

## The Southern Voice: Zapatista and the Challenge towards

## Neoliberal Agenda in a Globalized World

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*The Zapatistas, emerging in the early 1990s in Chiapas, Mexico, advocate for indigenous autonomy, participatory democracy, and social justice, offering a powerful critique of neoliberal globalization. Their decentralized governance model, based on autonomous municipalities known as “caracoles,” emphasizes collective consensus, horizontalism, and grassroots self-governance, challenging conventional power structures. This study utilizes qualitative research through literature analysis and frames its discussion within critical perspective. By critiquing neoliberal policies and advocating for indigenous dignity and autonomy, the Zapatistas underscore the detrimental impacts of globalization on marginalized communities, presenting a broader struggle against capitalist exploitation. It explores the Zapatistas’ ideological foundations, strategic resistance to NAFTA, and its critique of neoliberal globalization highlighting its significance for global social movements. The movement’s unique operational model contrasts with Mexico’s hierarchical systems, promoting local authority and community empowerment. The Zapatistas’ commitment to gender equality, education, healthcare, and improved living standards reflects their vision of a pluralistic and inclusive society. Their slogan, “a world where many worlds fit,” continues to inspire contemporary social movements worldwide, advocating for a just and equitable society.*

**Keywords:** Neoliberal Policies, Globalization, Social Movement, Zapatista

### Introduction

Social movements in the 21st century are characterized by the dynamic and interconnected nature of global society, driven primarily by the advancements in digital technology, social media, and increasing awareness of global issues. Digital technology and social media platforms play a crucial role in organizing, mobilizing, and disseminating information (Sandoval-Almazan & Gil-Gar-

cia, 2014). Movements such as the Arab Spring, Black Lives Matter, and the #MeToo movement utilize social media to unify voices and mobilize mass action. This demonstrates how technology can be a powerful tool for creating social change and amplifying voices that might otherwise go unheard. Contemporary social movements generally have a positive impact on many aspects, albeit facing challenges. They have successfully

raised public awareness about various critical issues such as climate change, gender equality, human rights, and social justice. For instance, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement has drawn global attention to issues of racism and police brutality. Additionally, modern social movements often influence policies and legislation, urging governments to adopt more fair and inclusive changes. By leveraging digital technology and social media, these movements can mobilize masses quickly and effectively, creating global solidarity that can pressure political leaders and corporations to take action. Overall, these dynamics demonstrate that 21st-century social movements can create broader and more sustainable social change (Tilly, 2019).

Current social movements often focus on global issues like climate change, human rights, gender equality, and social justice, while also addressing specific local issues that make them relevant in various contexts. These movements tend to be inclusive, involving diverse groups of people regardless of background, age, gender, or ethnicity, which strengthens the movements and increases their impact. Frequently, these movements are sparked by viral events that accelerate mass mobilization and attract international media attention. Moreover, many modern social movements adopt more horizontal and decentralized structures, allowing for more egalitarian participation and flexible responses to emerging issues (Morrow & Torres, 2022).

Contemporary social movements often employ creative tactics and strategies to capture public and media attention, such

as peaceful demonstrations, theatrical actions, and viral online campaigns. Collaboration among organizations, communities, and individuals is increasingly common, strengthening social movements through broader networks and alliances. With these innovative and adaptive approaches, they successfully leverage technology and global networks to amplify their voices and achieve their goals, creating broader and more sustainable change.

The social movements of the 21st century share a close relationship with the Zapatistas in several aspects. Firstly, the Zapatistas have served as an inspiration for contemporary social movements with their innovative approach to social change. The concepts of horizontalism and democratic participation pioneered by the Zapatistas have influenced many modern social movements in terms of organizational structure and inclusive decision-making. Moreover, the Zapatistas also address issues relevant to current social movement issues, such as climate change, human rights, gender equality, and social justice. Contemporary social movements often draw inspiration from the Zapatista struggle for the rights of minorities and indigenous communities, as well as their resistance against neoliberalism and detrimental economic globalization (Alcantara & Bringel, 2019).

The Zapatista Army of National Liberation, or Zapatistas, is a revolutionary indigenous movement originating from the southern Mexican state of Chiapas. Emerging in 1994, the Zapatistas rose in resistance against the implementation of the North

American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which they perceived as a threat to indigenous autonomy, land rights, and economic well-being. Led by the enigmatic Subcomandante Marcos, the Zapatistas seized control of several towns and cities in Chiapas, proclaiming their demands for indigenous rights, land reform, and autonomy. The movement is deeply rooted in Mayan culture and anti-capitalist ideology, seeking to address centuries of marginalization and exploitation faced by indigenous communities (Dupuis-Déri, 2019).

The urgency of analyzing the Zapatista movement lies in its ideological foundation and strategic resistance to NAFTA and neoliberal policies in general. The movement's vision encompasses indigenous autonomy, participatory democracy, and social justice, offering a powerful critique of neoliberal globalization. Understanding the ideological underpinnings of the Zapatistas sheds light on their emergence and ongoing struggle against economic exploitation and cultural imperialism. Strategically, the Zapatistas operate through decentralized autonomous municipalities known as "*caracoles*", where decision-making is based on collective consensus and participatory democracy. Their movement strategies emphasize horizontalism, rejecting traditional hierarchical structures, and promoting grassroots organizing and self-governance. This unique operational model challenges conventional notions of power and authority, offering an alternative vision for social and political organization (Zibechi, 2019). Critically analyzing the Zapatista movement's critique of neoliberal

globalization is essential for comprehending its purpose and significance. By challenging neoliberal policies and advocating for indigenous autonomy and dignity, the Zapatistas highlight the devastating impact of globalization on marginalized communities. Their resistance represents a broader struggle against capitalist exploitation and serves as a beacon of hope for social movements worldwide.

### Theoretical Framework

As reflected by Weber (2002), critical theory approaches in international relations (IR) have developed a theoretical lens to evaluate the nature, quality, and scope of social change in the era of globalization. This era is viewed either as an ideology that obscures long-standing trends of modern capitalism or as something fundamentally new. Within the IR discipline, "critical theory" has become a shorthand for various efforts to break away from the dominant paradigms of realism/neorealism and liberalism/neoliberalism. As such, it represents diverse critiques from the peripheries of the discipline, including neo-Gramscian analyses, reformulations of Marxist theory, feminist challenges, post-structuralist inquiries, and theoretical contributions from the Frankfurt School.

Critical theory provides a compelling framework for understanding globalization, emphasizing the socio-political, economic, and cultural dimensions of this complex process. It seeks to challenge the dominant narratives and ideologies that sustain global inequalities and power structures. A critical viewpoint on globalization starts from the framework that it is not merely an inevitable

economic phenomenon, but a deeply contested political project shaped by powerful actors with vested interests.

One of the central tenets of critical theory is the critique of neoliberalism ideology in legitimizing and sustaining the globalization process. The dominant neoliberal ideology promotes the idea that globalization leads to economic growth and development, leading to the excessive usage of capitalism to count, meaning the capitalization of any resource. Globalization, from this perspective, is viewed as an extension of capitalist exploitation on a global scale. The neoliberal economic policies that drive globalization—such as deregulation, privatization, and free trade—are seen as mechanisms that perpetuate wealth concentration in the hands of a few multinational corporations and wealthy nations (Senker, 2015). These policies often result in the marginalization and impoverishment of vulnerable populations, particularly in the Global South. Critical theorists highlight how globalization exacerbates existing inequalities and creates new forms of socio-economic stratification, thus perpetuating a cycle of dependency and underdevelopment (Petras, 1999).

However, critical theorists argue that this narrative obscures the exploitative and unequal nature of global economic relations (Hornborg, 2017; Hickel et al, 2022). By promoting the notion of a borderless world where free markets reign supreme, neoliberalism masks the power imbalances and coercive mechanisms that underpin globalization (Donnelly, 2019). This ideological critique is essential for understanding how

global economic policies are justified and perpetuated despite their adverse impacts on many communities. Therefore, the critique of free trade and neoliberalism is central to the theoretical debate on globalization within critical theory. This critique challenges the assumptions and consequences of neoliberal economic policies mentioned above. Critical theorists argue that these policies are not neutral or universally beneficial but are instead deeply political, serving the interests of powerful economic actors while exacerbating social and economic inequalities. One primary critique is that free trade, as promoted by neoliberalism, leads to unequal economic development. Critical theorists argue that while free trade is purported to generate economic growth and efficiency, it often benefits wealthy nations and multinational corporations at the expense of poorer countries and marginalized communities. This perspective draws on dependency theory and world-systems theory, which emphasize the structural inequalities in the global economy. These theories argue that the global economic system is designed to maintain the dominance of the Global North over the Global South, perpetuating a continuous cycle of dependency and underdevelopment. Free trade agreements and policies often open up markets in the Global South to competition from more advanced economies, leading to the deindustrialization and destabilization of local economies (El-Ojeili & Hayden, 2006).

Underscoring the importance of resistance and agency in the context of globalization also becomes an important part. While globalization is often portrayed as an

unstoppable force, critical theorists highlight the various forms of resistance that emerge in response to its detrimental effects. Social movements, grassroots organizations, and transnational networks of activists play a crucial role in challenging the injustices perpetuated by globalization. These movements seek to promote alternative visions of globalization that prioritize social justice and human rights over profit and economic interests. These movements often emerge from marginalized communities that are disproportionately affected by the adverse consequences of free trade and neoliberal economic policies. Their struggles are vital for imagining and constructing alternative futures. By challenging the status quo, these movements open up spaces for envisioning new forms of economic organization that prioritize human well-being and social justice (Johnston & Laxer, 2003).

## **Methodology**

This study uses a qualitative descriptive approach to investigate the Zapatista movement's ideological basis, strategic resistance, and influence. This method was chosen for its potential to provide in-depth, comprehensive, and nuanced insights into the movement's complicated social dynamics. A systematic review of scholarly journal articles and books is used to collect data, which provides critical assessments and contextual background necessary for comprehending the greater significance of the Zapatista movement. These sources are chosen to provide a variety of opinions while remaining relevant.

Thematic analysis is used to analyze data, which entails several critical phases. To obtain a full comprehension, the data is first acquainted with by extensive reading and re-reading of relevant literature. Following that, initial codes are generated by recognizing key phrases and segments linked to the research themes. These codes are then sorted into prospective themes, iterated upon to appropriately portray the data, and cross-checked against the complete dataset for consistency and depth. Throughout the study, ethical considerations are strictly adhered to, particularly in the literature's respectful representation of indigenous knowledge and cultural practices. The use of many data sources to triangulate the research improves its reliability and validity. Reflexivity is maintained by noting personal biases and preconceptions, hence preserving study transparency. This analytical approach strives to provide a full, detailed, and contextualized knowledge of the Zapatista movement, providing significant insights into its ideological origins, resistance techniques, and long-term influence.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Ideological Foundation of Zapatista**

In the early 1990s, the Zapatista movement, formerly known as the Zapatista Army of National Liberation, or Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional, or EZLN, rose out of the Mexican state of Chiapas. Its core principles, which represent a wide range of leftist philosophies, include participatory democracy, anti-neoliberalism, and indigenous rights (Stephen, 1995). Fundamentally,

the movement supports indigenous communities' autonomy and self-governance and works to preserve and honor their customs, languages, and cultures. This ideological position results from indigenous groups in Mexico having long been marginalized and exploited (Mora, 2007). The Zapatistas are fierce opponents of neoliberal economics, claiming that such policies increase inequality and further alienate the impoverished, especially indigenous populations. They oppose free trade agreements such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), deregulation, and privatization. According to the Zapatistas, these measures disrupt traditional ways of life, ruin livelihoods, and harm local economies. Their resistance to neoliberalism places them in line with larger international movements that denounce the effects of corporate capitalism and globalization on marginalized groups.

Although the Zapatistas greatly borrow from socialist ideas, their philosophy transcends traditional Marxism. They promote resource and land redistribution, highlighting collective ownership and demolishing capitalist frameworks that support exploitation (Harvey, 1998). Their endeavors to recover land for native populations and create independent areas where communal life and cooperative economy are the norm are indicative of this. They take a practical approach to socialism, adjusting it to the particular social and cultural circumstances of Chiapas. Gilbreth and Otero (2001) point out that the Zapatista movement's dedication to participatory governance and direct democracy makes it unique. The EZLN makes sure

that choices represent the will of the people by utilizing a network of grassroots assemblies and councils. By giving people more local authority and a sense of agency over group decisions, this kind of government empowers people. It symbolizes the Zapatista critique of conventional power structures and stands in stark contrast to the hierarchical and frequently corrupt governmental systems that rule Mexico.

The movement advocates for gender equality, education, healthcare, and a good standard of living. This devotion is more than just rhetoric; the Zapatistas have taken tangible steps to improve living circumstances in their autonomous zones, such as creating schools, clinics, and cooperative companies (Stephen, 1995). Their ideology aims to address both the symptoms and the underlying causes of poverty and inequality. The Zapatista goal is summed up in their slogan, "a world where many worlds fit." This slogan shows their desire for a pluralistic and inclusive society that values variety and encourages equality. They envision a world in which indigenous peoples and other oppressed groups own their lands and resources, and economic and social systems emphasize human needs before profit. This vision extends beyond Chiapas, connecting with global movements working to oppose capitalism and create more equal communities (Gahman, 2017).

Indigenous peoples of Chiapas historically experienced severe persecution, land dispossession, and socio-economic marginalization. From this, the EZLN uprising on January 1, 1994 was a direct response to

these long-standing injustices. This uprising coincided with the implementation of the highly significant NAFTA policy. In light of this, peasants and indigenous peoples began to worry that NAFTA would lead to more land grabs and economic hardship. Therefore, the Zapatistas positioned themselves as defenders of indigenous rights against the encroachment of global capitalism when they declared themselves rebels on the day NAFTA came into effect (Harvey, 1998). For the Zapatistas, land reform has been a major concern. The indigenous people of Chiapas have long fought for agrarian reform and land rights. Grounded in the struggles waged by communities as land reclamation forces and advocates for equitable distribution and use of land resources, the Zapatista movement emerged. This movement serves as a call for social and economic justice coupled with their demand for land reform, which runs counter to the historical phenomenon of injustice that has disenfranchised indigenous peoples in the region (Gilbreth & Otero, 2001).

The political climate in Mexico has had a major impact on the growth of the Zapatista movement. It can be seen that Mexico's political system, characterized by corruption, clientelism, and the dominance of elite interests, has resulted in severe inequality and disenfranchisement for the entire society in Mexico (Mora, 2007). The Zapatistas emerged as a grassroots opposition to this system, advocating for openness, accountability, and genuine democratic governance. The Zapatistas themselves criticize the Mexican state for its failure to protect

the rights and welfare of the most vulnerable populations, particularly indigenous groups. Its vision for a more just and equitable society, founded on the ideas of autonomy and communal ownership continues to inspire and influence social movements around the world. The Zapatistas' struggle against past and contemporary injustices demonstrates their unwavering dedication to establishing "a world where many worlds fit," where variety is valued and equality is the norm.

### **Zapatista's Strategic Resistance to NAFTA**

The Zapatista movement, represented by the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN), has employed a multifaceted strategy of resistance against the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) since its inception in 1994. This resistance is rooted in the belief that NAFTA disproportionately benefits large corporations and agribusinesses, to the detriment of indigenous communities and small farmers in Mexico, particularly in the state of Chiapas. The Zapatistas feared that the agreement would lead to the displacement of indigenous populations and the erosion of their traditional ways of life (Khasnabish, 2010).

On January 1, 1994, the day NAFTA came into effect, the EZLN launched an armed uprising. They occupied several towns in Chiapas, including San Cristóbal de las Casas, and declared war against the Mexican government. This dramatic move was designed to draw international attention to the adverse effects of NAFTA on indigenous peoples. The initial phase of their re-

sistance involved direct military confrontation with the Mexican army (Stahler-Sholk, 2017). Utilizing guerrilla tactics and leveraging the difficult terrain of Chiapas, the EZLN sought to challenge the state's power. However, faced with an overwhelming military response, they soon shifted their strategy (Reyes, 2016).

One of the most effective strategies employed by the Zapatistas was their adept use of media and public relations (Inclán, 2018). Subcomandante Marcos, the charismatic spokesperson of the EZLN, became a symbol of the movement. Through communiqués, the internet, and alternative media, the Zapatistas were able to disseminate their message globally. This savvy use of media helped them garner international support and sympathy, transforming their local struggle into a global issue. Their ability to articulate their grievances and aspirations resonated with activists and sympathizers worldwide, creating a broad network of solidarity.

In addition to their media strategy, the Zapatistas engaged in political and legal maneuvers (Reyes, 2016). They entered into peace talks with the Mexican government, leading to the San Andrés Accords in 1996. These agreements recognized indigenous rights and autonomy, although they were not fully implemented. In response to this failure, the Zapatistas established autonomous municipalities known as *caracoles* and *Juntas de Buen Gobierno*. These entities allowed them to exercise self-governance, independent of the Mexican state. This move was both a practical and symbolic assertion of their autonomy and resistance to the neoliberal pol-

icies embodied by NAFTA (Harvey, 2016).

The Zapatistas also focused on building international solidarity and networking. They hosted international *encuentros* (encounters) to bring together activists from around the world. These gatherings facilitated the exchange of ideas and strategies, fostering a transnational movement opposed to neoliberal globalization. The Zapatistas' struggle resonated with various global movements, such as the anti-globalization protests in Seattle in 1999 and the World Social Forum, highlighting the interconnectedness of local and global struggles against neoliberalism (Perea Ozerin, 2021).

Economic resistance and self-sufficiency were also key components of the Zapatista strategy. They established agricultural cooperatives to produce and sell goods such as coffee, crafts, and textiles based on fair trade principles. These cooperatives aimed to reduce dependence on external markets and government aid, promoting economic autonomy within their communities. Additionally, the Zapatistas prioritized education and healthcare, building their own schools and clinics to improve living conditions and enhance self-reliance. These initiatives were crucial in sustaining their communities and demonstrating the viability of alternative, self-sufficient ways of living (Naylor, 2014). In addition, cultural resistance was another vital aspect of the Zapatista movement (Higgins, 2000). They emphasized the preservation and promotion of indigenous cultures, languages, and traditions as a form of resistance against the homogenizing effects of globalization and neoliberal policies

promoted by NAFTA. This cultural assertion reinforced their identity and solidarity, strengthening their resilience against external pressures.

Despite the decline in media attention over the years (Tucker, 2014), the Zapatista autonomous regions continue to operate, serving as a model of self-governance and resistance. Their innovative approach has highlighted the adverse impacts of neoliberal policies on indigenous populations and small farmers, making a significant impact on global discussions about trade, indigenous rights, and social justice. The Zapatistas' struggle against NAFTA and neoliberalism has influenced various global movements, demonstrating the power of local resistance in shaping global narratives and inspiring broader efforts for social and economic justice (Rebrii, 2020).

### **Zapatista's Critique of Neoliberal Globalization**

The Zapatista movement's critique of neoliberal globalization is indeed deeply rooted in their commitment to indigenous autonomy, social justice, and resistance against economic exploitation and cultural imperialism. To comprehend the purpose behind their critique, it is imperative to delve into the principles and context that shape the Zapatista worldview. At the core of the Zapatista critique lies a profound dedication to indigenous autonomy and the preservation of indigenous rights. The Zapatistas staunchly advocate for the rights of indigenous peoples to govern themselves, control their land and resources, and

uphold their cultural heritage and identity (Godelmann, 2014). They view neoliberal globalization as a direct threat to these rights, as it often promotes privatization and market-driven development that disregard indigenous perspectives and interests. For the Zapatistas, defending indigenous autonomy is not just a matter of practical necessity, but a fundamental assertion of dignity and self-determination in the face of historical and ongoing marginalization. At the heart of the Zapatista critique lies a rejection of neoliberal policies and practices that prioritize profit over people, deregulate markets, and dismantle social welfare programs. Neoliberal globalization, characterized by free trade agreements, privatization, and austerity measures, has led to increased inequality, environmental degradation, and the marginalization of indigenous communities worldwide. For the Zapatistas, neoliberalism represents a continuation of colonialism and imperialism, perpetuating systems of oppression and exploitation (Collier & Collier, 2020).

The purpose of the Zapatista critique of neoliberal globalization is twofold: to defend indigenous autonomy and rights, and to challenge the hegemony of neoliberal capitalism. The Zapatistas assert the right of indigenous peoples to self-determination, land, and resources, which they view as essential for preserving their culture, identity, and way of life. Neoliberal policies, however, threaten these rights by prioritizing corporate interests and market forces over indigenous sovereignty and communal land tenure systems. Moreover, the Zapatistas critique

neoliberal globalization for its devastating impact on local economies, social cohesion, and environmental sustainability. By opening up markets and deregulating industries, neoliberal policies often lead to the displacement of small-scale farmers, the exploitation of natural resources, and the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few elites. This exacerbates poverty, inequality, and social unrest, particularly in marginalized communities like those in Chiapas (Brass, 2020).

Another key aspect of the Zapatista critique is its emphasis on alternative modes of development and governance rooted in indigenous knowledge, traditions, and values. The Zapatistas reject the notion that development and progress are synonymous with Western-style capitalism and consumerism. Instead, they advocate for a form of development that prioritizes the well-being of communities, respects nature, and fosters collective solidarity and self-sufficiency. The Zapatista's purpose in critiquing neoliberal globalization is not merely to resist or oppose, but to propose alternatives and build alternatives. Their resistance is not just about saying "no" to neoliberalism but also about envisioning and constructing a different world based on principles of justice, equity, and solidarity. This is evident in the autonomous municipalities or *caracoles* established by the Zapatistas, where they govern themselves according to principles of participatory democracy, collective decision-making, and mutual aid (Maison, 2023).

Indeed, the Zapatistas' commitment

to their critique of neoliberal globalization is vividly demonstrated through the establishment of autonomous municipalities, known as *caracoles*. These self-governing communities operate based on principles of participatory democracy, collective decision-making, and mutual aid, serving as living embodiments of the alternative vision advocated by the Zapatista movement. Within these *caracoles*, decision-making is decentralized, with power distributed among community members rather than concentrated in the hands of a few elites. This horizontal organizational structure not only challenges traditional hierarchical models of governance but also fosters a sense of collective ownership and responsibility among community members. Furthermore, the emphasis on mutual aid underscores the Zapatistas' commitment to solidarity and community support, countering the individualism and competition often promoted by neoliberal ideologies. By establishing these autonomous municipalities, the Zapatistas not only reject the authority of the Mexican state but also demonstrate the viability of alternative forms of governance rooted in indigenous autonomy and collective self-determination.

## Conclusion

The Zapatista movement, formally known as the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN), emerged in the early 1990s in Chiapas, Mexico, championing participatory democracy, anti-neoliberalism, and indigenous rights in response to historical marginalization and exploitation. Op-

posing neoliberal policies and agreements like NAFTA, which they argue exacerbate inequality and harm traditional livelihoods, the Zapatistas advocate for collective ownership, resource redistribution, and communal living tailored to their cultural context.

Their governance model, based on grassroots assemblies and councils, contrasts sharply with Mexico's hierarchical and often corrupt systems, emphasizing local authority and community empowerment. Committed to gender equality, education, healthcare, and improved living standards, the Zapatistas have implemented tangible improvements in their autonomous zones.

Their slogan, "a world where many worlds fit," reflects a vision for a pluralistic and inclusive society that values diversity and prioritizes human needs over profit. The 1994 uprising was a direct response to the injustices exacerbated by NAFTA, highlighting their focus on land reform and agrarian rights. The political corruption and elite dominance in Mexico have fueled their growth as they advocate for transparency and genuine democratic governance. The Zapatistas' struggle against global capitalism and their vision of a just, equitable society continue to inspire global social movements.

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