



Reframing autonomy in political geography: A feminist geopolitics of autonomous resistance



Lindsay Naylor

Department of Geography, University of Delaware, 216 Pearson Hall, Newark, DE 19716, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 29 April 2016
Received in revised form
25 December 2016
Accepted 3 January 2017

Keywords:

Autonomy
Feminist geopolitics
Resistance
Decolonial
Agriculture
Corn
Chiapas

Classifications:

Critical geopolitics
Feminist geographies

ABSTRACT

Autonomy is often universally defined and undertheorized, making invisible ways of knowing and understanding autonomy that are embodied and practiced. Alternate theorizations have drawn on anti-capitalist and alter-globalization movements and discourses to provide accounts of struggles for autonomy as they relate to self-determination, identity politics, and oppositional action, however, in many cases these accounts are still grounded in universal understandings. In this paper I use a feminist geopolitical perspective to re-read autonomy for difference within, alongside and outside of contemporary political geographies of autonomy. Empirical work in self-declared autonomous communities in Chiapas, Mexico, demonstrates that current political geographies of autonomy do not sufficiently explain the ongoing struggle for indigenous farmers in the highlands. In the article, I examine how autonomy is understood and practiced by subsistence corn and coffee farmers who have declared themselves autonomous and in resistance. I argue that in the case of farmers in resistance, autonomy is not just a political act, but also an embodied practice deployed through agricultural production and consumption. A feminist geopolitics assists with reframing autonomy and identifying different ways that it is understood and practiced. In examining the practices that farmers view as contributing to autonomy, different understandings and ways of knowing autonomy emerge.

© 2017 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

At first glance the communities populated by indigenous subsistence farmers in the highlands of Chiapas, Mexico appear cohesive and homogenous. Corn and coffee plots dot the landscape interrupted only by scattered dwellings and coffee drying patios. However, upon closer examination different agricultural practices, territorial claims, and political affiliations become apparent. Some differences are more visible; for example, party affiliation or support may be painted on the sides of homes, or farmers might wear shirts with election slogans printed on them. Other differences are less visible; some farmers eschew official parties and politics as part of their support for social movements that oppose them. The expression of the less-visible differences that pervades this landscape is connected to the declaration and practice of autonomy by farmers in resistance. A *resistencia autónoma* (autonomous resistance) is asserted by farmers who have declared autonomy and who refuse to recognize the Mexican state—it is a politics of deliberate disengagement. This expression of autonomy is bound up in larger scale political-territorial discourses; simultaneously it

is personal and embodied by a range of political actors.

The struggle for autonomy for *campesinos/as* (peasants, as they self-identify) is not simply a rejection of state governance and neoliberal market structures, it is a process of creating self-reliant and secure livelihoods. As one farmer related to me:

Autonomy is not just a political thing anymore. It is an economic thing and a social thing ... It is not about territory with borders, it is about action, about growing coffee, and about having the land for the *milpa* [cornfield]. It is about daily life and how we live, what we do every day. It is about not being told what to do from the outside.

Autonomy is all at once intimate, individual, and communal. For farmers, autonomy is about daily life and agricultural production. In this paper, I argue that academic understandings of autonomy tend to be universal, singular, and absolute and that they should be multiplied and re-read for difference. In self-declared autonomous communities in the highlands autonomy is a process and embodied practice. It is a dynamic practice of resisting state-led politics and economic development while maintaining livelihoods through

E-mail address: lnaylor@udel.edu.

agricultural production, specifically the production of native corn. The material and embodied production and consumption of corn serves as an object of analysis here. In examining the practices that farmers view as contributing to autonomy, different understandings and ways of knowing autonomy emerge, which stand outside a universal framing.

In the aftermath of the bloody but short uprising by the Zapatistas in 1994, thirty-four official municipalities were declared autonomous and in resistance in Chiapas State (Stephen, 2002, p. 76). Less visible indigenous groups in Chiapas, including Sociedad Civil Las Abejas, provided support for the declaration of autonomy made by the Zapatistas (Tavanti, 2003). Even as these groups declared autonomy they still sought rights and recognition as citizens of Mexico (Stahler-Sholk, 2001; Stephen, 2002).¹ While initial negotiations were based on recognition from the state, the failure of the state to implement indigenous rights accords led to a unilateral declaration of autonomy (Speed & Reyes, 2002).² Although this declaration of autonomy is grounded in place, it does not map on to official or contiguous territory. Moreover, *resistencia autónoma* is a rejection of government assistance, institutions, and power-sharing while also being based in the creation of viable alternatives (e.g. the civilian governments of the Zapatistas).³ Because the social movement action in Chiapas is often associated with self-determination and alter-globalization, studies focused there invariably tie resistance to opposition against hegemonic global forces. While this categorization may assist with understanding wide-scale politics regarding identity and neoliberal capitalism, as well as state and corporate practices, it tells us very little about what the politics of resistance look like as part of everyday life in Chiapas.

Participants in this research are supporters of autonomy and are cooperative members in Zapatista or Sociedad Civil Las Abejas coffee cooperatives. It should be noted that this is not a paper about these social movements. While participation in these movements is part of *resistencia autónoma*, the analysis here is focused on farmer practices. The politics and struggle of these movements is “sedimented” in place (Nelson, 2003, p. 564), and provides a political discourse that is imbricated in the fabric of everyday life in self-declared autonomous communities. Indeed, how autonomy is deployed makes up part of a larger daily struggle by these actors, who may be linked to a range of movements (e.g. Zapatista, fair trade), and whom I collectively refer to as farmers, or *campesinos/as*, in resistance. I spent time in several highland communities visiting the coffee cooperatives, the homes and fields of farmers, and also visiting with farmers, asking questions about the production of coffee, corn, and resistance. These conversations led me to begin questioning how to think about autonomy. Notably, it became clear to me that how *campesinos/as* experience autonomy—as the living, breathing, embodiment of indigenous resistance in the highlands—multiplies our understandings of autonomy.

The need to rethink autonomy is apparent when observing the processes and embodied practices of *resistencia autónoma* in self-

declared autonomous communities in the highlands, where people are not making demands on the state for power-sharing and the spaces of autonomy are not demarcated by official borders. There are many places, globally, where there are active demands for autonomy that are being levied at state governments and as non-capitalist measures. Yet the demand for autonomy in Chiapas stands out as an example where people are effectively bypassing state processes.

Even as state processes permeate the highlands, participants in self-declared autonomous communities remain disengaged. The state looks to the official municipality of Chenalhó (see Fig. 1)—which does not map onto self-declared autonomous communities—and charts its campaign against autonomous resistance through attempting to control bodies and territory. Regular military patrols secure the roadways. Sponsorship of paramilitary activity creates a landscape of fear. Political campaigning highlights the presence of the parties quite literally on homes and bodies through painted slogans, posters, and t-shirts. The most direct efforts of the state however, lie in economic investment, through welfare and development programs, as well as communal land privatization through which the state attempts to fracture community relations and target bodies. *Resistencia autónoma* does not fall cleanly into universal understandings of autonomy, which tend to render the struggle of farmers in resistance invisible.

To rethink autonomy, I attempt to move beyond a more simplified expansion of existing ideas of power-sharing with the state, territory as a container, and/or organized resistance, and instead strive to uncover processes, practices, and knowledges otherwise. In this paper I scale-down from the state, territory, and organized action and instead examine the construction of autonomy as a process and practice, with a particular emphasis on how the practice of autonomy intersects with subsistence food and fair trade coffee production in indigenous communities. My examination of autonomy in highland Chiapas is situated in broader discussions of the geographies of autonomy and an intervention via feminist geopolitics and decolonial philosophy. The specific contribution is considering multiple knowledges of autonomy and recognizing it also as an embodied and material practice. I demonstrate that there are multiple ways of knowing and understanding autonomy that have been rendered invisible and provide a reframing, which breaks away from the normalizing tendencies of geopolitics. My aim is to show the pluriversality of autonomy through pushing against the geopolitics of knowledge.

In order to understand autonomy as a material, embodied practice, we must first consider academic renderings of autonomy. This paper begins with a discussion of contemporary conversations on autonomy and territory. In addressing the need to reframe autonomy, I then consider the geopolitics of knowledge and draw from decolonial literatures and feminist geopolitics to multiply our understandings of autonomy. To elucidate diverse knowledges of autonomy this is followed by an engagement with the case material that focuses on the lived experience of autonomy for farmers in resistance. Examining the experience of autonomy through non-interaction with state processes and via agricultural production assists with reframing autonomy.

Geographies of autonomy

Autonomy as a site of study remains undertheorized and narrowly defined. To define autonomy, scholars turn to its Greek roots: *auto*-self and *nomos*-law (cf. Böhm, Dinerstein, & Spicer, 2010, p. 19; Chatterton, 2005, 2010; Ulmen, 1993). Autonomy is thus framed as self-governance and power-sharing with the state. In the geographical imagination, it constitutes territorial control and governance over a bounded space demarcated by borders. If

¹ This change is not unlike what Mikesell and Murphy argued regarding minority-group desires to withdraw from the state, progressing from recognition, access and participation to separation, autonomy and independence (1991:582).

² The 1996 San Andrés Accords on Indigenous Rights and the subsequent COCOPA law (for more detailed accounts see: Mora, 2008; Simonelli & Earle, 2003; Stephen, 1997; 2002; Stahler-Sholk, 2004) that sought to institutionalize indigenous rights and peace between the Zapatistas and the Mexican government, were negotiated even while the state and paramilitaries waged a continuous low-intensity war against rebellious indigenous groups (Mora, 2008; Nash, 2001; Stahler-Sholk, 1998; Stephen, 2002; Tavanti, 2003).

³ There is a rich body of literature on Zapatista governance that I do not seek to replicate here; see: Barmeyer 2008; Baronnet et al., 2011; Earle & Simonelli, 2005; Mora, 2008; Stahler-Sholk, 2010.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/5118469>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/5118469>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)