigenous demands away from collective struggles that challenge structural inequality and towards fragmented foci on language politics, spirituality, and intellectual production (Hale 2002, 520-21).

Jodi Melamed argues that the US hegemonic discourse makes antiracism possible by erasing the very category of race and replacing it with the notion of culture. Any cultural/racial deviations from the cultural values of freedom, liberty, and opportunity as defined by capitalism are cause for exclusion. Those who do not ~~obtain~~possess a sufficient portion of the wealth are seen to lack the appropriate cultural values: ~~biological traits had nothing to do with it~~not to embody the wrong race. By reconciling capitalism and antiracism, American culture claims universality not only for itself but also for capitalism and uses the resulting moral legitimacy to expand its global power (Melamed 2006).

To summarize, in the neoliberal multiculturalism, *nondistributive* democracy is conducive to market rule; multicultural demands are contested in the private sphere within depoliticized channels of civil society; and civil society and the courts solve the conflicts and insufficiencies of the market. Popular participation and demands for structural equality and social redistribution are deflected away from collective mobilizations and even criminalized.

~~NGOs, the business sector, and the state offer rather than social transformation, problem solving; rather than popular participation, selected-in stakeholders; rather than social contract, self-regulation; rather than social justice, compensatory policies; and rather than power relations, social cohesion (Santos 2005, 35).~~

The implementation of multicultural regimes in Latin America since the 1990s follows these norms. Some argue that multicultural rights were not intended to fulfill the outstanding promise of equality for minorities, but to proffer a new source of legitimacy to states (Hooker 2005). After implementing harsh structural adjustment programs in the 80s, Latin American states entered into serious legitimacy crises due to their inability to ensure the socioeconomic well being of their citizens. States propped up new neoliberal multicultural regimes with exclusion based on difference as the new target of government redress and eliminated combating socioeconomic and political inequality from the states' agenda (Hooker 2005).

Mexico's transition to multiculturalism is a pristine example of neoliberal governmentality. In the 70s and 80s, macroeconomic financial volatility induced by gradually introduced neoliberal restructuring as well as the failed policies of import-substitution and the collapse of international oil prices left the state bankrupt (de la Peña 2002, 55). President Salinas capitalized on the perceived crisis by implementing an overhaul that clearly signaled Mexico's transition from protectionism and corporatism to free markets and state-shrinking (de la Peña 2006, 287). As part of the overhaul, Salinas negotiated the North American Free Trade Agreement with the US and Canada (de la Peña 2006, 287).

To improve the treaty's prospects, Salinas implemented constitutional reforms that aligned Mexico to the global norms of neoliberal antiracism discussed above. Salinas reformed Article 4 to read,

The Mexican nation has a multicultural composition originally rooted in its indigenous peoples ...(Gutierrez 1999, 200). The law will protect and promote the development of their languages, cultures, practices, customs, resources, and specific forms of social organization ...(de la Peña 2006, 287).

This article officially acknowledged indigenous peoples for the first time in Mexican history and signaled the formal abdication of the norm of mestizaje (de la Peña 2006, 287). However, Salinas also reformed Article 27 of the Constitution to allow the privatization of communal landholdings hereto protected by the 1917 Constitution (de la Peña 2006, 287). The joint passage of these amendments is a clear example of the way the apparent democratic and antiracist ethic of multiculturalism serves to palliate the expansion of capitalist measures aimed at social exclusion and economic inequality.

Two years later, President Salinas signed NAFTA into effect. Free trade between Mexico and the US severely exacerbated the crisis of the Mexican campo. Indigenous and non-indigenous campesinos are facing the brutal structural violence of a state that officially annulled the guarantees achieved by the Mexican Revolution, namely a commitment to land distribution and protections against the buying and selling of communal property. In contrast, the Mexican government is directly forcing these campesinos to compete in unequal terms with the subsidized products of other countries. The government also implemented a land-titling program called PROCEDURE that gives individual members of communal and ejido lands the opportunity to secure their parcel of land under a private title of ownership with which they can sell or offer it as collateral. These combined policies have triggered the fragmentation of the communal and ejido land structure and propelled migration towards the powerful agricultural centers of northern Mexico and the US and the US-MEXICO maquila sector. By concentrating land in a few hands once again, these measures directly undermine the material and cultural base indigenous and non-indigenous campesinos need to survive. These measures expose the fallacy behind the government's commitment to protect and promote the cultures of

indigenous peoples and reveal the way neoliberal economic policies impose capitalist ways of survival on both indigenous and non-indigenous peoples alike.

FEDOMEZ formally emerged in 1985 as a coalition of three peasant organizations from the Huasteca region of Mexico, which is located at the intersection of the states of Hidalgo, Veracruz, and San Luis Potosí (Schryer 1990, 51, 280). The communities that comprise FEDOMEZ first organized in the risky process of recovering lands from landed elites in the 70s. The peoples of these communities are Nahuatl, Huastecas, Otomis, Totonacas, and mestizas. Since their formal constitution as an organization they have maintained independence from the municipal governments and all political parties.

The national and transnational economic context of the 1970s was experienced in the Mexican countryside as retrogression in the achievements of the agrarian land distribution of the 1930s. This retrogression began in the 1940s, when Mexico served as the cradle for the Green Revolution. This counterrevolution directly undermined the legacy of the Mexican Revolution and its professed commitment to redistributing land. State development projects were directed at bolstering agribusiness, which set incentives for the acquisition of land (Schryer 1990, 198-206). Elite land owners, which usually occupied power positions within municipal governments, gradually dispossessed peasants, both mestizo and indigenous, of their communal lands with the state's approval and support. Peasant communities countered these abuses but were met with state and paramilitary violence. Many communities spent decades petitioning for communal and ejido land through the legal venues instated by Mexico's agrarian law, largely to no avail.

The population explosion of the 1960s and 70s in the cities and countryside pushed many people to migrate to the Huastecas. The shortage of land compounded by

the explicit concentration of government monies and technical support in the hands of landed elites, provoked the peasants in the Huastecas to take over land, or as they put it “recuperar la tierra”.

At the time of the take overs, the peasants did not label their struggle as a socialist class struggle. When interviewed, FEDOMEZ members say they organized against “el rico” or “la rica”, or the rich female or male cacique who took the land from their “abuelos” or “forefathers” through deceit and outright physical violence and coercion. These take overs consisted of mustering a significant number of people, from 100-250 individuals, to plant or work some of the land taken by the cacique. The cacique hired hit men to evict the campesinos. Once a few communities succeeded in retaining their land, other communities followed suit. When a community was ready to initiate a recovery, they would ask other communities, some of which had already practiced recovering lands, to join them on the day of the take over. This process resulted in much violence, with state governments intervening by sending state police and arresting, disappearing, and killing many compañeros and compañeras. Some communities took over lands and were evicted several times before the cacique eventually gave up.

The governments of Veracruz and Hidalgo were forced to expropriate land from the caciques to distribute to many of these communities, but these measures did not suffice. Land take overs continued until the early 1990s, with a few cases occurring after Salinas’ agrarian reform.

The organizations that comprise FEDOMEZ underwent several name changes due to state and cacique defamation campaigns that criminalized their organizations as “roba vacas” and “guerrillas”. The decision to form FEDOMEZ in 1985 was due to the need for stronger unity in the face of the military incursions of the 1980s. Many of the people

I interviewed remember the 1980s as the decade of repression. Hundreds of members were imprisoned in maximum-security state penitentiaries, tortured, killed or disappeared. Military troops settled in their communities and patrolled them for months, looking for the so-called leaders of FEDOMEZ, which they identified as guerrilleros. Those that were able to elude the military sought refuge in Mexico City and actively denounced the state violence that was taking place in the Huastecas. It was in Mexico City that these compañeros met other organizations, unions, and universities from different states. These networks feed collaboration and serve as the medium for the exchange of ideas and experiences. It was through these networks in Mexico City that most compañeros of FEDOMEZ first learned of socialism. Some of the representatives or men, which have long-term positions within FEDOMEZ that involve frequent traveling to state capitals and Mexico City, report that the organization came to the realization that it had in fact launched a class struggle and had been practicing some aspects of socialism without knowing so.

However, the concept of socialism as such did not pervade FEDOMEZ until much later. Men and women, which have had none or much less exposure to the networking sites of Mexico City report that they did not learn of socialism until about 2005, when FEDOMEZ officially joined the Frente Nacional de Lucha por el Socialismo, or the National Front for the Struggle for Socialism, which consists of about thirty organizations from nine different states in Mexico. Each community discussed the implications of socialism before FEDOMEZ officially joined the FNLS.

The representatives interviewed call their brand of socialism, “socialismo a la Mexicana”, or “socialism Mexican style” to defend their project from the common accusations that socialism has not worked in other countries. While some of the men

involved in networking do have some knowledge of Marxist Leninist theories, most other members conceptualize socialism in their own words as collective work, sharing, and equality. Most of them clarify that they have not reached socialism. This time-space of socialism is “where there are no rich or poor”, “where there is no lack or excess of food”, and where there is “a government of the people”. In their words, it is practiced by “working in cooperatives”, “solving our problems together”, “everybody working for everybody”, “working together to defend our rights”, “being one force”, and by “defending communal property”. I perceived that the people I interviewed have deeply embraced socialism and apply it creatively. When trying to interview a representative, he commented to one of the compañeras passing by that he hoped it was ok if we interviewed inside the church. The compañera replied, “of course its ok, the church is of the people”. In another instance, I asked a group of compañeras whether they thought it was possible to reach socialism. One of them answered “Si dios quiere”, or “if god wills it”. A compañera immediately replied, “It is not if god wills it, we make the effort to reach Socialism”.

I hypothesize that this notion of socialism is so readily embraced by FEDOMEZ because it fits in with their experience in the past thirty years of relying on each other. Independence from state parties as well as the dangerous acts of land recovery forced them to depend on each other to survive and achieve their needs. Many members express love for “la organizacion”, which they think of as a collective. Some of them express much gratitude to it for helping them when they were in prison or persecuted. Many of them insist that socialism has worked “en los hechos” or in practice and they firmly state, “we will not abandon the struggle, we have lost so many compañeros.” One compañero

stated that FEDOMEZ joined the FNLS because, “if the state sees you are alone, it will finish you”.

The ideal of working for each other pervades their notions of government and its disposition towards indigenous peoples. They condemn the current government for taking the side of the rich. One *compañero* said that the current structure of government is “an idea of the rich”, whereas the “idea of the peoples or of the poor is socialism”. Another *compa* stated, “the government wants to exterminate indigenous peoples and continues to subject us to its ideas”. Several *compas* stated that the government imposes the culture of the rich on them through the television and radio. They state, “that is not our culture, they want us to imitate them so that we can buy all of their products.” From their vantage point, capitalist culture is a more visible government policy than any multicultural commitment to indigenous culture.

Independence from state parties and municipalities has essentially meant that FEDOMEZ has practiced self-government for thirty years. The communities resolve their problems amongst themselves. As some of them see it, they no longer contribute to the bourgeois system of justice that only benefits the rich. Self-government has also given them the opportunity to focus collectively on protecting their language and traditions.

Recently, some of them have been learning the history of indigenous peoples and have read that collectivism predominated in indigenous cultures. They state that by their lifetime capitalism had thoroughly planted the seeds of individualism. In a way, the peoples of FEDOMEZ are just beginning to recover the cultural autonomy that was taken from them. When I asked a *compañero* if he thought socialism can adequately value indigenous peoples unlike the current system, he replied, “Well that’s how it should be”.

Members of FEDOMEZ seem prepared to make socialism work as a medium through which they can attain not only economic and political equality, but racial equality and cultural autonomy as well.