MEXICO – Sustainable Rural Cities, Dispossession and Counterinsurgency in Chiapas

Karela Contreras, Rosaluz Pérez, Miguel Pickard, Abraham Rivera and Mariela Zunino

Sunday 4 January 2015, posted by Claudia Casal, Riley Pentico

> "In the past, poverty divided Chiapans and confronted them; today poverty unites us, today poverty invokes unity, combining all the efforts to resolve the greatest challenges that Chiapas has." Juan Sabines Guerrero, governor of Chiapas (2006-2012).

What are Sustainable Rural Cities?

Sustainable Rural Cities in Chiapas are new projects, small cities built expressly in the rural area, which offer the country's peasants a series of services (among them: electricity, water, sewage, education, health, communication, employment), with the objective to concentrate both rural men and women. The principal objective of that concentration is, on one hand dispossess the people of their land, their main resources and heritage and, on the other hand, transform a millennial lifestyle based in the production of basic crops. In exchange for a home and a few services in a Rural City, the government hopes that the peasants abandon their lands or at least give up farming basic crops and dedicate themselves instead to the cultivation of agro-products for the export or consumption to the main cities in Mexico.

The Rural Cities are part of an enormous effort to transform life in the south and southeast of Mexico, particularly rural life, to patrons of consumption and production oriented by the market. This effort is part of big plans that have been announced until the last years of Ernesto Zedillo's six year term (1994-2000) and have found expression in the Plan Puebla Panamá, now renamed the Mesoamerican Project and, in the state of Chiapas, in the so called Reconversión Productiva del Campo, that by itself responds to the territorial reordering initiated by the government of the current governor Juan Sabines Guerrero.

The mesoamerican project and the logic of territorial reordering

The Sustainable Rural Cities program wasn't conceived by the government of Juan Sabines nor is it merited from President Felipe Calderón. Its origins and authoritative elements can find root documents and communications of international financial institutions such as World Bank. This institution praises economic integration as the main weapon in the fight against poverty, and as the way to "take modernity to all the corners of the earth".

But what do these financial institutions understand of integration? It's treated as a territorial re-accommodation, a re-adaptation of the depending space of a greater or lesser exploitation of resources and territory on behalf of the interests of capital. To World Bank economic integration means, among other things, to have a greater connection or closeness among both urban and rural zones, that is to say, to gain an adequate density to encourage concentration and improve quality of life. In the words of World Bank's report "A new economic geography",

> "No other country has attained a level of median income without having reached industrialization and

> urbanization. No other has reached the high income group without counting on thriving cities (…). The advancement to the density which is manifested in urbanization is strictly related with the transformation of an agrarian economy to an industrial and post-industrial one. No other country has reached wealth without transforming the geographical distribution of the people and its production" [1]

In this manner, it has been made evident that to the promulgators of "development", economic integration implies a process of territorial reorganization, which primarily incorporates a process of population reorganization, which leads to the concentration of the population in "thriving cities". Behind this development mind speech, other implicit objectives flourish but become obvious under the logic of an extractive integration and based in dispossession: on one hand, to free great chunks of territory in order to place them in servitude of the free market, concentrating communities in public centers, and on the other hand, to exploit this population concentration to elevate it to federal control and thus setting it up as manual labor for the mega-projects and industries to be installed in the spare lands.

In 2008 the presidents of the Mesoamerican countries decided to re-launch the Plan Puebla Panamá under the name of the Mesoamerican Project, as part of a supposed second level of "project of high social impact in areas of health, environment, natural disasters, and homes". In this reunion, Felipe Calderón declared that "not only have we decided to accelerate the steps but rather to advance to a comprehensive project of development and integration for the region and to open the door to social development projects for homes and equally for health, planned and approved" [2] . At the same time, Calderón announced an extensive program of homes, including the financing of mortgage credits for fifty thousand homes, with which are hoped to extend the Mexican model of home construction across the face of Central America. In this sense, the president of the Consulting Council of Rural Cities, Esteban Moctezuma Barragán, also president of the Aztec Foundation, declared that "there will be Rural Cities not only in Chiapas and in Mexico, but they will spread across Latin America and the globe and will be a heritage of president Calderón and of governor Sabines, because they resolve many problems at once, due to being based on a thorough foundation".

In turn, this concept of land reorganization becomes explicit in a document of the Comisión Ejecutiva del Proyecto Mesoamérica (Executive Commission of the Mesoamerican Project), where there is a so-called implementation of a "Mesoamerican Policy of Land Ordinations and Regional Action", which permits: "(…) in precept, to define prioritized regions of modernization, territorial objectives and construction funds to clarify and achieve greater efficiency, financial practicality, and social profitability for the new generation of regional projects (…)." [3] The Sustainable Rural Cities program is thus part of the neoliberal framework of plans, projects, and deals that are going forth through Mexico and particularly in Chiapas, and it uses this process of land reorganization to facilitate better access and hoarding of natural resources and land.

There exists several ways to put this logic of land reorganization into practice. The most used formula consists in promoting the social and economic conditions for forced populace relocation by way of migration, which situation is chosen due to the systematic application of rural emptying policies and thrashing of the peasant corn economy. But there exists another way that promises to be more effective and quick in the dispossession of the countryside: concentration of the rural population in urban centers and the consequent liberation of extensive territories once in peasant hands, now plausible to be thrown to the free market.

The process of territorial reorganization isn't new: this has occurred time and time again in our lands, it is already inherent to methods of production and capitalist accumulation, whose system requires a constant re-accommodation of geography and those who inhabit them. We can say that the actual process of territorial arranging obeys a phase of re-colonization of territories in the context of strategically planning of territory of resource application. In this sense, we can trace a parallel between what happens in the state of Chiapas with the Sustainable Rural Cities, and with what was known in the 18th century as "indebted peons". Jan de Vox tells how in that time "the Indians, suddenly were dispossessed of their ranch and corn field properties, not having any other solution than to become servants of their new

master". In this manner, families were agglutinated in the huge plantations dedicated mainly to coffee, tobacco and cattle. Here they worked countless days for their debtors, with minimal payment or sometimes none at all, in return to be given a place to sleep. In exchange of this "favor", entire families begged for their freedom, leaving their lands to become servants to their "masters" [4] .

Strategic natural resources and rural cities as counterinsurgency

Due to the relations of current existing power in the world, access, management and usufruct of natural resources is seen as limited and controlled by geopolitical power of wealthy nations and multinational bodies. This becomes clearer when we know that the original peoples of this region of the country are located in 81% of the state's lands and look to be dispossessed for the security, control, exploitation and "protection" of these strategic resources. "For this, the evidence shows that the areas with important reserves of energy resources (petroleum, natural gas, electricity) minerals resources, water resources, and those which are richly biodiverse, appear more and more strategic and conflictive" [5].

No less important is the counterinsurgent objective. Santiago el Pinar will be the first Rural City that plays this role. Since 1995 it was part of the counterinsurgency strategy of the governor Albores Guillén and base of operations of the Mexican army. In 1999 the municipality Santiago el Pinar was created to counteract the growing EZLN force in the region. Its geographical position is strategic, so close ot the autonomous state of San Andrés and above all the state of San Juan de la Libertad (el Bosque) "to install military telecommunication towers and police literally upon the municipalities" [6].

They are large in number and diverse in name, but whether it be internment camps, native reserves, model villages, strategic hamlets, development centers, agro-villages, concentration camps or, now, the controversial name Rural Cities, forced or induced relocation of rural populations has a nefarious history.

The "detention" of a sector of the populace inside of cities built to isolate it from its usual environment isn't new. The Rural Cities in Chiapas are a variant of the population control that has been used in other types of wars. In the "hot" wars, many of them were of invasion or northern countries against its supposed colonies of the south, forced detainment of the peasant population is part of a broader strategy of counterinsurgency and pacification.

Several examples can be mentioned: the British in their wars in Malaysia and Kenya in the '50s, the French in Algeria in the '50s and '60s, the US in Vietnam in the '60s and '70s and, with some variances, in Iraq during the current decade, through isolation and controlled Access of a few neighborhood in the capital Baghdad. Another closer example are the model villages (later called "centers of development") and created the Guatemalan army during the '80s and '90s to isolate both the peasant and civil populace from the URNG insurgents (Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca) [7]

Currently the geo-politicization of natural resources has launched a new doctrine of "environment security", which reads like a security or protection of areas rich in strategic resources in the face of scenarios of uncertainty that place the stability of the economy in danger. This new doctrine promoted by wealthy nations, integrated with national security like strategy, positions itself to respond to or reduce whatever uncertainty that places the economic stability to whatever nation it applies. In 2008, the US is a case where this doctrine was integrated within its plan of national security. But of course, this plan tends to present itself with purposes such as environmental conservation, humanitarian aid, and social development for the poor.

In this sense Latin America is placed as a strategic reserve of the United States, since the '90s. "Central America and the Southern Cone of the Americas have been functionalized in American geo-policy via Southern Command and other schemes such as Plan Colombia. Canada and Mexico are already under US military control by way of Northern Command, the alliance for the security and prosperity of North America (ASPAN) and currently the Merida Initiative" [8] (2). All these military plans are the padlock of the free-trade agreements such as NAFTA and the "development plans" such as the Mesoamerican Project

across the whole continent.

Restructuring of Productive: the dismantling of a way of life

More than 410 concrete houses are stacked side by side on the hot streets that make up the first “sustainable” rural city of the state of Chiapas, “Nuevo Juan de Grijalva”. Around the city, walking its streets and talking to its people can quickly topple the official propaganda which boasts of having devised the ideal city and a perfect solution for fighting poverty, not only to Chiapas but for the whole world. The “worthy and sustainable” homes have nothing “solid, thermal and ecological”. On the contrary, their reduced size, space distribution, material of construction, and the utterly warm feeling on the interior, only makes them worthy to be disposable. The “spacious porches backyards” are no more than shrunken spaces in need of shade where the sun’s rays harm instead of help and farm animals practically live with the family. The urban landscape has little sustainability when there doesn’t exist a single tree, even in the parks. In the streets, which carry names of businesses, breath heat and desolation.

Of the more than 400 families that inhabit the city, only a few have managed to gain employment by placing themselves alongside of some production project or sitting in front of a “Super Chiapas”, the grocery store. Nonetheless, although luck seems to be on the side of the few families that have found work, the reality directly collides with their incomes: those who work in the production products-farms or greenhouses inspired by productive restructuring—don’t have anywhere to put their product, those who have opened stores have debts up to seven thousand pesos with the Comisión Federal de Electricidad. The health center, which the government boasts to offer “all services”, can hardly count on the supplies to satisfy, in quantity and variety, the city’s population.

From the residents’ testimonies one can read that the dream of a “modern city”, with plenty of employment options and access to all services has been quickly derailed by the pressing reality that they live in a “country city” of more than two thousand inhabitants. Also it is obvious how the architecture and development of the city collide directly with the way of life of rural and indigenous populations.

To know the Rural Cities program closer allows one to see that the objectives behind such projects not only point to the abandonment of the field, corn planting and care of the fields, but the target comprises a whole universe actions, values and identities belonging mainly to an indigenous-peasant worldview that has been resisting the onslaught of political and economic power for over five hundred years. In the words of anthropologist Andrés Aubry: “The neoliberal Conquest snatches land as it did 500 years ago, destroying homelands to construct territory as gifts to reapers of foreign currency”.

A peasant abandoning his home to go live in a rural city has implications much bigger than there mere separation from his roots. Pretending to remove a person from his rural environment, around which has always revolved around their way of life, means wanting to destroy its essence, being from peasant-indigenous roots. The land is for the farmer, peasant, and native. It is the basis of his existence, and the cornerstone from which an entire way of life and reproduction of values flow.

Behind this type of program is a pejorative and dehumanizing vision of the peasant-indigene being. Under such a conception it has nothing to contribute to the advancement of modernization in the countryside and consequently sand, instead of oil, is greasing the gears of this neoliberal machine and advancement of “progress”. So, dispossessing one of his land and “converting” it into something productive and profitable is all the better if it’s only one sided.

The flogging of the peasant lifestyle that persists upon separation of one from his surroundings, primarily has an aim of counterinsurgent character: breaking of communal bonds and the very practices of a community’s lifestyle, both to those inherent of the indigene worldview and those adopted on part of the collectivization of land and are manifested in practices such as ejido assemblies. Dismember, isolate, and disorganize seems to be the pattern.

Likewise, there is an element that plays a fundamental role in the abolition of the peasant-indigene

lifestyle: the question of food. In Nuevo Juan de Grijalva, there hundreds of people have lost the means to produce their own food due to not having space nor the appropriate resources. In the words of one of the Rural City's inhabitants: "On the ranch we eat almost everything we produce and here we have to buy it all (…). We can't produce our own meals…". That which the corn field once awarded them, now is an obligatory purchase in the store. Another resident tells us: "Out there we harvested it all ourselves. If we wanted fish, we would go down to the river and there we would get it.

It wasn't required to go buy it, but we would go fish for it ourselves. I don't know how, but everyone looks for a way to eke out a living. Here there is no way to do that…" The separation or distancing of the peasant from his land brings significant consequences into his alimentation, nutrition, and above all the family budget. This alimentary dependence is a stark example of a more direct strategy that seeks to submit the populace under the State's control, destroying whatever is left of autonomy, sovereignty, or Independence. The government-business pattern stands on the field crushing any guidelines beyond its corporate, coercive and dominating logic.

As a primordial component of Rural Cities the government is initiating the program Productive Conversion, as the fundamental axis of the "Chiapas Development Plan 2006-2012", which has an goal of "combating unproductivity", transforming peasants into "little entrepreneurs" dedicated to planting fields of timber, fruit, and bioenergy. For the government and its private interests, everything that doesn't fit under the logic of accumulation and economic growth is titled as "unproductive". However, what persists is a process of "de-ruralization" whose goal is the imposition of agri-business logic. Productive conversion seeks substitute the cultivation of corn and other products—which do no more than "perpetuate poverty"—for other sources of high profit, like those destined for the production of agro fuels.

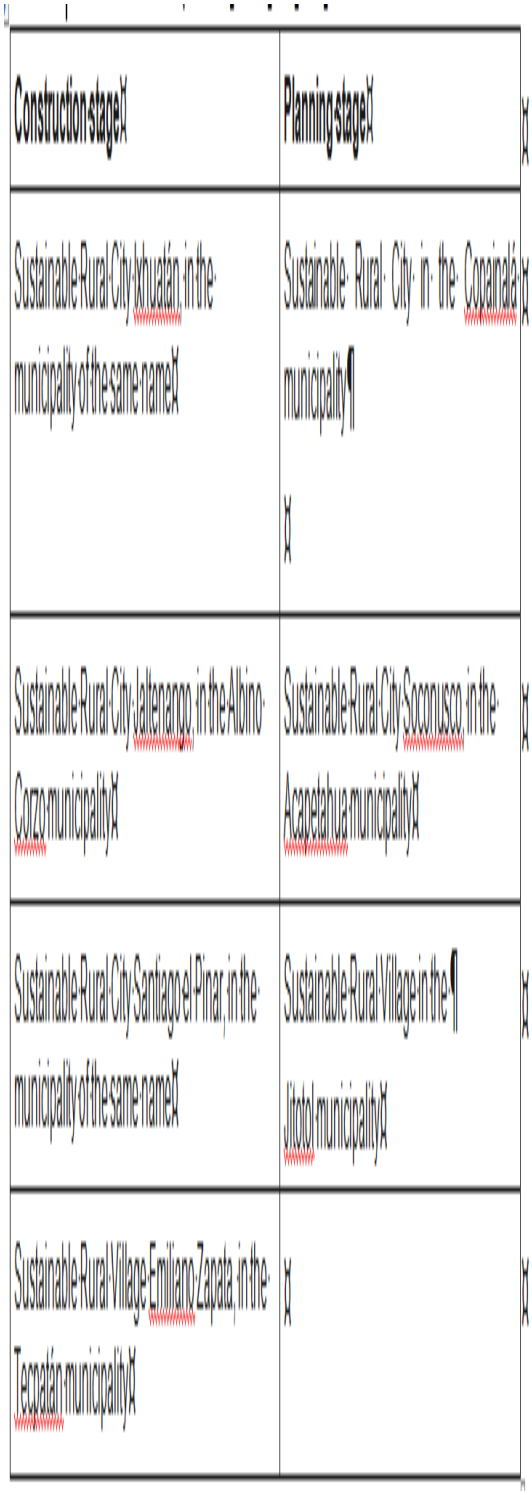
Upon the rural city of Santiago el Pinar, the government expressed that "as part of the socializing process of relocation, inhabitants and representatives of these locales also knew of the model home located in a building of the new town center, built according to their way of life with full respect to their customs and traditions" [9] . An affirmation that exemplifies the abyss that exists between the standard discourse and the reality of the facts. If one approaches the communities to be relocated and hears the word of the affected sheds light on the true methods of implementing this project, which is far from being based on consultation and free choice of communities. An inhabitant of Santiago el Pinar recounted that the government "only negotiated with the mayor. The communities were unaware. When they came to be informed the agreement was already made." In the case of Ixhuatán, what warns them is the presence of a veiled threat: the government comes saying that the relocation is completely voluntary, but those who don't agree to move will be out of luck, that is to say, that which could occur in that locale to be abandoned falls under complete responsibility of those who decide to remain there. Services such as electricity will be retracted and houses destroyed.

So, communities themselves that have historically suffered neglect from the government, now receive the

threat that if they don't decide to move, they will suffer even more discrimination and exclusion from an already absent government, thus being pressured to choose relocation. This threat of abandonment and the fact of withholding the use of services to families, if they don't abandon the vital area where they have lived there for decades, is an authoritarian act on the government's part and a violation of the citizens' free choice.

The rural cities in the Chiapan geography and the interests behind them

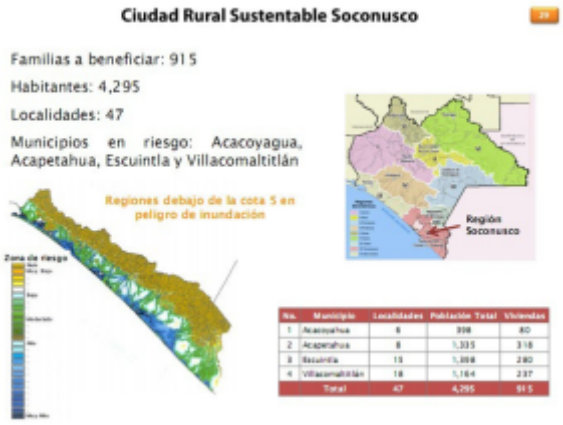
To map out the Rural Cities allows one to create relations with other mega projects to be implemented in the same regions. The convergence of the chosen construction sites of the Rural Cities with other interests appears to go beyond mere coincidence. Today the government's plans include construction of some seven Rural Cities, making a distinction between those in construction and those that find themselves in the planning/designing stage:



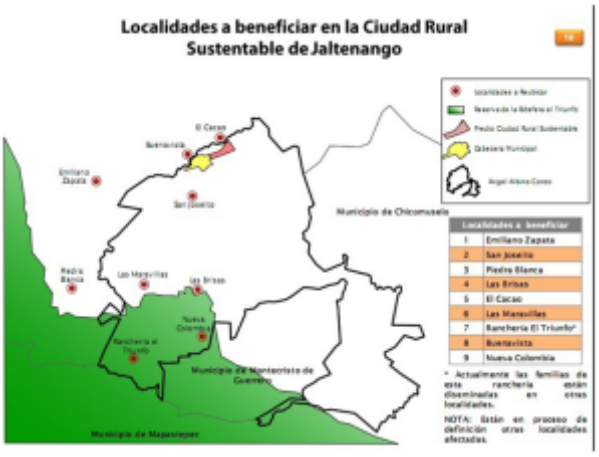
Construction stage	Planning stage
Sustainable Rural City Ixhuatán, in the municipality of the same name	Sustainable Rural City in the Copainalá municipality
Sustainable Rural City Jaltenango, in the Albino Corzo municipality	Sustainable Rural City Soconusco, in the Acapetahua municipality
Sustainable Rural City Santiago el Pinar, in the municipality of the same name	Sustainable Rural Village in the Ixtotol municipality
Sustainable Rural Village Emiliano Zapata, in the Tecpatán municipality	

In the municipality of Copainalá a Rural City of the greatest magnitude is being planned: 900 total homes for some 4500 inhabitants from some 24 locales in the región, in a property of about 116 hectares. In July of 2010 spokesmen from the Comisión Federal de Electricidad announced plans to construct two news hydroelectric dams in Chiapas, one in the Acala municipality, and another in that of Copainalá. On this occasion, the hydroelectric Project coordinator of said Company declared that since these dams would generate a social resistance by those affected, the best strategy would be to compensate the population by building clinics and schools in the surrounding areas [10] . What better than to build them a Rural City to calm the resistance?

In the case of the Rural City Acapetahua in the Soconusco region where it would be built, coincidentally is the town with the greatest Surface area of oil palms in the state of Chiapas, totaling some 7,600 hectares of land. The state government's intention, as it counts on one hundred thousand hectares of oil palms to ensure production of agro-fuels, is to attain it by 2012. Just a few kilometers away, President Felipe Calderón finished inaugurating the famous Biodiesel plant in Puerto Chiapas, where Sabines affirmed that "[we] Chiapans, headlined by our President, witness a historic step of a new era, the era of biodiesel production". So, what better than to build a Rural City there and transform it by way of productive conversion of the peasant population into the forerunners of the new era of agro-fuel production?



Upon visiting the Rural City of Jaltenango, or "City of Coffee", and interviewing officials of the mayor's office, a few new elements have come into view in respect to the discussion of environmental conservation and natural disaster prevention. After the strong hurricanes and floods of the September and October months in 2010, which devastated several towns of Chiapas, the government solidified its official statement on the Rural Cities program as not only strategy for the eradication of poverty, but rather also as risk prevention. Newspapers published dated entries signaling that of the 118 Chiapan townships, 40 are vulnerable to suffer mudslides and 28 in flood risk zones [11] . "The proposal to reduce risks of disasters is to relocate the populace from dispersed areas into Rural Cities", affirmed government sources [12] An example of this is Nueva Colombia, in the Jaltenango municipality, which was affected by the strong rains of September. Authorities announced that the families of the community would be relocated to the "City of Coffee". On October 17th, an article in the newspaper La Jornada titled "Jaltenango residents refuse to be relocated to Rural Cities" [13]. According to the people, to be relocated would alter their way of life, since it would indicate the production of organic shade-grown coffee mainly due to the distance and destruction of homes, thus leaving them nowhere to reside during seasons of production. In government reports, Nueva Colombia appears on the list of "beneficiary" communities to be relocated.



Nueva Colombia is only one of the many areas that finds itself in the Biosfere of El Triunfo reserve. An official of the Jaltenango city council reported in an interview the convenience of relocating all these communities and removing them from the reservation since in this form “we protect vegetation and wildlife, and we avoid massive destruction from logging”. Those remarks signaled a very present tendency in the official statement: criminalization of the peasant-indigene population. Millennial practices such as corn cultivation are part of the historical culture of all the Mesoamerican region, which attributes to them responsibility for not only inciting “natural” disasters, but also contributing to environmental deterioration and even global climate change.

As announced by President Calderón in Amatán, Chiapas: “Landslides occur, of course, in unusual instances, but not only this; they occur also due to the human affectation to the topsoil of the areas where the landslides generally occur. Specifically, it is visible, clear, and evident that in those places where trees have been cut down and, in general, the natural native flora to be planted in their place, particularly maize and other grasses, what happens is that the risk of landslides significantly increases in these situations” [14] Following these remarks, he offered to give to the stricken families of Amatán the same amount of money that these corn fields would obtain when they change cultivation to that of lemon trees or timber forests.

This tendency to criminalize field labor is crossed by the appropriation and manipulation of the environmentalist speeches on behalf of the government. The Rural Cities program finds itself legitimized and justified behind the environmentalist speeches in vogue these days: those of sustainability and struggle against climate change. The “environmental sustainability” seems like one of the main directors of this program.

In this sense, according to the official statement, the Rural Cities “do not only resolve poverty, but rather face climate change and environmental deterioration with efficiency” [15]. Therefore, to displace the indigenous rural population living in the El Triunfo reserve is a feat of environmental conservation and combat against climate change. To relocate these families to a Rural City is an action for the good of all humanity. According to the official discourse, it is they, not mining, roads, monocultures and large mega projects plundering natural resources, who are destroying the environment.

Conclusion

As expressed by the English investigator Japhy Wilson [16], the history of Mexico is characterized by an ever present tension among the State’s ambition to produce a national, homogenous society inside the parameters of modernity, and the determination of the people to retain their lands and autonomous practices. In the current phase of capitalism, which implies a greater attack from government interests and businesses upon natural resources and the consequent subsumption of territories and of all the aspects of life to the State, thus putting any attempt of conservation or construction of autonomy directly against regional geopolitical goals as the Mesoamerica Project. It consists of territorial plans based on abstract representations of space, where those living there are objectified and not seen unconsidered nor

are they historical subjects, nor subjects with human rights. Plans which erase the representational and symbolic space of the cultures rooted in specific spaces, which is what some authors have called “violence of abstraction”.

The concentration of the population in the Rural Cities isn’t done with concern of economic, social or cultural needs of the populace, but rather in that which hides behind an economic motivation that responds much better to the accumulation of capital. So, this program reflects an attempt to impose at all costs capitalist social relations where some autonomous spaces exist, while all aspects of life are managed by the government. As one resident of Chenalhó relates: “We think that the benefits aren’t for us, nothing more than robbing mother earth of her riches, to sell the earth is to sell your heritage, and that we all lived in a pigsty.

In short, the model of rural towns imposes a pattern of homogenization not only against the forms of reproduction of indigenous peasant life but against their identity. As a member of a Chenalhó parish told us: “Well, it’s against the indigenous culture. I see that other cultures are mixing with it, but the communities have a well-organized practice, a celebratory culture, where work collectively help each other (...) And with this program (Rural Cities) these customs are disorganized and, to their demise, gradually forgotten..." In the same sense, Andrés Aubry mentioned that “to the native, peasant, and rural peoples, land and territory are more than work and livelihood: they are also culture, community, history, ancestry, future dreams, father and mother. But for the last two centuries the capitalist system has stripped that. It has banished peasants and natives alike, changing the face of the earth; dehumanizing it” [17] The culture conformity behind the lifestyle conversion of peasants and natives goes directly against their right to identity as the original people of the land.

In the same regard, on November 19th, 2010 hundreds of men and women of different communities in the region marched through the streets of San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas. Among them there was music, copal smoke, songs and prayers, were all thick among them in protest of the “death projects” that are being drilled into the Chiapan landscape: mines, dams, and the Rural Cities. In their statement they denounced the Rural Cities project:

> “Because it isn’t a sign of life for the indigenous peoples, but one of death (…). It is a plan imposed by the government in order to control the population and destroy its culture. It is uncertain that this project is to counteract poverty, because it is derived from the lie saying that poverty is evoked by dispersión. That is not true. We affirm that the cause is that the wealth of our country lies in few hands and doesn’t reach those who really need it. Therefore, the Rural Cities of Chiapas form part of the neoliberal system of plans, projects and international business deals that, bit by bit, take over our mother earth and carry off our natural resources…”

In conclusion, the anti-poverty project, in the versión of Rural Cities, is literal antagonism in violation of the autonomous rights of indigenous peoples. This project also is opposed to Zapatista autonomy, vivified in Caracoles Zapatistas and in the more than thirty autonomous Zapatista municipalities. While for the autonomies, political representation is based on the people’s decisión on their officials, represented in The Councils of Good Government, municipal councils and the construction of communities away from trade, corruption, authoritarianism, racism and violence of which they were subjected. In the government project of Rural Cities, social organization and representation are subsumed to the State’s program and the companies participating therein, under the government’s very logic: exclusive, corporate, and capitalist. For example, the autonomous communities take upon themselves decision about systems of: health, education, and on forms of communal development in general. However in Rural Cities, the inhabitants simply are converted into receptors of services, the which they had no control or say, services that weren’t conceived in the very populations interests nor the protection of it’s life.

From the perspective of the indigenous peoples, territory constitutes a collective good; a source of living,

knowledge, culture, identity, traditions and rights. In this regard, while the Zapatista movement is based in the symbolic, expressive appropriation of land, which is supported by collective identities, the Rural Cities program land ownership becomes functional - instrumental, mediated by a utilitarian relationship with space, which justifies the dispossession of the people and consequently converts the autonomous way of life into one of consumption and dependence.

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