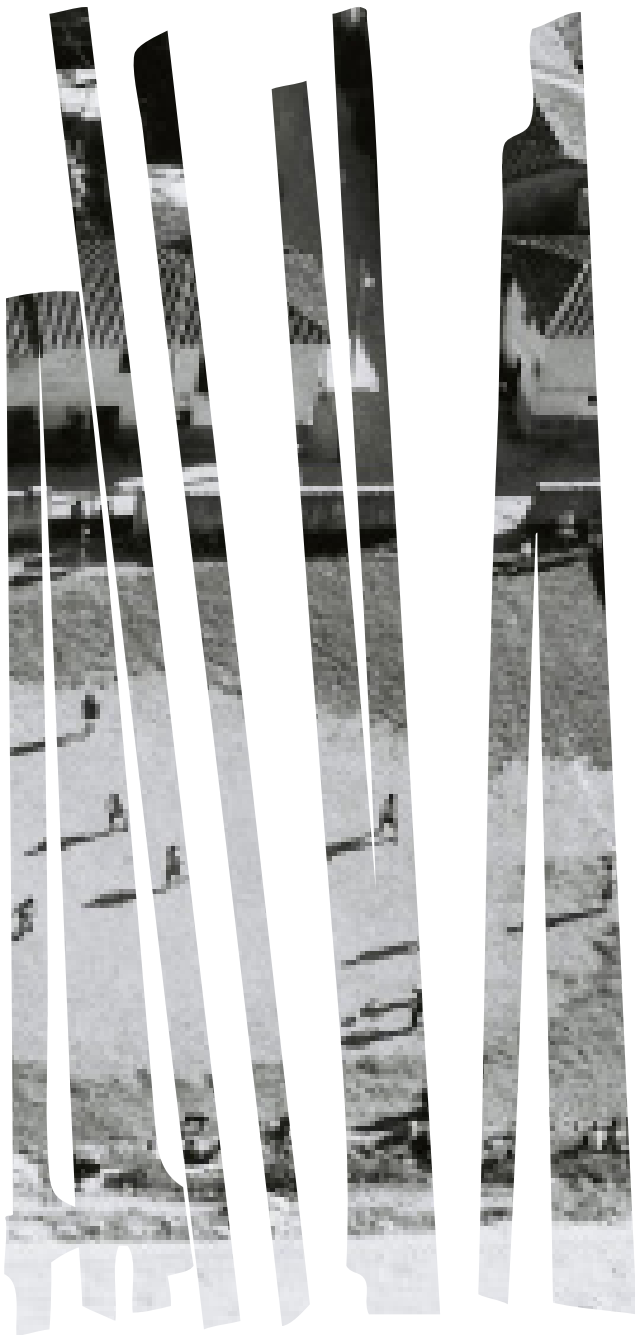


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**Horizontal Models of Conviviality
or Radical Democracy in the Americas**

Zapatistas, Boggs Center, Casa Pueblo

Gregory F. Pappas



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Gregory F. Pappas

Abstract

In this paper, I argue that despite their different circumstances (size, location, history, demography), the Zapatistas (Chiapas, Mexico), Boggs Center (Detroit, USA), and Casa Pueblo (Adjuntas, Puerto Rico) share common lessons that are worth considering, at a time when there is so much uncertainty and disagreement about how best to address social injustices and much disillusionment with representative democracy. After a summary of the history and accomplishments of each of these American communal activist organisations, I present the common lessons and consider some challenges and possible objections. They provide an alternative between naïve optimism and cynical passive pessimism. They practice horizontal models of conviviality and a holistic, ecological, and experimental approach to ameliorating injustices.

Keywords: radical democracy | Zapatistas | Boggs Center | Casa Pueblo

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Contents

1. Introduction	1
2. Zapatistas (Chiapas, Mexico)	2
3. The Boggs Center (Detroit, USA)	4
4. Casa Pueblo (Adjuntas, Puerto Rico)	5
5. Common Lessons from the American Communities for Radical Democracy	7
5.1 Redefining “Revolution”	7
5.2 Power	10
5.3 Autonomy	11
5.4 Democracy as how to <i>Convivir</i>	13
5.5 Democracy as <i>Convivir</i> that Balances Solidarity with Pluralism	15
5.6 How to Think (Inquiry) when Transforming a Changing and Precarious World	16
5.7 Ecological Consciousness and Responsibility	20
5.8 A New Political Ethics and the Importance of Education	21
5.9 By and for the “Local”, but with an Expansive Vision and Outreach	24
6. Challenges and Objections	26
7. Conclusion	29
8. Bibliography	31

1. Introduction

The current pandemic has exposed even more clearly the social-systematic injustices that have been around for a long time, but that continue to undermine the social fabric of our communities, cities, and what is left of democracy around the world. There is a growing consensus that after the stage of protest, there needs to be some significant changes to ameliorate racial and other systematic injustices. What sorts of changes are needed if we are not just to survive but to live a better life?

Many agree that a radical change is necessary. However, there is disagreement about what sort of changes are needed. Some are advocating for changes in law, policy, and political leadership. Others think that radical change will not happen unless we address the problem at the level of the economic-political national and global system we all live in, such as neoliberalism. Meanwhile, others think we need to change peoples' moral character (their "hearts") and our relationships with others. How should one inquire into the causes and possible solutions to our worst injustices? How do we avoid blindness, reductionism, or dogmatism? How do we avoid both naive and blind optimism, and cynical and passive pessimism about our most stubborn and almost permanent injustices?

In my research for answers to these important questions, I found out that, at least in socio-political philosophies concerned with justice, we have underestimated the practical wisdom of communities outside of the academy. It is part of the deep dualism between theory and practice in our society to assume that "grassroots" communities are good at organizing and protesting, examples of emancipatory movements, instantiations of our theories of liberation – but we academics are the ones with knowledge. We are the "experts" on injustices.

There is also a tendency to identify community-activist organisations according to their platform or what they oppose (or reasons for resistance). However, we cannot reduce all communal activist organisations as politically expedient movements that unite to protest, resist, destroy an oppressor, or achieve some temporary liberatory goal. Some of these communities are the sources of experience-based lessons on organizing and facing power, error, precariousness, uncertainty, and tragedy. They have practical wisdom on how to determine strategies, make decisions, and how to inquire into the causes and possible solutions to injustices.¹

¹ The history of the communities that can be the source of wisdom include the labor struggles and other communities of color that established resistance-activists' communities (such as the Black Panthers and the Young Lords). There are also indigenous groups throughout the Americas. Recently in Europe there has also been the "municipalist" movement (Baird 2017).

In the Americas, the most impressive are those resilient communities whose answers to the above questions are part of how to live or *convivir* (shared living) with others in nature as an ecosystem. They move away from customary views of injustice, revolution, and democracy, and instead toward a radical view of democracy. Three such communities are the Zapatistas (Chiapas, Mexico), Boggs Center (Detroit), and Casa Pueblo (Adjuntas, Puerto Rico). These particular “American communities” (from now on I will refer to them this way) are not located in the same area in the Americas nor are they connected. I argue that despite their different circumstances (size, location, history, demography) and challenges, they share a general approach to injustices that have kept them living well and with dignity. This is a good reason to listen to them. For this may mean that they have general lessons that can be useful to other contexts and are therefore worth examining and even trying out in our own locations. They practice horizontal models of “conviviality” but they are not perfect. They are fully aware of the presence of inequalities even in the best of democratic environments and facing up to them is part of the endless task required. They share a communitarian, holistic, ecological, and experimental approach to ameliorating injustices. They have experimented with community-based transformative justice in all spheres of life, i.e., health care, economy, and education. They have proclaimed openly that the preferred way to move forward regarding injustices is via a “radical” conception of democracy (not the Western political one).

In this essay, after a summary of the history and accomplishments of each these communities, I present the common lessons that are worth considering at this critical time in history, and I end up considering some challenges and possible objections.

The history of each of these communities located in different parts of the Americas is different, but there is a similar pattern of development or growth. They emerged from crisis and deep historical injustices in the Americas (colonialism, imperialism, white supremacy). In each case, particular events (crisis) sparked their emergence as protest movements or revolts that gradually became communities committed to a way of life and sustainable transformation.

2. Zapatistas (Chiapas, Mexico)

Arguably, in the history of Indigenous-led movements across the Americas, none have been more influential than the Zapatistas. The Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) of southern Mexico began creating their self-determined territories in the 1980s after a century and a half of structural violence from the Mexican state. The 1994 uprising of the EZLN was provoked by the North American Free Trade Agreement

(NAFTA), but it was also a response to over five hundred years of ongoing colonial oppression and recent privatizations and dispossessions of their land and freedom.

The Zapatistas have been responsible for spearheading some of the biggest demonstrations in Mexico as a response to different crises and injustices, such as the war on Iraq (2003), the US-led War on Drugs policy (2011), and, more recently, violence against women and the construction of the Maya train in Mexico.

The Zapatistas evolve from a revolutionary group in 1983 to a movement of civil resistance that aspires to create a different society. This transformation took some time and was the result of living and communicating with indigenous communities in Chiapas (Malquori 2020).²

The Zapatistas were able to stop the consequences of NAFTA: the annihilation of local farm economies and ecosystems and a dependence on the state that would undermine the autonomy of their communities. Since the famous uprising, and despite an ongoing counterinsurgency being spearheaded by the Mexican government, the Zapatistas have focused their efforts on improving their *convivencia*, collective resistance, and exercising autonomy.

In 2003 the Zapatistas started to launch autonomous municipalities throughout the state of Chiapas called “caracoles”. They started with five and have now sixteen. The Zapatistas draw from Indigenous traditions in their practice of horizontal governance, equitable gender relations, anti-systemic health care, grassroots education, and agroecological food sovereignty. Their economy is composed of worker cooperatives and family farms. The Zapatistas have also established national and international outreach events and alliances (Stahler-Sholk 2010). In 2021 Zapatista women will travel to Madrid to talk with Spaniards about the conquest (AP 2020).

The Zapatistas have a tradition of releasing a series of communiqués. Their history reveals an evolution from the abstract political and military language of the first communications, to a commitment to a new vision of democracy. There is a rejection of democracy as a representative political system run by the neoliberal state that has perpetuated injustices that are in part the legacy of colonialism. They propose a new vision of society from the ground up, an alternative model of democracy. With time they have decided to articulate their practical wisdom in terms of principles or mottos that can be seen in the streets and walls of the communities, such as *Para todos todo, para nosotros nada* (Everything for everyone, nothing for us). The Zapatista axiom

2 “In fact, the initial group that formed the EZLN remained in hiding for ten years not only to prepare itself militarily, but to actually listen to the voice of the indigenous people in order to help project it to the nation and the world” (Malquori 2020: 8).

Otro mundo es posible (Another world is possible) has been adopted by movements across the world.

The Zapatista approach to injustices and *convivencia* resonates in significant ways with a radical conception of democracy that has been merely imagined by other philosophers in the Americas (Addams, Hostos, Dewey, Locke, Freire, Villoro), but it is a vision of democracy that at least two contemporary activist communities, the Boggs Center in Detroit, and Casa Pueblo in Adjuntas, Puerto Rico, have practiced. The main leaders from these last two places have openly recognized their important similarities to the Zapatista vision.³ Grace Lee Boggs calls Detroit “the Chiapas of North America”, and states:

Thanks especially to the indigenous cultures that the Zapatistas have revealed to us, we are beginning to understand that the world is always being made and never finished; that activism can be the journey rather than the arrival: that struggle does not always have to be confrontational. [...] We cannot use the Zapatista model as a blueprint for struggle in the United States because our history and our contemporary conditions are qualitatively different. [...] What the Zapatista demonstrate, however, is the need for a paradigm shift in our thinking (Boggs and Kurashige 2012: 77).

3. The Boggs Center (Detroit, USA)

The story of the community in Detroit centred in the Boggs Center cannot be told without telling the story of the founders of the centre, James and Grace Lee Boggs. James Boggs (1919 –1993) was an African-American activist, an autoworker at Chrysler from 1940 until 1968, and the author of *The American Revolution: Pages from a Negro Worker’s Notebook* (Boggs [1963] 2009). In the 1950s, he belonged to different left organisations and worked with C. L. R. James. In 1953 he married Chinese American activist Grace Lee Boggs. They “built a durable partnership that was at once marital, intellectual, and political. It was a genuine partnership of equals, remarkable not only for its unique pairing or for its longevity, but also for its capacity to continually generate theoretical reflection and modes of activist engagement” (Wikipedia 2020).

The Boggs participated in the most significant communal activist movements in the United States in the twentieth century: the Civil Rights, Black Power, and Workers movements at the local level in Detroit communities. They also collaborated with Martin

³ In my account of these communities, I have had to rely on quoting the available written texts of some of their leaders. I intend to take their statements at face value for the purpose of this essay. I am aware of the risk of assuming they are representative of the wisdom of the community. A more in-depth empirical research would be necessary to fully validate my hypotheses.

Luther King and Malcolm X at the national level. With time the Boggs became aware of some of the mistakes of these movements, that for them were lessons for proposing an alternative vision and praxis. They learned from communal action and experiments in Detroit the need to redefine revolution and to reconcile the best lessons from Malcolm X and Martin Luther King. In the 1990s they and other friends in the community founded the Boggs Center for Community Leadership.

The Boggs Center is a house located in the East and poorer side of the city. It continues to be a hub for community-based projects, grassroots organizing, and social activism both locally and nationally. Their mission is “to nurture the transformational leadership capacities of individuals and organizations committed to creating productive, sustainable, ecologically responsible, and just communities” (Boggs Center 2016). Through local, national, and international networks of activists, artists, and intellectuals, they foster new ways of living, being, and thinking to face the challenges of the twenty-first century.

Among their major accomplishments are organizing marches and resistance practices, founding food cooperatives and community groups to support the elderly, organizing unemployed workers, and fighting utility shut offs. They established a K–6 charter school, managed by a local non-profit educational management organisation staffed by union members. They created the Detroit Summer program for youth and the James and Grace Lee Boggs School.

Grace Lee Boggs (1915–2015) was a social activist and had a Ph.D. in philosophy from Bryn Mawr College, where she wrote her dissertation on George Herbert Mead. Grace never pursued an academic career in philosophy. Still, throughout her activist years, she continued to read and write philosophy, where the influence of Hegel, Paulo Freire, John Dewey, George Herbert Mead, C.L.R. James, Martin Luther King, and Malcolm X are most noticeable. Most of her published work is about the philosophical lessons she learned from the different struggles. I consider her philosophical ideas a significant contribution to American philosophy, even though she has yet to be recognized among academic philosophers.

4. Casa Pueblo (Adjuntas, Puerto Rico)

The centre of Casa Pueblo is a house located in Adjuntas, a town in the mountains of Puerto Rico, close to a rain forest. Casa Pueblo was founded in 1980 by Alexis Massol González, a civil engineer and environmentalist. From the beginning, Alexis has been significantly supported by his family, especially his wife, Tinti Deyá Díaz, and his two sons, Ariel and Arturo. They are part of generations of families deeply rooted in the town. “Casa Pueblo” is the name of the community.

Some several major historical events or challenges punctuate the development of Casa Pueblo's history. Casa Pueblo was established in the 1980s as a local communal uprising to oppose the government's plans of open-pit mining of silver, gold, and copper. In 2002 Casa Pueblo and Alexis Massol were recognized for this effort with the prestigious Goldman environmental award. In the 2010s, Casa Pueblo was able to stop a proposed gas pipeline project that would cross the entire island and bring ecological and economic consequences to the small towns located in its path, including Adjuntas. They also started to establish regional and global solidarity ties with other communities and view themselves as part of a larger network. According to Alexis Massol, the community gradually evolved throughout the years: "we moved from protesting (without ruling out its importance) to proposing" ways to connect with the local land and *convivir* (Massol Gonzalez 2019: 101).

Casa Pueblo characterizes what they do as *practica reflexiva comunitaria* (communal reflective practice) that seeks to transform from below the "structures, relationships, practices, and visions for a country in need of profound economic, social, political, and cultural changes" (Massol Gonzalez 2019: 11). Casa Pueblo has established a school using an abandoned school building and a summer school in the forest that teaches new generations to be more ecologically conscious.

For Casa Pueblo, a "new Puerto Rico is possible" (Massol Gonzalez 2019: 9) if we seek an alternative way of procuring changes and resisting the island's colonial situation. Instead of top-down remedies, we should work together at the local level and rely more on *autogestion comunitaria*, i.e., creating and experimenting with different concrete means of communitarian and local self-determination. Casa Pueblo created the first communitarian and ecological radio station in Puerto Rico with a mission to democratize the radio waves and created programs with different points of view. On the economic side, they produce and sell coffee and arts and crafts in the main house and promote ecotourism. More importantly, today Casa Pueblo is transforming the island's energy matrix to renewable energy, starting with making most of their local town relatively independent of the country's energy grid. Casa Pueblo (the house centre) relies on a 13kW solar microgrid that feeds its radio station, movie theatre, and environmental school. During the Hurricane Maria crisis, the town of Adjuntas was the only one that had energy.

Arturo Massol is a Professor of Microbiology and Ecology at the University of Puerto Rico. He is the executive director of Casa Pueblo. Together with the community in Adjuntas and grants from non-profit institutions (Bickel n.d.), he has led a community aid response that aims to change the energy landscape of a country dependent on fossil fuels to one based on renewable energy sources. Casa Pueblo is using local agricultural waste (e.g., from the coffee beans) and the sun to produce energy for

schools and to power the entire business district in downtown Adjuntas. But this is just their starting point. They are en route to extend their renewable energy projects and model of democratic communal empowerment to as many Adjuntas' residents as possible—close to 20,000, including neighbouring towns. They encourage renewable energy via solar-bio power at the communal level, from and for the local community, but hoping that it will extend regionally and nationally. They consider this to be a silent and gradual revolution that started in Adjuntas. As Massol González put it, “inside a colony, energy independence is revolutionary”; Arturo Massol calls for nothing less than “energy insurrection” (Brown 2020). Installing solar panels and establishing a microgrid governed by local business owners providing cheap, renewable energy is a political act that disrupts or breaks dependence on fossil fuel, and colonialism. Casa Pueblo sees economic sustainability via reducing energy dependency, self-governance and empowerment, health, education, and protecting natural resources as interdependent aspects of how to *convivir* – a radical democratic vision.

One of the central ideas that Casa Pueblo has adopted is that of *poder social*, which comes from the Puerto Rican philosopher Eugenio María de Hostos (Hostos 1969). *Poder social* is the capacity of a local community to empower itself and make changes (ameliorate injustices) by trying creative ways to reduce dependency. Casa Pueblo has embraced Hostos as their philosopher and named their library, and their coffee, after him.

5. Common Lessons from the American Communities for Radical Democracy

5.1 Redefining “Revolution”

The American communities do not see themselves as the reformers of an unjust system but rather as revolutionaries. Grace Lee Boggs says:

[...] should we strain to squeeze that last drop out of a failing, deteriorating, and unjust system? Or should we instead devote our creative and collective energies towards envisioning and building a radically different form of living? This is what revolutions are about [...] creating a new society in the places left vacant by the disintegration of the old (Boggs and Kurashige 2012: 134).

In other words, these communities are doing something radically different than trying to improve their conditions by relying on and reforming a larger system (e.g., neoliberalism, colonialism) that constrains them. They are building a new one, allowing them to *convivir* relatively outside of and against the system. They, of course, hope

that eventually the larger system will be eroded and replaced in part as the result of their activities, but the focus and meaning of their present struggle are not based on reaching altogether that state of affairs. Instead, they call for revolution as radical change via local transformation. This is their focus; this is what is within one's means and is meaningful enough.

For these communities in America, we need to learn from the failures of revolutions in the 20th century and redefine what it means or requires. We must try to go beyond mere rebellion (venting) and victimism based on identity. For Boggs, rebellions tend to “increase the dependency rather than the self-determination of the oppressed” (Boggs and Kurashige 2012: 67) because we have defined ourselves more by our oppression. Rebellions “denounce and expose the enemy without providing a positive vision of a new future. Rebellions tend to be temporary, producing reform at best but not transformation” (Boggs and Kurashige 2012: 182). People stuck at the stage of rebellion “could only develop a sense of powerlessness and victimhood” (Kurashige 2012: 182).

According to Alexis Massol from Casa Pueblo, it took several generations to make the shift “from protest to a proposal that assumes responsibilities, placed natural resources in the hands of communities to promote a development model centred on people's wellbeing” (Massol Gonzalez 2019: 10). Their *practica reflexiva comunitaria* led them to concrete pro-active projects and to formulate principles and aspirations that guide their practice. Revolutions must move from protest to people becoming creative communal agents, learning from the struggle to achieve transformations of living conditions. A movement moves in the proper direction when the “oppressed begin seeing themselves as no just victims” but as builders that “go beyond slogans [...] to create programs of struggle that transform and empower citizens” (Boggs and Kurashige 2012: 99). In Detroit, Grace witnessed the need to create “new modes of work, education, art, and community” to “transform those rebels filled with righteous anger” (Boggs and Kurashige 2012: 15). She argues that we need to think of “revolutionaries as solutionaries, working together to solve very practical problems of daily life” (Boggs and Kurashige 2012: 89). The Zapatistas similarly emphasize building a new world rather than focusing all on opposition and destruction or becoming just a reactionary platform. One of their principles is *Construer y No Destruir* (To construct, Not Destroy) (Wedes 2014).

Revolution is not a wholesale, massive, quick, and final change overnight and from above. The American communities focus on small-local but concrete and lasting victories. Grace from Boggs Center admits that in comparison to older senses of “revolution”, “this way lacks drama and visibility”; it does not seem practical “for those seeking changes quick and huge” (Boggs and Kurashige 2012: 50), but radical transformation

can also occur “block by block, brick by brick” from a “more holistic perspective” (Boggs and Kurashige 2012: 165). The proposal is for radical transformation (of structures-institutions and “souls”) via resistance and particular local problem solving (for example, energy, food security, health, education, legal aid) by mostly collaborative actions (creativity, inquiry) from below.

Moreover, the way forward for these communities is far from linear, and there is no single correct way nor certainty or final salvation-guarantee at the end of the struggle. The path is made as we go. For the Zapatistas “we walk, not in order to arrive at a promised land, but because the walking itself is the revolution” (Holloway 2005). Grace Lee Boggs says: “The transition to a better world is not guaranteed” (Boggs and Kurashige 2012: 50). The idea of a revolutionary path that is made in the process of making it, is a consequence of their acknowledgment of the reality of uncertainty and change (process) in everyday life. If this is life (reality), then having a fixed plan or goal is detrimental to a revolution. Instead, plenty of fluidity, flexibility, and adaptability is paramount for effective resistance, intelligent problem solving, and strategies for procuring transformation.

For the American communities, genuine revolution requires a transformation that is not limited to structural material and political conditions. Again according to Grace, what is “needed is not a narrow focus on seizing state power but a cultural revolution in the form of continuous struggle to transform human relations” (Boggs and Kurashige 2012: 149). The call for transformation in all aspects of living in these communities comes from a holistic and ecological view of humans that is assumed in their practice. Structural material and political conditions are not a separate dimension from intellectual, moral, aesthetic, cultural, biological, or spiritual ones. These are all interrelated dimensions of life. Therefore, moral recognition and dignity are as important as a change in economic resources, power relations, structures, and institutions. Therefore they are social movements that show a way beyond “identity politics” and “exemplify how recognition and redistribution can organically underlie social organisation and drive change” (Lizarzaburu 2020: 65). From the point of view of the American communities,

[For] much of the twentieth century, movement building centred on the struggles of oppressed peoples for rights and for the political power necessary to change institutions. There was little, if any, recognition of the need for two-sided transformation, not only of institutions but of the oppressed who, especially in the modern world of the mass media, absorb the values of their oppressors (Boggs and Kurashige 2012: 2).

Revolution requires the need to inquire into and change both material-structural-institutional conditions of our environment as well as work towards a “radical revolution

of values” and “reinventing culture.” “We all have to change what we say, what we do, what we think, what we imagine” (Boggs and Kurashige 2012: 2).

To be sure, what these communities are doing is “decolonization”, a term that is now more in fashion than revolution. But it goes beyond mere deconstruction or critical examination of colonial categories and institutions; there is a call for positive transformation that requires an inclusive community of inquiry that patiently works creatively together with a prospective vision and a large imagination. Grace Boggs summarizes well what is required:

Our responsibility, at this watershed in our history, is to face the past honestly and do the things necessary to heal ourselves and our planet. Healing our society will require the patient work not primarily of politicians but of artists, ministers, gardeners, workers, families, women, and communities. It will require new forms of governance, work, and education that are much more participatory and democratic than those collapsing all around us. It will require enlarging our vision and decolonizing our imaginations (Boggs and Kurashige 2012: 12).

5.2 Power

One of the distinguishing features of the American communities is their view of the proper function of power. It is often assumed that social movements procure change by seeking “power” for themselves or exerting power on politicians. The American communities, however, do not seek power baffling those who wish to categorize them. They understand the importance of power to procure change and accomplish their goals, hence the need for empowerment. However, they resist the quest for power for its own sake, whether it is through arms or elections.

Revolution for them is about “transforming relations” and “not about the oppressed switching places with the oppressor” (Boggs and Kurashige 2012: 148). They do not aspire to overthrow the state nor to have representation in electoral politics. In the Fourth Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle, the Zapatistas made clear that they are “A political force which can organize a solution to the collective problems without the intervention of political parties and of the government. [...] A political force which does not struggle to take political power but for a democracy where those who govern, govern by obeying” (EZLN-CCRI 1996).

The American communities have learned from experience that the quest for power can corrupt or be counterproductive. For the Zapatistas, “armed struggle to bring about change through the seizure of state power reproduces the structures of the very power it is trying to combat and has had little success in bringing about radical social change”

(Stahler-Sholk 2010: 270). Procuring empowerment to build a more participatory and just order from the community level upward is the goal, not power.

Grace Lee Boggs learned from the struggles in Detroit that “concentrating on taking state power results in the popular movement being co-opted by the state” (Boggs and Kurashige 2012: 2). The proper approach “strives for empowerment rather than power and control” (Boggs and Kurashige 2012: 41) and “not building power over others but empowering each other” (Boggs and Kurashige 2012: 174). She says “We do not want to be the political class [...] simply switch governments [...] another alternative world is now possible [...] we want and need to exercise power, not take it” (Boggs and Kurashige 2012: 76). Like the Zapatistas, she believes that the quest for power corrupts, but her grounds are the ideal of the beloved community of Martin Luther King. For “love of power goes hand in hand with dominating and destroying community” (Boggs and Kurashige 2012: 85).

One of the central ideas adopted by Casa Pueblo in their practice is *poder social* (social power). Communities should seek *poder social* instead of *poder politico* (political power). *Poder politico* is power exercised from the “top down” even if it is by a democratic state (representative democracy). *Poder social* is the capacity of a local community to empower itself and make changes by trying creative ways to reduce dependency. It is the power of the local community via the active participation of everyone; working together, citizens learn their rights and responsibilities. As Massol-Deyá says,

[...] what we have in abundance is social power. It is through community-led development that we can activate this power to address our needs through a form of self-determination. We may not be able to self-determine at the geographical scale of the Country, but it is possible at the community scale (Massol-Deyá 2020).

5.3 Autonomy

Regarding autonomy, the American communities seek improving self-governance via reducing dependence from the state and corporations. Autonomy is a matter of degrees, and it can be achieved by different means. All of them have resisted the temptation to use outside help (e.g., government aid and programs) and to become part of democracy as a representative political machinery. Casa Pueblo and the Boggs Center have had to work within the constraints of a town and a city, but for all of them enhancing autonomy and local empowerment has required reducing dependence in addressing their everyday needs (education, health, energy, food, etc.).

The Zapatista have achieved the most independence from the state and national structures. They have designed *caracoles* as the alternative to the Mexican centralized political structure. These self-governance structures have evolved from assemblies to the formation of regional structures governed by rotating *juntas de buen gobierno* (good governance councils). It is a flexible model that emphasizes “every place having their own collective control and community-based decision making” (Stahler-Sholk 2010: 280-281).

In Detroit, the Boggs Center has been the catalyst for creating self-reliant ways to obtain their basic goods via the creation of local schools and gardens. The community took the precarious condition of the city as an opportunity “to create new decentralized institutions based on the possibilities opened up by the information revolution, for smaller work units, closer ties between producer and consumer, and greater participation in community life” (Boggs and Kurashige 2012: 139). To quote Grace Lee Boggs yet again, “the more we can do for ourselves, the more in control of our future we are” (Boggs and Kurashige 2012: 19).

The American communities have enhanced autonomy via communal working and creating together social spaces in which actors make their own decisions about matters that affect them most, e.g., education, health, and agriculture. Zapatistas have “sought out fair-trade-coffee marketing networks, established artisan and production cooperatives, organized agroecology workshops, built regional warehouses to cut out the intermediaries for basic supplies, and developed new mechanisms for interacting with solidarity groups in an effort to tap resources without sacrificing local control” (Stahler-Sholk 2010: 281).

The American communities use science and technology to enhance their autonomy. Southern Mexico has now followed the Zapatista’s model: cell phones are used for organizing, and they are building their own communications network. The Telecomunicaciones Indígenas Comunitarias (TIC) is a non-profit organization in Oaxaca established in 2012 that “has implemented independent, community-owned cell phone networks in at least 63 indigenous communities [...] making it the largest community-owned cell phone network in the world” (Srinivasan 2020). TIC has open ways to allow communities to be in more control and to be grounded on knowledge of local problems. TIC “has aimed to build upon the values of self-determination that run deep in indigenous Mexican cultures, and to blaze a trail toward the democratization of technology” (Srinivasan 2020).

For Casa Pueblo, technology and science have been central to autonomy. Their strategy is to focus on energy autonomy because they see it as a precondition for economic and political empowerment and autonomy. The communal assistance they

provide to install solar panels to local homes is an act of “energy insurrection” that not only makes them autonomous from the electric national grid, but that enables self-governing and flourishing in other areas of living.

In sum, these communities have strived to create their own self-governance structures, their own schools, gardens, and sources of renewable energy. They have achieved a level of food, health, energy, and economic sovereignty by bottom-up organizing. In this model, such goods as health and safety should be procured by democratic means that do not engender or perpetuate injustices.

Regarding these communities’ quest for more self-reliance or autonomy, there have been some narrow interpretations. They are not merely grassroots solidarity responses (and resistance) at times of mourning and despair for the sake of survival. According to Isa Rodríguez Soto, these strategies of *autogestión* (self-management) where *Solo el Pueblo Salva al Pueblo* (Only the People Save the People), come “not from mere benevolence, but from a place of exhaustion and survival” (Rodríguez Soto: 308). She agrees that such grassroots initiatives to take care of local health, economic, or educational problems can be lifesaving, but

they also represent the systematic state abandonment that forces communities to fill the gaps. [...] These mutual aid efforts do not – and should not – replace the state’s obligation to its people. [...] We must continue to hold our elected officials accountable and not rest on the monumental efforts of mutual aid groups and community organizations to ensure the survival of their neighbors (Rodríguez Soto: 308).

Some of the *autogestión* groups today fit her description, but the American communities have questioned the strategy of holding elected officials accountable. More importantly, their quest for less dependence through communal cooperation is not just a temporary resilience measure for survival but also a means to better *convivencia* and live a better life.

5.4 Democracy as how to *Convivir*

Each of the American communities has felt “disenchantment with the democratic electoral system, political parties, corruption, and the ruling politicians” (Massol Gonzalez 2019: 200). Mexico, Puerto Rico, and the United States have witnessed, even if differently, how representative democracy and legal reforms do not guarantee fewer injustices and a more democratic *convivencia* in everyday life. Democracy has historically failed to deliver in its promise to most Westerners, or worse yet, it has

been merely a rhetorical device employed by politicians to conceal injustices. We must reconsider what genuine democracy requires.

The originality of Zapatismo with respect to other indigenous movements, both in Mexico and in other Latin American regions, has been their explicit commitment to a different conception of democracy (Malquori 2020). In their Fourth Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle, they called upon “all those who know that democracy does not mean substituting those in absolute power but a government of the people, for the people and by the people” (EZLN-CCRI 1996). Hence, they created the *Juntas de Buen Gobierno*, a form of local governing based on broad participation and rotation of leadership to “prevent bureaucratic entrenchment or self-interested decision making. A further accountability mechanism is the separate ‘vigilance commission’, which oversees the actions of the *juntas de buen gobierno* and publicizes their decisions and actions” (Stahler-Sholk 2010: 284).

The Zapatista sees the cult of personality, or what Alexis Massol in Casa Pueblo calls *protagonismo*, as a threat to democracy. Leaders are public servants that should live by the *Mandar Obedeciendo* (Lead by Obeying) principle. Members of the councils are responsible for listening “to the demands of the communities, to coordinate the social organization, and to mediate when a conflict occurs. They have no privileges” (Malquori 2020). The American communities are critical of past movements that relied on “vertical leadership”, “mostly to agitate and mobilize faceless masses. There was none of the respectful listening to everyone” (Boggs and Kurashige 2012: 174). As Grace Lee Boggs says, we do not need “cadres of vanguard party with a common ideology” but “individuals and groups responding creatively with passion and imagination to the real problems and challenges that they face where they live and work” (Boggs and Kurashige 2012: 178). In sum, “we are the leaders we have been waiting for” (Boggs and Kurashige 2012: 159).

However, for the American communities, the democratization of political institutions via more horizontal and decentralized organisations is not sufficient. The alternative to Democracy as “top down” political system is a local “ground-up” communal *convivir* that results in the transformation of self, relationships, institutions, and material conditions in all contexts of life. The alternative view of democracy these communities aspire to is one where “democracy must become a norm and natural practice of our everyday activities” (Boggs and Kurashige 2012: 15), a “participatory and place-based concepts of citizenship and democracy”, that “unleash new creative energies” instead of the demand and expectation that “representatives take care of us” (Boggs and Kurashige 2012: 16).

Casa Pueblo strives for “the democratization of energy” because it is integral to improving *la vida cotidiana comunitaria* (everyday communal living) and creating “an ideal space to resolve and contribute, to enjoy the present, feel intelligent and capable to transform their own reality and circumstances” (Massol-Deyá 2020). The American communities prefer democratic means for democratic ends. Ameliorating our own local problems (e.g., education, health care, food-economy) is the democratic and most liberating-empowering, educative, and meaningful way.

5.5 Democracy as *Convivir* that Balances Solidarity with Pluralism

While the American communities are all rooted in a local place and culture, they do not essentialize or reify their identity (Stahler-Sholk 2010), nor do they base their solidarity on a single identity (ethnic, race, gender). They know from experience how identity has been used to dominate (e.g., the hegemonic definition of the Mexican nation), to disguise injustices or divide possible alliances among the oppressed. They also do not base solidarity on a common ideology-doctrine nor some politically expedient (but temporary) unity for the sake of liberation against a common oppressor. Instead, they practice moral solidarity that emerges from working and struggling together in ameliorating local problems and building a better world. The Zapatistas express the importance of solidarity in their principle *Todos para todos, nada para nosotros*.

The type of solidarity these communities encourage and practice is one that embraces pluralism. They promote inclusive participation of identities, ideas, and vocations in their communal dialogue in public forums. Zapatistas try to live by the principle *Un mundo en que quepan muchos mundos* (A world in which many worlds fit) (EZLN-CCRI 1996). Hence the movement has “increasingly recognized the centrality of the rights and needs of women, queer folks, prisoners, and other marginalized sectors in the struggle for justice” (Indigenous Anarchist Federation 2020). This is because, as Grace Lee Boggs says: “Our diversity is the source of our strength [...] we are striving for long term and sustainable transformation, and for that we need the wisdom that comes from many citizens, movements, traditions” (Boggs and Kurashige 2012: 131).

However, these communities are not naïve and are fully aware of how difficult or precarious it is to keep a working balance between solidarity and pluralism. Solidarity is an ongoing and fragile process that requires working together on common problems amidst pluralisms. As Arturo Massol of Casa Pueblo says, “our work is based on mutual respect of ideological differences and inspired by our collective needs” and admits “it wasn’t easy to harmonize differences or to achieve unity in the differences by working together against mining without losing principles” (Massol-Deyá 2020: 55).

These communities, therefore, should not be portrayed as proposing collectivism based on common doctrines that disregard differences and individuality. They are indeed against the sort of individualism fostered by neoliberal ideology, but they do not stand for an emphasis on community that disregards the individual (Wedes 2014) and discourages dissent and differences. Their view of democracy is one in which the individuals and differences are given the space for expression and optimal horizontal communal living because this is the most mutually enriching interaction.

This view of democratic interaction-communication as solidarity amidst pluralism, according to Faramelli (2018), is a practice that resembles the sort of interaction we witness in jazz music. The “assemblage politics” in Zapatismo is an assemblage that is heterogenous, horizontal, and fluid, a network organisation where unity (solidarity) is not compromised. It is “much like the players in a jazz ensemble who are able to work in concert while still maintaining the distinct individuality of each instrument. [...] They are explicitly refusing to be unified under a singular unified identity; rather Zapatismo is creating a politics based on the absolute heterogeneity of the different singularities that compose it” (Faramelli 2018: 88).

5.6 How to Think (Inquiry) when Transforming a Changing and Precarious World

For the American communities, democracy is about how to interact in everyday life, including how to think or inquire. They are activists about the importance of proper thinking as a means to transforming relationships and structures. There is no dualism between acting and thinking or praxis and theory. Grace Lee Boggs insisted that “this is the time not only to act but to think” (Boggs and Kurashige 2012: 55). The American communities’ concern for better ways to inquire arises in part with disillusionment with the rigid and dogmatic ways of thinking of some traditional left activist movements. As Subcomandante Marcos commented at the end of the first year of the Zapatista uprising, “something was broken in this year, not just the false image of modernity which neoliberalism was selling to us, [...] but also the rigid schemes of a left dedicated to living from and of the past” (Holloway 2006).

Grace Lee Boggs was also critical of some of her fellow activists in the movements that she belonged to, including the Black Power movement. “We make a point of criticizing a number of problematic tendencies we have witnessed among left-wing activists, especially the impulse to react and protest without properly thinking through situations and taking the time to project viable alternatives” (Boggs and Kurashige 2012: 27). “Many ideological leftists, instead of properly inquiring into a situation, they

view everything that happens as a sort of validation of what they think” (Boggs and Kurashige 2012: 55).

For the American communities, proper thinking requires learning from experience, which requires learning from the mistakes in the history of communal activist movements, including the dangers of overarching ideology and purist paradigms. They reject the simplistic and dogmatic diagnosis and solutions to problems that they know are complex, dynamic, and tragic.

The American communities are critical of rigidity and the emphasis on doctrine, whether it comes from the Left or the Right. In Detroit, Grace learned to refuse “simple binary oppositions – us versus them, victims versus villains, good versus evil” (Boggs and Kurashige 2012: 39). Movements should move away from “either/or, reductive, dualistic, and divisive, or blaming the other thinking” and “repudiate absolutes” (Boggs and Kurashige 2012: 41). Boggs thought that one reason for the “failing health and education systems” in the United States is how “we have been locked in a titanic battle between the left and the right [...] the problem is that our debate is confined to narrow parameters. Too often we regard health care and education as commodities” (Boggs and Kurashige 2012: 77).

Central to these communities is communal dialogue and reflection as the means of decision-making, judgment, and problem-solving. They encourage us to continuously critically re-examining our ends and our means. Casa Pueblo characterizes what they do as “communal reflective practice” to figure out how to “transform ‘from below’ the structures, relationships, practices for a better life” (Massol Gonzalez 2019: 9).

The American communities hope that via critical communal reflection in public forums, they can expose internal and entrenched hierarchies. The Zapatistas rely on making some structural changes by having communal meetings to address inequalities to allow intergenerational sharing of experiences. For instance, on New Year’s Day 2008, the Zapatistas organized a women’s *encuentro* in La Garrucha to address the problems of domestic violence.

In their practice, the American communities aspire for a form of communal reflection and decision-making that is democratic (i.e., as inclusive and as horizontal as possible) and experimental. For the Zapatistas, communal thinking should be guided by the principle *proponer y no imponer* (to propose, not impose). Proposals are made in town hall spaces on important issues and decisions. The unavoidable conflicts within the community are handled via dialogue and mediation. The dialogues are about local problems without ignoring the role of “macro” forces that affect their daily lives. The dialogues should also be done in the spirit of *convencer y no vencer* (to convince, not conquer), and the setting does not have to be always formal. “Each new project in the

community triggers a community assembly, where men and woman alike gather to discuss pertinent issues [...]; they “are often merged with *convivios* (social gatherings, literally ‘living together’) that include delicious food with leftovers going into family pots for later consumption at home” (Wedes 2014). Casa Pueblo and the Boggs Center have similar practices. Unlike the Zapatistas, a single old house is the centre of all their activities. Still, when you enter the houses, the most important place is a big table where people gather to engage in communal thinking.

For these communities, thinking is a social and embodied activity-process to solve problems and learning, and not a mental quest for abstract truths. Thinking together is not a matter of rational public discourse, as it is understood by some philosophers (e.g., in the deliberative democracy tradition). It is not a matter of exchange between “minds” or deliberation that examines merely propositions and evidence. They have great respect for rigorous and scientific inquiry. The Zapatistas have been able to stop COVID-19 from spreading because of their respect for science (Zimmering 2020). But they also encourage other means and forms of discourse and expression. The Boggs Center stresses the “importance of art and imagination” (Boggs and Kurashige 2012: 38) to expand “our imaginations and sensitivities beyond scientific rationalistic view of thinking” (Boggs and Kurashige 2012: 4). The school at Casa Pueblo and in the Zapatista communities stress education in both the sciences and the arts as complementary in proper education and problem-solving.

These communities are a better embodiment of the spirit of communal experimentation and openness to the lessons of experience than many scientific communities. They are experimental in the broadest sense of the word, i.e., with a remarkable fallibilistic attitude and sensitivity to context. Their openness to self-criticism, experimentation, adaptation, and learning is admirable and is what has kept them most resilient and useful as models. They seek strategies that avoid previous mistakes and adapt to present unique circumstances. Therefore, the Zapatistas have been able to adapt to different national scenarios: they have experimented with different paths, made mistakes, and have had enough self-criticism to learn in the process.

The Boggs Center encourages participants to see Detroit as “a laboratory for radical reconstruction” (Boggs and Kurashige 2012: 17) and to “engage in continuing dialogue that enable us to break free of old categories” (Boggs and Kurashige 2012: 81). Similarly, Casa Pueblo attributes their success throughout their years to stressing that learning from experience, i.e. *vivir lo cotidiano* is “to rectify errors, dream, encourage, and grow. To promote self-criticism is commendable” (Massol Gonzalez 2019: 138).

The American communities are not ideologically driven or guided by theory. Instead, they are driven by a moral vision or ideal. For them, this is not incompatible with being

open and experimental. As Arturo Massol from Casa Pueblo says, there must be a way to keep “alive ideals-utopias without falling into being a victim of illusions” (Massol-Deyá 2020). These communities stand for certain normative principles or values, but they are merely “tools” that can be guides without becoming blueprint or fixed prescriptions. They are open to revision and avoid the tempting quest for ready-made theoretical (top-down) solutions or criteria (theoretical “barometers” of good and evil). They are not dogmatic about pacifism or any particular means (nor about the ends). The communiqué from December 22, 2019, is very revealing of the experimentalism and continuum between praxis and theory that the Zapatistas live. They say they did not have a blueprint manual for how to achieve autonomy. “The only manual were the particular problems we encountered” (EZLN-CCRI 2019, author’s translation).

Another striking feature in these communities’ communal deliberations is how holistic and inclusive their thinking is regarding the causes and possible solutions that need to be considered to solve problems and procure change. This goes along with their holistic and ecological view of humans and problems. Communal inquiry must consider the relation between material-structural conditions and our relationships with others and nature. Achieving racial and economic equity may require changing or healing souls as much as it requires transformation structures and institutions.

The experimental and democratic thinking practiced by the American community cannot be separated from their view of reality as lived experience. They are very aware of the reality of change in life. Therefore they avoid fixity or essentialisms in their thinking. They seek and count on the stabilities provided by solidarity, culture, and tradition to be open to change. They have embraced both the new and the old, Western and non-Western tools for liberation. More importantly, they have learned that in a world where change, risk, conflict, contradiction, tensions, and uncertainty are inescapable, strategies must have some fluidity, flexibility, and adaptability. They cannot rely on a blueprint or set of instructions.

What for Faramelli distinguishes Zapatismo is that there is “something more fluid, inclusive and stable in its resistance” (Faramelli 2018:70). Grace Lee Boggs explicitly says that just as the Zapatistas, the community in Detroit is guided by the view that “the world is always being made and never finished” (Boggs and Kurashige 2012: 49). Ideas and models must be revisited because “reality is always changing”, conflict, contradiction, and tensions are unavoidable, but “new challenging contradictions [...] drive change” (Boggs and Kurashige 2012: 62).

In sum, the American communities are not just a socio-economic or a political model. They are also models of how best to acquire knowledge – an epistemology. Their practices enable better knowledge and transform individuals by making them more

meaningfully engaged and responsible for others in their communities. According to Arturo Massol, “it’s important to transfer decision-making power to the community to allow for self-development” (Massol-Deyá 2020). Local community-driven initiatives and inquiries enable better knowledge to solve problems than top-down approaches, such as relying upon bureaucratic agencies and experts. These agencies and experts usually lack both local context-sensitive knowledge and the moral care needed to do a good job. Massol from Casa Pueblo explains that

their hearts aren’t invested in the issues that communities are facing. But when people who are impacted deal with the situation, they share a sense of urgency. They know all the ways their neighbors are suffering. They try to do as much as possible with limited resources. [...] When solutions draw from the knowledge and experience of community members, I think they work way better than those that come from a top-down approach. It’s very difficult to define a single solution that will work everywhere (Massol-Deyá 2020).

5.7 Ecological Consciousness and Responsibility

The American communities have produced ecologically sustainable means to obtain the basic goals of life. They are activists in resisting the exploitation of the environment and environmental injustices. Casa Pueblo was born out of the defence of the land against mining and concern for the *el Bosque del Pueblo* (the Forest of the People). For them, “the deterioration of the environment, financial globalization and the problem of inequality” (Massol Gonzalez 2019: 104) are interrelated and urgent problems. Those in the climate justice movement admire the Zapatistas as proposing “a paradigm of development that is both just and self-sustaining” (Conant 2010). Such things as sustainable agriculture, accessible and affordable water and basic sanitation are an integral part of their organized experiments in direct democracy. The Boggs Center has also been active in the resistance against “toxic racism” and environmental injustice in “low-income neighborhoods and communities of color” (Boggs and Kurashige 2012: 167).

Just as important as their political activism is the radical way of thinking and ecological sensibility practiced by the American communities. The Boggs Center encourages “to go beyond antiracism to develop a more holistic perspective” (Boggs and Kurashige 2012: 167), and new “visionary thinking” requires seeing the consequences of consumerism upon not just human others.

These communities do not think in anthropocentric terms. Problems of injustice are not just social in the sense of a problem of the relationships among humans. They are about our relationships with all organisms in an ecosystem. Our entanglement with life

on earth requires more holistic thinking. If we are interconnected, entangled with all that sustains life on earth, we need to broaden our responsibility. According to Arturo Massol (Casa Pueblo), we should learn from the message “that the planet has sent us” in the current COVID-19 crisis (Massol-Deyá 2020). While there is much talk today about COVID-19 as the “enemy”, it is not an “other” divorced from humanity.

For the American communities, the way to counter the predominant anthropocentric and consumerist mentalities is through education. The educational programs that Casa Pueblo has established are intended to reconnect the people with nature and revalorize the forest and the landscape as spaces for educational experiences that can be transformative. The Boggs Center created the Detroit Summer educational program, where students learn sustainability and our connections to the rest of nature through community gardens in the city. They “planted gardens not only to produce healthier food for themselves and their neighbors but also to instill respect for Nature and process in young people” (Boggs and Kurashige 2012: 115).

5.8 A New Political Ethics and the Importance of Education

The above survey of common lessons makes it clear that we cannot reduce the American communities to be proposing a socio-economic model or to define them by their political opposition to neoliberalism or colonialism. These interpretations neglect the more ethical dimension of their practice. They are communities that are opposed to domination or injustice regardless of where it comes from. Sometimes they are even critical of injustices in their own communities. They are driven by local problem-solving, and an imaginative moral vision or ideal that a better *convivencia* is possible. More than a political and economic model, they are committed to a radical view of democracy as a moral way of life. This is what makes them so compelling to many of us today.

One reason why the American communities have a “radical” view of democracy is precisely that they do not separate the political from the ethical and other dimensions of living. They all stress explicitly the importance of living a politics committed to an ethical or moral stance. As Subcomandante Marcos said, “A new politics, a new political ethic is not just a wish, it is the only way to advance, to jump to the other side” (Devereaux et al. 1994). Grace Lee Boggs says, “We could no longer support a separation of politics and ethics” (Boggs and Kurashige 2012: 39) and, echoing Martin Luther King, she calls for a “revolution of values” against the “giant triplets of racism, militarism, and materialism” (Boggs and Kurashige 2012: 10), and the “dehumanization and spiritual impoverishment in a society dominated by money relations” (Boggs and Kurashige 2012: 22). Casa Pueblo wishes more people would measure “development as qualitative and not merely in terms of economic growth” and practice better *convivencia* (*el buen*

vivir) in our economic transactions “attentive to the common good to share happiness” (Massol Gonzalez 2019: 70).

These American communities see a close interdependent relationship between the economic, political, moral, and ecological dimensions. To ameliorate injustices, they see the need to democratize the economy via local economic, but not just economic, insurrection. They urge the need to move from the West’s consumerist and individualistic mentalities to a more ecological and communal vision.

Grace sees her community in Detroit as sharing with the Zapatistas a resistance to “the cult of economic growth” and “empire of money”. In the USA at the national level, she sees only an oligarchy with leaders using many tactics including “xenophobia scapegoating” to keep their power, but there is also a public at large not capable of communal democratic solidarities because they are caught up in identity politics and a corrosive form of individualism encouraged by economic practices that are not cooperative: “We must transform ourselves, because we are ‘hyper individualist’, ‘hyper materialist’” (Boggs and Kurashige 2012: 47). The “revolution of values” requires that more people move from “consumers and audience” to being “active citizens” (Boggs and Kurashige 2012: 32). She dreams of “coming to an end of the epoch of rights” to “an epoch of responsibilities” (Boggs and Kurashige 2012: xxii).

For the American communities, democracy as a way of life requires that we move away from consumerism (the commodification of everything) and a corrosive form of Western individualism. They all agree about the importance of dignity, sustainability, cooperation, courage, humility, education, solidarity, and community; and the need to move away from excesses encouraged by neo-liberalism (individualism, competition, materialism). They see a need for transformation from individualistic-consumeristic values and competition to a horizontal *convivencia* where we are creative participants with responsibilities in an ecosystem (ecological sensitivity).

The mixing of politics with values (ethics) of the American communities is bound to be met with some scepticism. It may be argued that we need to change the conditions of the oppressed, and sometimes talk of values and good intentions seems to appeal to some subjective or semi-spiritual dimension that seems tangential (at best) to actual transformation. Another reason to be sceptical about values and ethics is that it is often associated with the abstraction of ethical theories in philosophy. However, none of these characterizations apply to these communities. Their appeal to values and ethics is to encourage embodied ways of *convivir* as concrete ways of thinking, feeling, and imagining. As we have seen, for them, transformation of concrete conditions includes changes in material conditions, power relations, but also changes in the culture, values, and “souls” of the people. Talk about democratic values of equality, freedom,

and fraternity must move from abstractions to becoming aspects of our everyday relationships and concrete conditions. They believe we need structural changes in institutions but also to move away from consumerism and the commodification of everything.

The American communities do not “preach” or distribute pamphlets about their political ethics values and virtues because they do not think education and transformation are matters of propositional knowledge or information that can be taught from one mind to another. Instead, education is a matter of communal interaction and having learning experiences and not just what happens in schools as formal institutions. We learn through *convivencia* and through the very struggle and problem-solving. Boggs says, “we must view making revolutions as an inherently educational process” (Boggs and Kurashige 2012: 145).

Because of their faith in education, these communities have created their own schools, but they do not practice learning as repeating the teacher’s lessons as an authority. It is instead education based on “problem-solving”: “freedom to exercise their powers creates the kind of socially responsible, visionary, and creative people we need” (Boggs and Kurashige 2012: 141). Denying students this sort of education “produces individuals who are in constant state of rebellion” (Boggs and Kurashige 2012: 141) or to become mere survivors and consumers.

For these communities, more important than any principles or explicit lessons about how to *convivir* is the cultivation of certain skills, habits, dispositions, and sensibilities (i.e., virtues) via everyday life communal practice, interaction, and problem-solving. They believe that the ways of facing injustices and transforming relationships and institutions can be improved via learning certain habits of reflection and imagination through experience. For instance, to be able to have some sensitivity to evolving problematic contexts and the readiness to be critical of categories, concepts, or parameters that may not fit well with the present struggle (which may require some openness) are virtues. Different circumstances call for different strategies. For example, sometimes reversing exploitation requires protesting and marching, but at other times it requires protecting and recovering ancestral land to regain control over a community’s resources.

Another virtue practiced and taught by these communities is patience. They are aware that social problems usually require sustained and indefinitely prolonged communication and inquiry, which require slowness and patience to reflect. According to Massol (Casa Pueblo), “most of the time it takes some time to see the results of and action. Therefore it requires patience and persistence. They forget that to arrive at the top of the mountain you have to travel long road” (Massol Gonzalez 2019: 57). Grace Lee Boggs is critical of the left for not understanding that activism “requires a lot of patience

[...], requires time changing people” (Boggs and Kurashige 2012: 49). According to Faramelli, “explicit in the temporality of Zapatismo is a critique of acceleration. A well-known axiom of Zapatismo is ‘we walk slowly because we are going far’” (Faramelli 2018: 119). The fact that their community centres are called *caracoles* (snails) speak of their temporal pace. “The slow pace of the Zapatista transformation [...] stands in direct opposition to revolutions accelerating temporality” (Faramelli 2018: 119).

Two of the most important virtues that these communities emphasize are listening and humility since they are key to learning and communal reflection. The Zapatistas practice what they describe as *caminar preguntando* (asking questions while walking), i.e., maintaining humility in listening and always being open to other people’s perspectives and experiences, rather than claiming superiority (Speed 2013). Dignity is predicated on autonomy and “on mutual respect and communication with the other” (Faramelli 2018: 119).

The American communities allow spaces for the sort of active listening that is transformative. Casa Pueblo and Boggs Center, for instance, welcomes people from all walks of life into their communal activism with the hope that

scientists, economists, lawyers and musicians [...] were transformed into communitarian activists and we all in turn learned to do science, culture, poetry, economy, music. The scientist became a communal activist and communal activists were transformed into town scientists (Massol Gonzalez 2019: 18).

5.9 By and for the “Local”, but with an Expansive Vision and Outreach

The American communities believe that we must not underestimate the importance of local “rootedness” in living democratically. “Rootedness” (to be grounded, embodied) in particular and “local” communities and places is a condition for better inquiries, self-determination, empowerment, transformation, and meaning. As Grace Lee Boggs says, in Detroit it was important to practice “the kind of real problem-solving in their localities that nurtures a love of place and provides practice in creating the sustainable economies, equality, and communities that are the responsibility of citizenships” (Boggs and Kurashige 2012: 157).

For the American communities, what is “local” is the focus of their efforts and their inquiries about causes and remedies to injustices. This does not mean that they ignore or downplay the unavoidable and sometimes determining the role of “macro” forces. Communal inquiry cannot afford to ignore the wider circle of causes of local injustices, some of them even global. However, they are concerned mostly with local radical transformation without forgetting the national horizon, and without renouncing offering

a positive stimulus for the transformation of the whole world. In other words, the radical transformation of Mexico, the United States, Puerto Rico, and the world starts “here”. Whether local transformation can actually and in the long run enact enough change at the national and global level is an open question. Still, it is not what makes the present struggle for these communities meaningful.

For instance, Casa Pueblo has never forgotten that they live in a colony. Still, their focus and aim are to provide renewable solar-hybrid power to local communities (houses and businesses), one house or business at a time. Their *autogestion comunitaria* is “build locally, but is articulated at the national level and is projected globally” (Massol Gonzalez 2019: 18). Their model of energy distribution is from and for the “local” community, but with the hope that it would extend regional and nationally (Massol-Deyá 2020). This is what decolonization means for them.

The emphasis on local problems and resources, a “turning inwards” of these communities, is not seen as incompatible with “outreach” in the sense of seeking alliances and changes at the national and global level. The Zapatistas have turned inward but projected outward by establishing and widening solidarities with other local movements. As Justin Wedes says, “the 21st-century Zapatistas don’t view themselves in an insulated bubble but rather as part of a global movement for real democracy and climate justice” (Wedes 2014).

The American communities see themselves as participants of a global network – or movement – that is deeply pluralistic; as a movement of local movements all operating by and for local reconstruction. A proper response to the global hegemony of a group or culture is not faith in some global narrative of human emancipation. But neither is the proper response to succumb to the sort of atomistic or hyper localism (communal solipsism), where the world is fragmented with no reason to reach out and establish a growing network of solidarities. These communities are fully aware that national and global forces have zapped the quality of local associations, but for them to alleviate problems of national and planetary scope, we need more, not less, emphasis on what is local.

In sum, the democratic task for these communities is not an approximation to some ultimate or grandiose state of affairs based on a grand narrative diagnosis of evil across time and places. Genuine democracy requires “seed” and “soil” for spreading (expansion, growth). Democratic reconstruction starts where we are (amid a web of

local relations) and trying to extend as far as we can. Local places and communities are the centres of meaning and empowerment.⁴

6. Challenges and Objections

The American communities are not immune from problems and limitations. One can admire and learn from them without needing to romanticize them. These communities have had many challenges throughout their many years of struggle, some because of external forces and others internal to the communities. They are living proof that even the best forms of conviviality or democratic living are always enmeshed with either the legacy of inequalities from the past or new, unanticipated ones. For example, the Zapatistas are constantly challenged to reflect multiple identities (ethnicity, class, and gender) of their core support base and by state tactics to find ways to co-op their identity. They have resisted the impulse to base their alliances solely on class or ethnicity. They have had to face inequalities and marginalization in their own communities.

In the state of Chiapas, women have experienced before, during, and after the 1994 Zapatista uprising, oppressive situations in the private and public sphere (e.g., pre-arranged marriages, domestic violence, and femicide). The Zapatista communities, therefore, have had to struggle with both the violence and structural injustices that come from external forces and those reproduced from within their history and culture. Moreover, R. Aída Hernández Castillo's ethnographic research has revealed the multiple injustices the Zapatista women have had to endure from indigenous and national law, where even well-meaning feminist legal scholars trying to help them are blind to their ethnocentric perspectives (Hernández Castillo 2018).

Since the 1994 uprising, the internal problems within the Zapatista communities have improved. They have emphasized women's involvement to the point that today women can participate at all levels, and as a result, significant changes have been made, including laws passed and cultural transformation where more women can carry themselves with a sense of confidence and dignity. There continue to be some men's resistance for change, but women have moved from being limited to the private sphere to becoming political leaders, insurgents, health and education promoters, and coordinators of economic cooperatives. They began to shape the Zapatista communities. Women have moved from seeing themselves as victims to organizing and educating themselves through demanding spaces to participate within the Zapatista communities.

4 As Astra Taylor says, "while the democratic imagination is open and expansive, the practice must be both bounded and grounded, embodied in particular populations and places. Only by taking root can democracy seeds spread" (Taylor 2019: 275).

The Zapatista communities are, however, aware that there will always be a lot of work to be done regarding injustices from within their more horizontal ways of conviviality. They have learned from their struggle how even the most horizontal accomplishments tend to be always in tension with vertical tendencies and habits of domination deep within any community. They, and the other two communities in the Americas, have learned to question the complacency and lack of self-criticism from the simple and comforting Manichean views that assume injustices always come from some outside force or structure. No sharp boundaries can be drawn between good and evil based on identities.

These communities have also struggled with the challenge to minimize dependency and corruption. They have resisted the temptation to use outside help (e.g., government aid and programs) and to become part of democracy as a representative political machinery. Moreover, bolstering some degree of economic self-sufficiency while operating within broader economic structures (neoliberal policies) has not been easy. However, they are not ignorant or naïve about the power of the larger systems in which they operate. They recognize that they live in an uneasy and precarious tension with the larger system. For example, Casa Pueblo operates in a colonial system, and the Zapatistas in the Mexican neoliberal system. They are aware that they have relative and not absolute autonomy. But their aim is neither absolute autonomy nor some final historical liberation from some larger (national or global) system (colonialism or neoliberalism); at least, that is not the point or source of meaning for their present struggle.

However, despite these challenges, the American communities continue to be admired precisely because of how they face their problems and limitations. While they are far from perfect, these communities' praxis is one of trying to learn from experience. They stress the importance of learning, especially from mistakes, and listening. They reject simplistic diagnosis and solutions to problems that they know are complex, changing, and tragic. Their openness to self-criticism, experimentation, adaptation, and learning is admirable and is what has kept them most resilient and useful as models. Radical democracy requires coming to terms with how precarious and tense is any settled accomplishment in human relations. These communities provide lessons about how best to approach the unavoidable inequalities in *convivencia*. We must face up to them via a fallibilistic attitude, context-sensitivity, and new means of collaboration, including spaces for active listening and openness to self-criticism. These are virtues crucial for resilience and transformation. They can sustain and enrich a community but not be instrumental to some utopic world of conviviality without injustices.

The above common lessons are open to some important objections: (1) Isn't the emphasis on "local" and "micro" problematic at a time when it has become more obvious how systematic, structural, macro, and global are the more serious injustices we suffer

(colonialism, neoliberalism, white supremacy)?; (2) Is local self-determination today a dangerous and counterproductive myth that may serve the perpetuation of the above large structures-systems?; (3) Can this approach to injustices and model way of life be extended beyond the “local” sorts of contexts it has emerged? What is possible on a small scale may not be on a larger one. However, my presentation of these communities reveals that these objections are based on a superficial understanding of what these communities are about.

First, if we examine the deliberations of these communities, they do not abandon considering the role of systematic, structural, macro, or global causes of their local problems. They are sometimes seen as necessary, but it is a local problem that guides what is relevant or not. This is part of the context-sensitivity embodied in their practice. Talk about large structures are mere theoretical abstractions if we cannot show their presence in local problems and people. The local is the starting point and where we always are.

Second, these communities are aware of the limitations and continuous threats to local self-determination by national and global forces. Again, the direct aim of their struggle is neither absolute autonomy nor liberation from some larger system. To be realistic for them is to abandon the pretence of possible total isolation and lack of dependence. Acknowledging relationality and external pressures is compatible with the possibility of relative autonomy, which is a matter of degrees and dependent on how communities can monitor and resist them. They are fully aware of the risk in their locally focused strategies. They have not abandoned the hope that their focus on local transformation and self-determination is significant in overthrowing or breaking some evil larger system. Whether this will happen is an open empirical question, but such an outcome is not what makes important and meaningful the present struggle.

Third, these communities are aware that approach to injustices and model way of life may not be able to be reproduced elsewhere. They are explicit that what they propose should not be taken as a blueprint for other contexts. But this is because of one of the key lessons that can be extended to other contexts: context matters in sound thinking and judgment.

The general lessons these communities have provided (such as, avoid the concentration and quest for power) break with hierarchical ways of interacting, experiment with ways that are more horizontal, inclusive, and local; are suggested with the important qualification that no solution fits all places. In other words, context matters in communal deliberation and judgment; what may be appropriate for one place may not be for another.

In any case, is there any way of knowing in advance if anything accomplished at the local level by these communities can be extended beyond its contexts? We cannot really know how far it can be extended until we try, or experiment. Experimentation and trying to extend as much as possible democratic living is precisely what these communities stand for. We should aim at expanding the horizon, outreach, extension, and connections beyond the local. But the local is “where we are” and what is “within our reach”. That is where we should start.

One final objection may be that change from below and a strategic developmental fashion is limited, marginal, fragmented. Real revolutionary change does not come from small groups but popular will and resistance of working people or black people across the globe. How is carving out independent spaces going to challenge those mass spaces where people are daily subordinated? We need “mass movements” even if it is not an overnight worldwide explosion for a revolution.

This objection assumes what the communities have open to question regarding traditional revolutions. To be sure, they are not opposed to global movements as such. They see themselves as contributing to a larger network of similar communities all over the world. However, they believe that top-down and centralized global in scope revolutions have already been tried. They have no problem with global popular will, but global resistance must come from local work. We begin where we are and build outward. It is time to question the idea that the best way to ameliorate the world is to start at the political national, or global level, and somehow good things will “trickle down” to the most local places and people.

7. Conclusion

The American communities in the Americas are models and sources of inspiration for new democratic ways of transforming or ameliorating the world, not to a perfectly just one but with less injustices. We must continue to learn from them, in particular their redefinition of democracy and revolution, and their holistic, ecological, and experimental approach to ameliorating injustices. These communities have practical wisdom that we in the academy cannot ignore on the pretension that we are the source of self-sufficient or ultimate knowledge when it comes to the causes and solutions to injustices.

The lessons from these communities seem urgent today as the world is becoming more disillusioned by how democracy as a representative political system has failed us, and how the earth is closer to an ecological disaster. Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, there have been plenty written already about how our present crisis is an opportunity to rethink our relationship with animals and our place on earth. These communities are examples of this ecological, communal thinking. But it is not

thinking in the abstract; they have produced ecologically sustainable means to obtain the fundamental goals of life. There is a lot we can learn from them.

The American communities offer a way to be realistic without succumbing to pessimism, retraction, or passivity. To challenge today both naïve optimism and cynical pessimism requires a lot more than rational arguments. Becoming acquainted with communities and cultures that are seeing, thinking, sensing, and imagining the world differently is more powerful than words. As León and Rockhill have argued, “it is one thing to *tell* people that another world is possible; it is quite another to *show* them that another possible world is actual” (León and Rockhill 2020: 16). Another world is already being born in these different places-communities in the Americas. They are somewhat invisible in comparison to the deterioration of democracy all over the world. They offer no certainties nor a new grand narrative of human emancipation. Compare to traditional revolutions, they are local, multiple, changing, and fragile, but they should be taken seriously.

In recent interviews, Cornel West has called for “deepening democracy” as a “democracy from below” that require beyond critiques of the status quo, “alternative visions and ways of being that sustain our resilience in the face of the system” (Blakeley 2020) and a transformation of values. We should investigate the American communities as providing this alternative vision.

The relative success of these communities has already inspired others around the world to emulate them. For instance, in Seattle, there has been an effort to create an autonomous zone within the city, one that “replicate the legacy of resistance organizing rooted in Latin America”. The community has tried to find ways to provide their means to resolve their own problems without relying on the police (Wallis 2020). However, they have faced some severe challenges. Their success is questionable. This is hardly evidence that we should not learn from the American communities. For, again, one of their key lessons is that trying to replicate across contexts is a mistake. There is no blueprint to follow in the struggle for democratization or a more horizontal *convivencia* as each location is faced with different challenges and resources. Good judgment requires communities of inquiry in different locations that must consider the local history, conditions, and resources. This requires sensitivity to context, a virtue practiced by the American communities.

In light of creeping fascism, white supremacy, misogyny, and domestic terrorism, the American communities insist in actualizing democracy’s most radical potential and give up on the illusion that just changing presidents can ameliorate our problems (Kurashige 2012). In the 20th century, American philosophers Villoro and Dewey had a resonant hope for more grassroots movements calling for a view of democracy. They believed,

just as the communities I have presented, that life (*la vida*) in its integrity teaches us that there is no use in separating the economic and the political from the moral and the ecological. There is a need to move from the consumer and individualistic mentalities of the West to a more ecological and communal vision. We must if we are even to survive.

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