

# What Does Autonomy Mean to You?

Members of Sexta Grietas del Norte

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*from* the Eagle and the Condor Liberation Front

Autonomy is the practice of collective freedom that desires a commitment to a praxis of struggle for another world in motion. Autonomy allows for the creation of spaces (not necessarily physical) within already existing worlds. These spaces give room to collectively grow, learn, unlearn, and exist with each other not against each other. Autonomy for us is a practice against oppression, and in the case of our context, is anti-capitalist and anti-colonial.

Autonomy is knowing we have the power to control our own body, community, economies, and land through the ways we see fit to meet our needs. We do not need to restrict ourselves to state-imposed definitions or regulations, moving beyond this creating our own worlds even while white settler colonialism/coloniality/and capitalist institutions still exist. Autonomy is a praxis.

—Los Angeles, California

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*from* Charlotte

Autonomy, as inspired by Zapatismo, is an ongoing, daily process of collectively building a dignified life for all. It is built by creating and reintegrating systems of and for life: for example, in agroecology, self-government, economics, education, justice, health, arts, and sciences... all responding to the evolving needs of our communities, human and beyond-human.

Autonomy builds on the ancestral Indigenous wisdom of our diverse peoples in order to recreate better ways of being in relationship with one another. This construction needs to include the participation of all, so that collective action can reflect collective voice while respecting the self-determination of each. The collective does not supplant the brilliance of each person; on the contrary, each contribution nourishes the common good. This is how we can build autonomous community in our places that respects all of life.

—Territory of Huichin and Jovel (a.k.a. Oakland and SCLC)

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*from* Semillas

When thinking about what we mean by autonomy, the topic of time comes up a lot: autonomy connects to the privilege of having access to time and being able to choose what you do with your time. Self-determination also comes up for us as being able to choose how we want to live and having our own materials/resources as a means of production without the need to depend on any institution, government, or corporation.

We agree that land is vital in order to have autonomy. Land that belongs to the community and is a safe space to exist, convivir, to commune, organize, grow food, create, and heal. What makes it safe? Some of us express it as a space needed for “community only.” Others among us

argue that it should be a designated space only for People of Color (POC). This has led us into a bigger discussion on “who/what is community?” and how do we create “a world where many worlds may fit?” This has also led us into a broader conversation around decolonization, gentrification, neo-colonization, and the idea of the lines that have been drawn to divide us globally, and whether “true autonomy” can only be achieved if we return to our native lands or to the neighborhoods where we were born and grew up in. We all agree that a safe space is a place where *el estado*, or the state, cannot enter or have any power over the land or the community in that space. Autonomy to many of us also means being able to have the most basic human rights like education and health without depending on money and without having to undergo any kind of “evaluation” from *el estado* and its institutions to determine if we meet the criteria to deserve rights such as health care, housing, and education.

On how we practice autonomy, as a collective we try our best to create spaces to heal and build with our communities. We are proud of the many social justice films and art projects we have realized and produced with the community without depending on any institution. NYC is extremely expensive, and through collaboration and sharing of resources, many times we have been able to accomplish the impossible. Still, we realize that many of the spaces that we’ve created have been on land/space that never belongs to the community; it’s almost like we float to different sites, and so the idea of whether or not it’s possible for a space to be “autonomous” and “safe” temporarily makes us wonder: can it float, can it transform to adapt to the realities and challenges that expensive cities/urban spaces present? Is it a “state of mind” or a verb, not just some metaphor? We must continue to reimagine autonomy and not be afraid to transform spaces, the way the EZLN teaches us. In sharing what we think about autonomy, we are left with more questions than answers, but we hope that this summary can contribute to conversations on how we understand and can practice this and grow autonomy in the belly of the capitalist beast.

—New York City, New York

*from Raíces sin Fronteras*

Discussing autonomy brings up important memories and concepts such as “councils,” “communes,” “duality of power,” “germs of popular power,” etc. These concepts condense important past and present experiences that focused, on the one hand, on the destruction of capitalist domination, and, on the other hand, on the creation or recreation of community life with principles and values opposed to capitalism. Many perspectives have inspired these historical struggles, for example, those of the socialists, communists, and anarchists. Our thinking-feeling is that the Zapatista experience offers a perspective that values, weighs, and breaks down but yet continues those perspectives; it is thus an effort not to deny them, but to incorporate them dialectically, and it does so on the basis of recovering organizational forms of native peoples, such as community assemblies. For us, all of this goes hand in hand with autonomy.

The Zapatista perspective for autonomy is anti-capitalist and carries a simultaneous yes and a no. Neo-Zapatismo recognizes the great socialist and communist debates and battles of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th. However, neo-Zapatismo is above all, a seed that sprouts in the times of neoliberal capitalism and in lands and peoples “from below” of one of the most excluded territories of the Global South: Chiapas. The neo-Zapatista movement is not incidental; it is one of the most notable and successful expressions of the struggles, rebellions, and resistance that neoliberal capitalism, or the Fourth World War, as the Zapatistas call it, inevitably engenders. This Indigenous movement calls us to fight for autonomy with “rebellion” and “resistance.”

For the Zapatistas, “rebellion” means NO! to the system. It is the struggle to destroy the capitalist hydra, to tear and deepen cracks in its walls. At the same time, “resistance” means YES! to something else that is possible. It is the effort to start building another world from now on, at the same time that the present world is being destroyed (“The Crack in the Wall. First Note on Zapatista Method,” *Enlace Zapatista*, May 2015). The Zapatistas put them together because their tactic simultaneously considers

rebellion and resistance, a NO! and a YES!, unlike some Marxist-Leninist proposals that focus on the NO! and relegate or postpone any practical consideration of the YES! to a future after the overthrow of the capitalist state. It is not like those who seek a YES! within the system, for example taking over governments or creating cooperatives that just adapt to the neoliberal market, or organizing collectives that create bubbles trying to escape separately from capitalism, but without proposing the common struggle to destroy it for everyone.

The Zapatista experience inspires us, therefore, to fight for life and against death in our own geographies, calendars, and in our own ways. It inspires us to open and deepen “cracks” against the capitalist hydra, which on its path despoils and attempts to annihilate anything and anyone that it finds not useful for itself; cracks such as those opened by peoples protesting gas pipelines, migrants marching against borders, movements against police brutality and racism, struggles for abolition, or workers striking against labor exploitation. The networks in solidarity, for example, with the struggles of the National Indigenous Congress, are also cracks in the walls of capitalism.

For life, building “resistances” in our territories means cultivating seeds of alternative and anti-capitalist civilizations and generating another education, another way of production with egalitarian labor relationships, another health, another culture, and another form of community relationship that celebrates differences, embraces coincidences, and refuses to reproduce the existing hierarchical and patriarchal system.

For life, it means weaving resistances based on another feeling-thinking where consumerism is questioned and respect for Mother Earth prevails; resistances that are neither mirrors nor identical, but that embrace each other in rebellion to mow down the capitalist hydra’s weeds. As SupGaleano put it in a June 2021 communique entitled, “The Journey for Life: To What End?”:

Each person, according to their calendar, their geography, and their customs, will have to make their path, and just like us Zapatista peoples, they will stumble and get up, and what they build will have whatever name they want to give it.

The Zapatista perspective invites us, then, to fight for a world in which many worlds fit, where everything is for everyone, nothing just for ourselves, and where whoever rules, leads by obeying. These simple yet profound principles guide our efforts for freedom, justice, peace, and democracy, and against exploitation, plunder, repression, and contempt. In short, for life, and against death. This is how we understand the Zapatista perspective on the struggle for autonomy.

—Mexico City and San Diego

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*from* Gustavo

Autonomy is a collective and collaborative process where people work together to fight against oppression, violence, dehumanization, and hierarchies while also implementing another form of relating to one another and existing.

Autonomy is a shared responsibility where everyone participates and gives back to the people, land, and community in whatever way, shape or form.

Autonomy as a process to collective living and a practice of shared responsibilities that ensure the survivability and well being of a people and community.

Autonomy is the practice of creating and sustaining communal practices that support and invest in one another as opposed to destroying or tearing down.

Autonomy is the practice of mobility. Acts of moving and traveling without being criminalized, incarcerated, or killed. The act of developing relationships with people, land, environments, and hubs. The practice of existing in place that are not our own.

Autonomy as a practice of self sufficiency without having to rely on nation/state for food, housing, medicine and survivability.

Autonomy as a practice of educating, teaching, and learning

knowledges and skills that will improve the conditions of our communities.

Autonomy as a practice of collective living where the people decide what is best for communities.

Autonomy as having the materials that we need to ensure the survivability of our communities.

Autonomy as a networks of families, peoples, organizations, communities working together.

Autonomy as a relationship with the earth, elements, and unknown mysteries.

—Albuquerque, New Mexico

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## *from* Chiapas Support Committee

Our discussion of autonomy highlights various facets of autonomy, which we list below, not in any particular order.

**Values:** Autonomy has to do with a group of people deciding that they want to live according to different values than the dominant culture. They need to have their own alternative cultural values, and a common agreement as to how to live in a place. Autonomy includes relationships to the animals and the environment. The core values are passed on to future generations.

**Non-capitalistic economic models:** Autonomy involves a way creating and distributing the necessities of life in a way that is not driven by profit, and must involve a more collective form of governance.

**Creating your own systems:** The Zapatistas created education, health, and justice systems, based on their specific needs and values.

**Individual/collective:** We have to change ourselves internally. A key aspect to autonomy for the Zapatistas is that everybody puts the community before the individual. As oppressed people we feel defeated, like we don't have the voice or the power not to be at the mercy of money or power. We need to have agency to live and make our own decisions and choices collectively.

**A practice, not a thing:** Autonomy is not a set thing to aspire to, but an attitude, a process and a practice that involves both individuals and collectives. What can we do in our lives that can take us towards autonomy? For example, a part of the process would be to obstruct capitalist consumption, to find ways to stop prioritizing work, in other words, to reduce the amount of alienated labor we have to engage in. Abolishing the police in our communities is also an example of a move towards autonomy.

**Four types of autonomy:** organizational, institutional, movement and peoplehood. Autonomy for Zapatistas was a political evolution due to the failure of negotiations with the state. Autonomy is a political concept, but it could only happen when people are involved.

**Examples of autonomy:** Zapatistas, Rojava, Mujer Obrera (they have land, systems to generate income), Highlander Institute in Tennessee. Others are building autonomy through food justice based on the land. During COVID, groups organized with local farmers to distribute organic greens to those in need.

**Reimbodiment, spirituality:** Autonomy is the rebuilding that happens after the destruction of capitalist structures and the disembodiment that it creates. This re-embodiment has to include a spiritual journey.

**Diversity:** Autonomy will be diverse, depending on the circumstances, needs and desires of the communities involved, and de-centralized. Not all autonomies will look the same, autonomy will take different forms in different cultures. It is a long and hard process, so we have to be gentle in approaching it.

**Visualizing autonomy:** We need to create a space to visualize what our economy can look like outside of a capitalist system. How can Zapatista forms of autonomy be translated into an urban context? Our group is dispersed over a large urban area. We don't share land or space. As a collective one thing we can work towards is what does a material basis look like for us: do we want to buy land, do we want to open a co-op? We don't have land or space, but we can support and network with those who do, and build collectives. These are key to building autonomy.

—Oakland, California



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## from Autonomia Xochitequio

In our collective conversations and activities, we have been able to identify some fundamental points on the question of autonomy.

In principle, we have reached consensus that autonomy is, in its most general description, a practice that generates tools to open paths to ways of existing and relating to the world that are not imposed. As a practice, autonomy is put into *action* both **from *thought* and from *doing***. Both questions present themselves as exercises, and, whether they are material or immaterial, each allows the other to appear. In this way, we have been able to verify that thinking and doing have been constantly separated in the West, but that it is necessary to think of them together, in a dialogue and interrelation, as the key to their disruptive and creative potential.

This being the case, we believe that **thought**, as a practice, is fundamental insofar

## de Autonomia Xochitequio

En nuestras conversaciones y actividades colectivas, hemos podido reconocer algunos puntos fundamentales sobre la cuestión de la autonomía.

En principio, hemos llegado al consenso de que la autonomía es, en su descripción más general, una práctica que genera herramientas para abrir caminos a modos de existencia y relación con el mundo no impuestos. Como una práctica, la autonomía se pondría en *acto* tanto **desde el *pensamiento* como desde el *hacer***. Ambas cuestiones se nos presentan como ejercicios y, aunque sean materiales o inmateriales, permiten uno al otro su aparición. De tal forma, hemos podido comprobar que el pensar y el hacer han estado constantemente separadas en Occidente, pero que es necesario pensarlas en conjunto, en un diálogo e interrelación, como la clave de su potencial disruptivo y creativo.

Siendo así, creemos que el **pensamiento**, como una práctica, es fundamental en tanto que se

as a critical vision and reflection of the world is needed to be able to understand, on the one hand, our place in the organization of society and, at the same time, how to project modes of resistance, problematization, and alternatives to it. In this sense, we understand that some sites of *intellectual knowledge*, whether produced by academics, militants, and/or collectives, help us understand that the hegemonic form of the world has capitalism as its center of gravity and that, through constant depredation and annihilation of the earth and its population, capitalism produces a generalized precariousness of life that benefits corporations and international banking. Understanding the mode of operation and deployment of the capitalist system, in its different modalities of functioning and productivization of life (e.g., sexual, racial, labor, state, economic, legislative), allows us to project, plan, imagine and observe, together, critical alternatives to its operation, from our specific territorial and social experience. From *action*, on the other hand, since a theoretical

necesita de una visión y reflexión crítica del mundo para poder entender, por un lado, cuál es nuestro lugar en la ordenación de la sociedad y, al mismo tiempo, cómo proyectar modos de resistencia, problematización y alternativa a la misma. En este sentido, entendemos que algunos lugares del *saber intelectual*, ya sean producidos por algunxs académicos, militantes y/o colectivos, nos ayudan a comprender que la forma hegemónica del mundo tiene al capitalismo como su centro de gravedad y que, a través de su constante depredación y aniquilación de la tierra y su población, produce una precarización generalizada de la vida para el beneficio de las empresas y la banca internacional. El comprender el modo de funcionamiento y despliegue del sistema capitalista, en sus distintos modos de funcionamiento y productivización de la vida (sexual, racial, laboral, estatal, económico, legislativo, etc.), nos permite proyectar, planear, imaginar y observar en conjunto alternativas críticas a su funcionamiento, desde nuestra experiencia territorial y social específica. Desde el *hacer*, por otro lado, ya que no bastaría

verification of the widespread crisis to which capital inevitably leads is not enough, it is necessary to *practice and materialize* alternatives to its order that, from different ways and degrees, erodes the given field of relationships and gives collectives the ability to make decisions about their own experiences and ways of relating. On various occasions, these practices in their daily weaving and unfolding teach us about *non-imposing* ways to meet and dialogue that allow unforeseen relationships to develop and other existing ways of knowing, ones that do not respond to the Western order, to be affirmed.

In accordance with all of the above, we also believe that autonomy is a practice that is carried out both collectively and individually. In this way, it is essential that the community, through the self-understanding of its forms, enables space where the traditional modes of producing social relations can be suspended, or, in other cases, uses of the same traditional modes to develop possible alternative ways of meeting and socializing. It is from this collective perspective

solo con una constatación teórica de la crisis extendida a la que nos lleva inevitablemente el Capital, sino que sería necesario *practicar y materializar* alternativas a su orden que, desde distintos modos y grados, erosiones el campo de relaciones dado y entregue a las colectividades la capacidad de decisión sobre sus propias experiencias y modos de relación. En variadas ocasiones, estas prácticas nos enseñan en su despliegue y tejido cotidiano, sobre modos de encuentro y diálogo *no impositivos* que permiten el desarrollo de relaciones no previstas y la afirmación de otros modos de saber existente que no responde al orden Occidental.

En concordancia con todo lo anterior, creemos también que la autonomía es una práctica que se lleva a cabo tanto colectiva como individualmente. De tal manera, es fundamental constatar que la colectividad posibilita, en la autocomprensión de sus formas, un espacio donde se pueden poner en suspenso los modos tradicionales de relación productiva de lo social, o, en otros caso, utilizar estos mismos modos tradicionales para la elaboración de alternativas de encuentro y socialización

that we open ourselves to an alternative relationship with the land, production, social hierarchies, history, culture, and other instances that germinate in our collaboration and dialogue. All this allows us, at the same time, to problematize individual practices that reproduce the same order of representations and social beliefs, making it possible to re-evaluate and re-comprehend the standards we live by as well as our beliefs, to open ourselves to the possibility of practicing new ideas that don't need to be imposed on others or ourselves.

Our own practice of autonomy arises from the specific geographic context of the border between the United States and Mexico, in the urban sprawl that encompasses San Diego and Tijuana, on occupied Kumeyaay territory that was never ceded. Within this geographic expanse we travel between centers of military and technological power that make San Diego their home and the underworlds that sustain these centers. It is in the interstices are areas of dispossession where excess materials, excess waste, and excess people accumulate. Our

posible. Es, desde esta perspectiva colectiva, que nos abrimos a una relación alternativa con la tierra, la producción, las jerarquías sociales, la historia, la cultura y muchas otras instancias, las cuales germinan en nuestra colaboración y diálogo. Todo esto nos permite, a mismo tiempo, problematizar nuestras prácticas individuales que reproducen el mismo orden de representaciones y creencias sociales, haciendo posible reevaluar y re-comprender los estándares de nuestra vida y nuestras creencias, para abrirnos a la posibilidad de practicar nuevas ideas, sin necesidad de ser impuestas ni a otros, ni a nosotrxs mismxs.

Nuestra propia práctica de la autonomía surge desde el contexto geográfico específico de la frontera entre EEUU y México, en el despliegue urbano que abarca San Diego Y Tijuana, ocupando territorio Kumeyaay nunca cedido. Entre dicha extensión geográfica transitamos entre centros de poder militar y tecnológicos que hacen de San Diego su hogar, al igual que los inframundos que sustentan estos centros. En las interstices ocupan zonas de despojo, donde se acumulan materiales que sobran,

journeys reveal the environmental and affective catastrophe that these sacrificial zones generate, and from these places we seek to generate an infrastructure that sustains life. As a practice of autonomy, the *rascuache* appropriates and revalues what has been dispossessed and puts those very discards back into circulation. This time, not in the service of an incessant accumulation of capital, but of a collective material and spiritual sustenance.

*Rascuacheando*, we get down to work, in a way that precludes the demands for efficiency that capital imposes.

The trajectory inscribed in the form of the broken and discarded materials that we recover needs to be unraveled. We dismember wooden fences, transmute food that was allowed to rot, crush cans that were on their way to the dump. The rebuilding process arises as a collective and creative effort that transforms us as well as the material.

In short, the practice of autonomy, from its different places of intervention, invites us to a different way of engaging with the world, keeping in mind

desechos que sobran y gente que sobra. Nuestro caminar reconoce la catástrofe ambiental y afectiva que generan estas zonas sacrificiales, y desde estos sitios busca generar una infraestructura que sustente la vida. Como práctica de la autonomía, lo “rascuache”, retoma y revaloriza lo despojado y vuelve a poner en circulación esos mismos desechos. Esta vez, no al servicio de una acumulación de Capital incesante, sino de un sustento colectivo material y espiritual.

“Rascuacheando” ponemos manos a la obra, de una forma que requiere obviar las demandas de eficiencia que impone el Capital.

Al tomar materiales rotos y descartados necesitamos deshacer su trayectoria inscrita en su forma. Descuartizamos vallas de madera, transmutamos comida que se dejó pudrir, y aplastamos latas que iban en camino a ser enterradas. El proceso de reconstruir surge como un esfuerzo colectivo y creativo que nos transforma a nosotrxs al igual que al material.

En definitiva, la práctica de la autonomía, desde sus distintos lugares de intervención, nos invita a llevar a cabo otra relación con el mundo, teniendo a la vista las

the critical experiences that already exist and are unfolding within it. Learning from its forms and putting into practice transformations in our daily lives, both collectively and individually.

—San Diego, CA  
(Kumeyaay territory)

experiencias críticas que en él ya existen y se despliegan. Aprendiendo de sus formas y poniendo en práctica transformaciones en nuestro cotidiano, tanto colectiva como individualmente.

—San Diego, CA  
(territorio Kumeyaay) 