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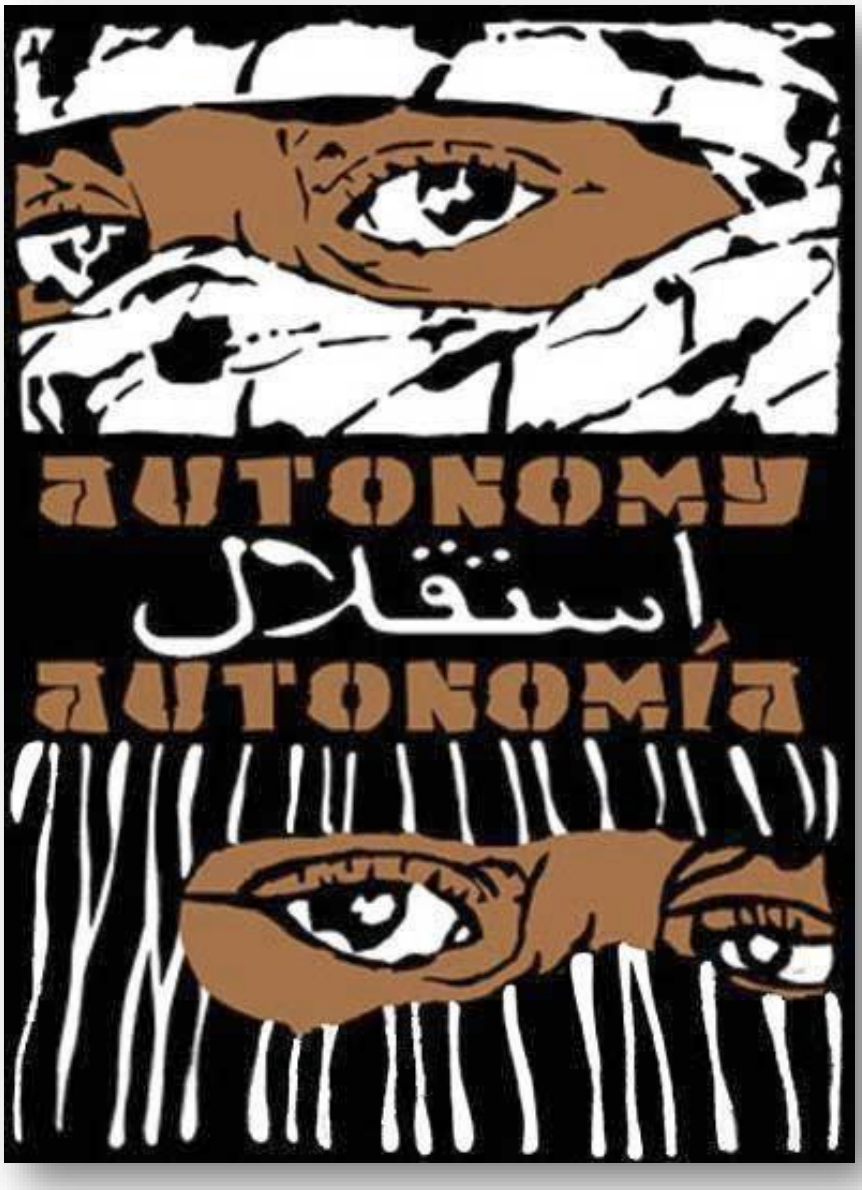
From Chiapas to Gaza: Transnational Movements and the Geographies of Liberation



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On March 2014, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) revealed the winner of a contract bidding to install cutting-edge surveillance towers along the Arizonan-Sonoran border: Elbit Systems, an Israeli-based company known for its high-tech security arsenal and fortification of the "Apartheid Wall." As public outrage ensued, with civil society organizations calling attention to the often-made connections between the U.S. and Israeli military apparatuses, few people realized that this was far from the first time that Elbit Systems was known to distribute of military equipment. In fact, Elbit Systems is but one arm of a small group of Israeli companies known to have sold arms and distribute intelligence personnel across the Americas. And as sparsely publicized the connections between the U.S. and Israeli militarisms are, even less is known about Israel's contractual relations with the state just south of the Rio Grande. With Zapatista and Palestinian activists swapping statements of solidarity this same year, it is worth examining what the implications of these transnational solidarities in the face of an emergent security-industrial complex—epitomized here by Elbit Systems, Inc.—that is freely able to traverse national borders. Seeking to apply a critical transnational and geographical perspective to this shifted focus on Zapatista-Palestinian linkages, I hope to showcase how "geographies of liberation" are rendered possible, even in the face of extreme state repression and violence.

While some attention has been directed to the connections between the U.S.-Mexico and Israeli-Palestinian borderlands (Lloyd & Pulido, 2010), virtually none

has focused on the connections between the states of Mexico and Palestine, both of which share a history of colonial state oppression against marginalized indigenous populations. Additionally, both share a continual border conflicts and racial conflicts that emanate from land disputes and the entitlement of diasporic populations. Without wishing to overdetermine the parallels between two rather different legacies of settler-colonial violence and state oppression, it is clear that documented connections between Israeli and Mexican militias have been grossly underrepresented in the press. Given the role that a multinational "security" agency like Elbit Systems plays in the global political economy, and the millions of dollars poured into border militarization, it is not far-fetched to imagine an Orwellian scenario wherein similar multinationals expand their intelligence operations across the globe, building up "fortress cities" and militarized states. In the case of Mexico, the role of Israeli militarism is far from imaginary: in 2004, Elbit Systems (along with Aeronautics Defense Systems) won contracts with the state to supply surveillance and intelligence systems to the tune of over $20 million. Moreover, and relevant to the discussion at hand, the Mexican government secretly deployed Israeli personnel during the 1994 Zapatista uprising, training Mexican military and police forces in Chiapas to bring "stability" to the region (Johnson & Quiquivix, 2013).

In highlighting the transnational linkages between indigenous freedom fighters in southern Mexico and the Levant, it's clear that what geographer Manuel Castells calls the "information age" has revolutionized capital and communication streams so as to produce a "space-time compression." In bringing in a *critical*

transnational perspective, wherein political borders are displaced as the "ultimate horizon" of revolutionary activity (Streeby, 2013) we can de-normalize the tendency to approach these ruptural events and movements within the parameters of the nation-state. In other words, by examining the ways in which these movements resist the logics of settler-colonial violence, we should avoid the tendency to encapsulate them as problems within static, spatially-defined nation-states, or to view movements as solely responsive to national imperatives. In light of the Zapatistas' firm rejection of the statist politics, and Palestinians' current statelessness, Streeby's observation about social movements questioning "the inevitability of the nation as the horizon for utopian hopes for justice" is especially useful and apropos. Additionally, and relatedly, *critical geography*'s re-conceptualizatoin of space as a site of social construction and continual meaning-making is also appropriate to the discussion at hand. With Chiapas, Gaza, and the West Bank under constant military siege and surveillance, and border struggles an increasingly dominant force in civic life, an examination of spatial struggles—that is, struggles on, and *over*, space—will be especially informative for our rapidly "securitizing" world.

Israeli Apartheid and 'The Machine of Destruction'

Looking particularly at the struggle for *spatial* justice in occupied Palestine, it is clear that few places in the globe convey as great a sense of geopolitical strife and ideology-infused warfare. As it turns out, the militarization of Palestine preceded the 1948 *Nakba*, or catastrophe: colonization of the region, enabled in large degree

by the strategic deployment of militia forces to key sites of the region, demonstrates how important spatial control and regulation were to the integration of Israeli statehood. By 1949, a swift and publicly silenced ethnic cleansing of Palestine left hundreds dead and some 750,000 people displaced; this, in turn, diffused forcibly diasporic refugees across an increasingly militarized landscape that characterized the post-World War Arab region. As Israel worked to secure its dominance over historic Palestine through a continued securitizing and ethnic gerrymandering of space, refugees were prevented the right of return to their ancestral lands, and Palestinians who remained within the expanding boundaries of the Israeli state were subjected to uncompromising military rule. (Abunimah, 2014; Pappe, 2006).

Over the ensuing decades, Israel's repeated attempts to quell Palestinian resistance led to a proportional growth in its military industry and the expansion of its borders. Israel gradually developed an international reputation as a source of military know-how, with repressive state apparatuses—including the South African apartheid regime, and the counterinsurgent governments in Central America—contracting with the Israeli military industry through a purchase of arms and intelligence expertise. In the aftermath of the first Intifada (1987) and the signing of the Oslo Accords (1993), Israel's policy of "closure," which culminated in the construction of the separation barrier around the Green Line, severely limited transborder crossings to the detriment of the impoverished Palestinian territories (Bornstein, 2002). By curtailing mobility, restricting access to jobs and social services, and taking over additional farm lands, the separation wall that split the West Bank from Israel became quickly associated with South Africa's spatially

segregated system of apartheid. Emblematic of the ways in which border imaginaries are translated into material conditions, the fortress-ification of Israel and its illegal settlements is strongly suggestive of the ways the settler-colonial military apparatus serves the interests of white supremacy and private property.

Seen through a lens of a critical transnational and geographical perspective, Israel's overt and covert strategies of militarized territorializations are highly suggestive of the importance of socio-spatial strategies in the subjugation of colonized subjects. Indeed, the fortification of the apartheid wall, the proliferation of illegal "citadel" settlements, the corralling of entire villages in the West Bank, and the construction of Israeli-only roads are but a few of the spatial strategies Israel has invoked to maintain its occupation and compression of Palestinian life. As we see today in the case of the case of the Gaza Strip, a 139-square mile region with a population of over 1.8 million people, Israel's overarching dominance in land, air, and sea has produced a panopticon geography of intimidation and terror, one mediated by its three-dimensional surveillance systems and high-tech digital weaponry. With the globalization of these enclosing, repressive technologies that both challenge and affirm the "space-time compression" of the information age, one can see materialized John Collins' fear of the "globe…becoming Palestinized" (quoted in Abunimah, 2014).

It is, indeed, the increased development and export of these "security" technologies that caused Naomi Klein to pinpoint Israel as a "stark warning" for the dystopic futures rendered possible by a neoliberal "economy that expands markedly [with] violence" (Klein, 2006). With Israel marketing its cutting-edge weaponry and

military expertise as battle-tested technologies, becoming a sort of "shopping mall for homeland security," this fear seems likely to materialize as a global wars on "terror" are met with a highly-profitable security-industrial complex. It is in this global context that Israel has continued to play the role of a military industries expert, hosting multiple annual, transnational conferences and exhibitions around homeland security and domestic law enforcement that have attracted state leaders from the United States and Mexico (Abunimah, 2014). Harkening back to the cross-national collaborations in torture techniques used against colonized populations in the 18th and 19th centuries (Johnson, 2009), the trading of policing, surveillance, and intelligence technologies between these three settler-colonial states forecasts a transnational system of governance perfected through the biopolitical repression of Palestinians. Altogether, these trends are suggestive of the proliferation of citadel cities and militarized, Orwellian landscapes reproducible in the southern borderlands of the U.S. and Mexico.

Undeniably, this technologized marginalization of otherized subjects—which, in the case of Chiapas and Palestine, is also the undermining of the territorial stakes of indigenous sovereignty—has prompted all forms of resistance on the local and transnational scales. While military industries have certainly transnationalized, Lisa Lowe reminds us that the "innovation of cross-border organizing" has also produced new forms of political activism able to disseminate their messages globally (Lowe, 2008). To be sure, tapping into solidary transnational networks was one of the strategies deployed by resistance leaders during the latest Israeli bombing of Gaza in Operation Protective Edge (July 2014), all of whom condemned the necropolitical

encroachments of the Israeli siege. Pertinent to this discussion, and as evidence of how transnational corporatism can unleash a parallel resistance, the Zapatistas released a public message of solidarity in which they speak eloquently against the neoliberal machine's production of "death and destruction." Speaking to an "indigenous consciousness" that works against the narratives of modernity and progress (Medak-Saltzman, 2010), the Zapatistas not only acknowledge the death-seeking connections between the Israeli state and transnational capital, but also affirm, with incredible warmth, their embrace of the Palestinian people. Framed within an indigenous epistemology that is awoken to the realities of death and destruction, they affirm knowledge of Palestinians' ability to "resist and …rise again" (Johnson, 2014). Such 'knowing,' established through an indigenous consciousness grappling with the destructions of disaster capitalism, also leads to an inversion and reconceptualization of geometrical distance and geography when they assert that, though they are "far away on the map," their embrace of Palestinians remains constant. With themes of war and nation, land and dispossession, recurrent in their solidary speech, their message effectively foregrounds the mutually shared struggle over space that connects Palestinians to the Zapatistas.

Image from the entrance of the Palestinian Consulate in Mexico City, with the images of nationalist freedom fighters Abd al-Qadir al-Husayni and Emiliano Zapata. Below, in Arabic: "Long live Zapata – hero of the Mexican Revolution."

The Nakba in Chiapas

As the southernmost state of the Mexican federation, Chiapas has a long history of indigenous resistance tracing back to at least the 17th century (Pérez Brignoli, 2000). Historically and culturally linked to the Central American Federation, Chiapas—one of the poorest of the Mexican states—also had the most unresolved land disputes in the country prior to the Zapatista uprising (Hesketh, 2013). It was, in fact, the creeping territorial dispossessions in and around the Lacandon Forest, begun under the privatization efforts in the early 1980's, that prompted indigenous groups in the region to build alliances to resist state and corporate power. On January 1st, 1994, on the first day that NAFTA and its free trade policies were set to begin, a coalition of around 3,000 men and women from various ethnic communities revolted and took over the main municipalities of the region, including San Cristobal de las Casas, Altamirano, Ocosingo, and Las Margaritas (Castells, 2000). As members of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (*Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional*), their revolutionary attempt to defend space against the deleterious effects of liberalized capital signaled, for many, the beginning of an explicitly anti-globalization movement. Giving up armed struggle shortly after the takeover, the Zapatistas' ability to retain control of space rested on a deft communication strategy, one that Castells considers as the "*first informational guerrilla movement*."

Illustrative of the ways in which the Information Age has reconfigured space and time, communication networks and capital flows, the Zapatistas' strategic move to rely on telecommunications, video, and the Internet helped diffuse their anti-

neoliberal agenda while inspiring social movements around the globe. It also marked the beginning of an unrelenting trend of geographically dispersed movement organizations forming connections and building solidarities online. Indeed, with their withdrawal from direct armed conflict with the state, it was their relentless media connections, and cross-border linkages to a global civil society, that protected the Zapatistas from outright repression.

That said, the Mexican state has continued to undermine Zapatista sovereignty through a relentless military presence that continues today. From overt to subtle attempts at stripping away lend tenure, to restricting mobility, to destabilizing the movement through the use of infiltrators and paramilitary groups, the always-troubled narco-state has, in the Zapatista rebellion's twenty-year history, used overtly spatial tactics to regain dominance in the region. More recently, as northward-looking Central American migrants transit across the Chiapas-Guatemalan border, a growing military presence in the region has been rationalized under the auspices of controlling narcotrafficking and illegal migration. Additionally, while the Mexican state has repeatedly denied close affiliations to the Israeli military industry, journalist investigations and released documents have revealed that, not only was Israeli expertise contracted at the height of the Zapatista uprising, but was also contracted in 2004 to deploy surveillance technologies, contributing to a securitization of Chiapas.

On January 2014, a much-publicized ambush just outside one of the Zapatista *caracoles*, La Realidad, was executed by anti-Zapatista organizations (including military proxies). One of the movement's leaders, a teacher who went by

the name Galeano, was assassinated, prompting the Zapatista's spokesperson, Subcomandante Marcos, to commit a symbolic "suicide." In response to this ambush, a group of activists from "the Arab region and exile," including numerous Palestinians, wrote a letter of solidarity in support of the Zapatistas' "inalienable right…to defend their personal and collective integrity, territory, and autonomy" (Winstanley, 2014). Published in Spanish, Arabic, and English, the letter suggests a cross-national bond that contradicts the spatial logics of settler-colonialism, and their positivist rubrics for geometrical distance, by indicating a familial kinship decoupled from national-statist borders. Cautiously reflective of how the atrocities in Palestine are but one of "many more around the world," the letter's empathy stretches across the Atlantic in expressing support for their "brothers and sisters in Chiapas…struggling against a Nakba in a fight not just for themselves, but for all of humanity."

Geographies of Liberation and Spatial Imaginaries

In Rosaura Sanchez and Beatrice Pita's *Lunar Braceros: 2125 – 2149* (2009), a dystopic future is envisioned in which the Zapatistas' industrial war "machine of destruction" is expanded so as to consume a considerable portion of the planet. The protagonists, twenty-second century cholos living in a super-national state configuration called Cali-Texas, are hired as technicians in charge of a disposing Earth's waste on the Moon. In this world, Earth is imagined as ravaged by centuries of ecological destruction, its extracted resources, including land, rendered so scarce as to demand lunar exploration to resolve capital's need for expansion. After

realizing that their work as waste management technicians is fated to be a one-way trip with little chance of return, the protagonists hatch a plan to return to Earth—a plan that culminates in the protagonists finding refuge in an independent, autonomous region in South America reminiscent of zapatismo. In the end, it is indigenous-governed Zapatista territory where the salvation of humanity is said to rest.

In discursively undermining the hegemony of capitalism and the nation-state formation, where the destructive realities of the war profiteering encompassed by disaster capitalism reach their logical end, the novel reminds us of what could emerge through contesting visions of history and geography. With the Zapatistas figured as the harbingers of peace and existence in contrast to the nation-state's war and annihilation, the dystopic warning of *Lunar Braceros* highlights the fictionality of the nation-state as a source of human progress and development. In using lunar braceros to undermine the notion of capitalism's seamless integration, centering, instead, its recurrent crises and spatial disruptions, the book also recalls Alicia Schmidt-Camacho's formulation of the "migrant imaginary" as one that inverts the logic of capital's transnational flows. By shaping cartographies that fail to yield to the conventional political mappings of the capitalist nation-state, the migrant imaginaries of the braceros—both lunar and terrestrial—actually share a worldly vision with the Zapatistas, whose indigeneity is typically connoted with stagnancy and backwardness. In the 'middle ground' that constitutes Mesoamerican Mexico, where both indigenous and mestizo, foreign and citizen subjects reside and transit,

the contestation over land and space as home or transit point denaturalizes the military state's spatial strategies of confinement or dispersion.

Undoubtedly, with the need to define and materialize borders being contested by overlapping counter-strategies of migration and stasis, Marx's dictum of the "annihilation of space by time" will continue to govern transnational relations. Elbit Systems will continue to prop up border walls in Mexico and Palestine, and migrant laborers will continue to engage in deadlier transborder crossings. With uncertainty overshadowing the future of social movements, today reconfigured through the use of instantaneous communications that confirm Marx's prophesy, the need to re-imagine the logics of neoliberal globalization—in a sense, resisting through the formation of resistive *spatial imaginaries*—will become increasingly imperative. Drawing on the insights of Mignolo's "decolonial imaginary," said to undo the unjust disparities of racial capital within geopolitics, Alex Lubin proposes a space of possibility that aligns with Zapatista and Palestinian re-configurations of territory and autonomy. In mapping the imaginaries of *geographies of liberation*, "dialectical spaces produced in the collision between nationalism and colonialism…and subaltern decolonial and liberation politics," Lubin's work underscores the importance of transnational solidarities in reimagining global futures.

As struggles in and over space unfold between and within the occupied territories of Palestine and Chiapas, social movements will need to define and implement explicitly spatial counter-strategies, explicitly decolonial imaginaries. In contesting the hegemonies of transnational capital and its buttressing of the military

state, such movements will need to cling to a vision of humanity that affirms the Zapatistas' reterritorialization of space. Indeed, by referencing Palestine as a place "far away on the map"—a siting that implies proximity in a cartography of hope and humanity in times of death and destruction—the Zapatistas refute a positivist logic of pragmatism and inevitability in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds. It is their vision of space, counterpoised to that of the transnational security apparatus, that the world should defend.

An indigenous woman from San Cristobal de las Casas, Chiapas, Mexico holds a sign in Spanish that reads: "The Muslim indigenous community of San Cristobal de las Casas supports the Palestinian people!"

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