

Towards New Emancipatory Horizons: Autonomous Politics in Urban Groups of Mexico and Chile

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"Critical thinking is necessary for the struggle.
Critical thinking they refer to as theory.
We say no to lazy thinking that conforms itself to whatever exists.
No to dogmatic thinking that tries to become Rule and impose itself.
No to trickery that argues by using lies.
We say yes to the type of thinking that asks, that questions, that doubts.
Not even in the most difficult conditions should the study and analysis of reality be abandoned.
Study and analysis are also weapons of struggle.
But neither practice by itself, nor theory by itself is enough.
Thinking that does not struggle does nothing but make noise.
A struggle that does not think repeats its mistakes and does not get up after it falls.
Struggle and thinking unite in those who are warriors, in the rebellion and resistance that today shake the world, even if their sound is one of silence.
We Zapatistas think and struggle.
We struggle and think within the collective heart that we are."

Subcomandante Insurgente Moisés,
EZLN Communique,
January 1st, 2015

Abstract

Recent decades have witnessed the emergence of powerful social movements and community initiatives across Latin America. These collective projects have developed a strong anti-systemic critique, refusing state-centred and top-down approaches to social change and seeking to prefigure in the present the social world in which they want to live in. At a micro scale, the political organizing around grassroots groups or *colectivos* has become a popular strategy for Latin American activists living in the city. Inspired by this phenomenon, this thesis analyses the politics of autonomy enacted by *colectivo*s in Latin America. More specifically, it examines how the politics of autonomy is understood by Chilean and Mexican *colectivos*; the dimensions, organizational structures and strategies shaping their praxis; the main challenges encountered in the 'doing' of autonomous politics; and its potential for the prefiguration of a radical approach to social change.

Informed by the traditions of activist research and militant ethnography, this research has advanced a collective and politically-engaged process of knowledge production, providing a thick description of the politics of autonomy enacted by Latin American *colectivos.* This thesis also moves beyond Western and Eurocentric scholarship, committing to an 'epistemology of the South' that acknowledges the rich knowledge production developed with/alongside autonomous movements in Latin America.

The findings of this thesis reveal that Latin American autonomous activists have a twofold understanding of autonomy: a negative one, based on the refusal of the main systems of domination; and an affirmative one, based on the creation of an alternative politics able to challenge those hegemonic systems. The creative side of autonomy is put into motion through five main dimensions (horizontality, affective politics, *autogestión*; popular education; and political networks) that are not free from challenges and hindrances. As the *colectivos* understand autonomous politics both as a horizon and a struggle, they acknowledge the issues encountered in their praxis and make constant efforts to improve their collective performance. Finally, it is concluded that the politics of autonomy is not only a political statement nor a romantic utopia. It is a radical, organic and feasible approach to social change being enacted in the here and now by *colectivos* and larger social movements across Latin America.

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CHAPTER ONE:
INTRODUCTION

"Against death, we demand life.
Against silence, we demand the word and respect.
Against oblivion, memory.
Against humiliation and contempt, dignity.
Against oppression, rebellion.
Against slavery, freedom.
Against imposition, democracy.
Against crime, justice."
(Subcomandante Marcos, *EZLN*, May 2014)

1.1 Introduction

The last decades have witnessed the emergence of heterogeneous and powerful popular struggles across Latin America. The Mexican Zapatistas, the Landless Rural Workers' Movement in Brazil, the Chilean student movement, the workers-controlled factories in Argentina, the indigenous movements in Bolivia, Ecuador and all over the continent, feminists from different countries standing against violence, the *Ayotzinapa* movement demanding justice for the disappearance of 43 Mexican students, these are just a few examples of the 'explosion of rage and hope' (Dinnerstein, 2015, p.1) that has expanded throughout the continent. These movements have generated a lot of scholarly interest and several researchers have tried to capture the political ethos and dynamics of these large processes of resistance[1].

These struggles have coexisted with less spectacular although equally radical grassroots initiatives, in which a diverse array of political subjects are challenging capitalist, patriarchal and colonial structures. They constitute an anti-systemic critique, which is coupled with a growing disavowal of representative politics, expressed in movements and communities' refusal to accept 'top-down' approaches to social change and the

[1] See page 17 for a summary of scholars working on these movements.

tutelage imposed by traditional institutions such as the state and political parties. Rather than waiting for top-down solutions or for future revolutions that will come when the state has been conquered, the members of these movements are trying to prefigure in the present the social world in which they want to live. Through innovative forms of self-organization, self-determination and self-management, they embrace the idea of 'autonomy' as a new path towards emancipation, trying to build 'a new world within the shell of the old' (King, 2016, p.38).

Inspired by this political phenomenon, this thesis analyses the politics of autonomy enacted by '*colectivos*'[2] in Latin American cities. The main research question guiding my study is thus:

What can we learn about the politics of autonomy from the study of urban *colectivos* in Chile and Mexico?

In order to answer the main research question, I have established the following sub-questions:

1. How is the politics of autonomy understood and enacted by urban *colectivos* in Chile and Mexico?
2. How do these *colectivos* challenge existing systems of domination?
3. Which dimensions, organizational structures and strategies shape the 'doing' of autonomous politics in these *colectivos*?
4. What are the main problems and challenges encountered in the practice of autonomous politics?
5. Does autonomous politics challenge state-centred approaches to social change and prefigure a radical approach to social transformation?

These questions will be answered through a collective and politically-engaged process of knowledge production with and within Chilean and Mexican '*colectivos*'. In

[2] In English: 'collectives' or grassroots political groups with an autonomous political stance. See section 1.2 in this chapter for a detailed explanation of *colectivos*.

answering them, I have sought to develop a 'thick description'[3] (Geertz, 1973; Denzin, 1989) of autonomous politics in two Latin American countries, with the hope that this reflection will contribute to current social struggles for emancipation.

Having laid out the aim and research questions guiding my study, in what follows I will present the personal journey and motivations shaping this research project along with its theoretical, methodological and political relevance. Then, I will provide a contextual overview of Chile and Mexico, looking particularly at their political and economic trajectories. Next, I will present my case studies, the four '*colectivo*s' that gave life to this research. Finally, I conclude with an outline of my thesis's structure.

1.2 From rage and hope we rise: Why study autonomous politics in Latin American cities?

I was born in 1983, in the middle of one of the most horrific dictatorships that modern history recalls. Although I was a child, I vividly remember those nights when my parents joined thousands of Chileans who banged their pots in protest against the lack of democracy in our country. As a child, those nights were fun, because I did not understand the risk that all these people, including my parents, were taking by engaging in this practice of dissent. I also remember the day of the plebiscite, when Chile said 'No' to Pinochet's dictatorship and millions, including myself, went onto the streets to celebrate the return of democracy. The hugs in the streets represented the hope of millions of people who believed that a new democratic Chile was lying ahead. By embracing the opposition's slogan (*'Chile, happiness is coming'*), they trusted that happiness was finally arriving to our wounded country. Nonetheless, the elite-led transition to democracy maintained authoritarian features within the new 'democratic' system and gradual disenchantment with the political order emerged. The dictatorship generated a culture of individualism and political apathy and this did not disappear. I became a

[3]Clifford Geertz (1973) is the first author who introduces the notion of 'thick description' into the qualitative research's vocabulary. With this concept, he wanted to stress the importance of developing rich and thick descriptions of the context under which the researchers' interpretations are made. For the purpose of this thesis, I draw on Denzin's (1989) adaptation of the notion of 'thick description'. In his words, a thick description: '…goes beyond mere fact and surface appearances. It presents detail, context, emotion, and the webs of social relationships that join persons to one another. Thick description evokes emotionality and self-feelings. It inserts history into experience. It establishes the significance of an experience, or the sequence of events, for the person or persons in question. In thick description, the voices, feelings, actions, and meanings of interacting individuals are heard'. (Denzin, 1989, p.83)

teenager in this context. Seduced by the neoliberal culture, I tried hard to become the 'girl' that commercial TV was portraying. However, something did not fit. Although my parents never tried to impose their political views on me, the baggage of the family history was too heavy to ignore. My grandfather was a member of the Communist Party and became a political prisoner during Pinochet's regime. Although he was lucky enough to be released in less than a year, the thought that he was tortured for his beliefs kept circling around in my head. As the feeling that something was wrong never ceased and my identity as a 'mainstream girl' did not work out, I decided to change my circle of friends and get closer to a communist classmate who introduced me to the world of politics at the age of 15. For three years, I became a loyal supporter of the Chilean Communist Youth, believing in the party as a catalyst for social change. This commitment changed when I started my University degree and I was able to share with others my disagreements regarding the bureaucracy, vertical dynamics and reformist trends existing within the party. In this new environment, I realized that there were other spaces of resistance. There were collective projects that did not have vertical structures nor vanguard-based strategies seeking to 'educate' the alienated masses. Disenchanted with the low-intensity new democracy, these groups stopped believing in a change achieved by seizing state power, posing instead the idea of resistance and construction of a radical politics 'from below'. Inspired by the Zapatistas, the Argentinean uprising and other Latin American movements that were challenging the political and economic elite, I joined this wave of re-politicization and began my journey as an autonomous activist. Since then, I have grown politically, I have gained theoretical and empirical knowledge on processes of resistance, I have been active in different groups and political networks; I have changed my mind about some matters and I still think the same about others, but, most importantly, I have kept dreaming. These dreams nourish my soul and give me the energy to obstinately insist on the quest for social justice. In my thirties, and against the predictions of those who thought that my 'rebel period' would pass, I am more convinced than ever that we have the power to create multiple cracks to the neo-colonial and patriarchal capitalist order and to change the world from below.

Why do I begin my doctoral thesis with an autobiography and a statement of my political beliefs? Unlike some research projects, the motivations behind my thesis are not only concerned with filling 'gaps' in the literature, although this has become an important outcome of my study. I do not seek to analyse a social phenomenon from a detached or

value-neutral approach either, albeit my politically engaged methodology has proven to have its own validity mechanisms and a situated and embodied version of objectivity. My research stems from my experience as an activist and it seeks to contribute to current social struggles through the creation of a collective process of knowledge production with and within Latin American autonomous groups. In particular, with this thesis I hope to make a contribution to the internal reflections of *colectivos* and movements regarding the potential, challenges and horizons of autonomous politics.

Beginning from my own story is a political and epistemological decision. It means challenging the passive voice and impersonal third person so fiercely defended by mainstream academia and instead explicitly placing myself in the field I am studying. It is an acknowledgment that I am also part of the 'we' who struggle, of that collective scream of refusal and dignity that John Holloway (2010a) so beautifully captured in his book '*Change the world without taking power'*[4]*:*

> In the beginning is the scream. We scream (…) 'We' are here as the starting point because we cannot honestly start anywhere else. We cannot start anywhere other than with our own thoughts and our own reactions (…) We can only start from where we are but do not want to be, from where we scream. (Holloway, 2010a, p.1,4)

As a critical scholar, this departure point led me to focus on local spaces where we have been collectively screaming. Accordingly, in 2006 and 2007 I studied youth political collectives in southern Chile, comparing the practices and discourses of autonomous and traditional groups. With this comparison, I wanted to stress the unique character of autonomous '*colectivos*'[5] (collectives), through an analysis that would enable us to draw lessons from our own political experiences. In the case of Chile, '*colectivos*' flourished during the post-dictatorship period. The Chilean historians Gabriel Salazar and Julio Pinto (2002) were some of the first authors who made visible this new type of political organizing. According to them, *colectivos* are grassroots organizations that gather members with a similar cultural and political positioning. They share an explicit political stance, are committed to reaching consensus and prefer to avoid unnecessary formalities. The discourse embedded in these groups reveals their democratic-participatory

[4] This book was first published in 2002.
[5] Valenzuela-Fuentes (2007).

inclination: all the members think, decide and act; there is no censure, no bosses, and representation is subordinated to participation (Salazar and Pinto 2002). Autonomous '*colectivos'*, usually located in the cities, reject 'representative' politics and engage with a new set of political practices such as equal participation, asambleism, *autogestión* (self-management), pluralism and a cultural turn in politics (Valenzuela-Fuentes, 2007). By calling themselves '*colectivos*', these groups emphasize the collective character of the struggle, as opposed to electoral participation that deposits in the individual act of voting the possibilities of social transformation (Muñoz, 2002).

Through the exploration of the politics of '*colectivos*', I also sought to contest mainstream scholarship about political participation in Chile, which has overlooked non-institutionalised collective experiences and relegated them to the 'social' sphere, leaving the 'political' as the exclusive field of party-type organizations and state-centred participation[6]. If in 2007 the study of this type of politics was marginal, after the massive students' uprising in 2011 and the consequent irradiation of autonomous ideas and practices within the movement, more scholarship[7] began to acknowledge some of the features of this new form of political organising. The influence of the autonomous trend over the Chilean student movement gave us another reason to believe even more in the potential of this alternative approach to social change. Drawing on the students' mobilizations of 2011 and research[8] that documented Chilean and other Latin American struggles, it can be argued that the cycles of social protest in the region have been nourished by the political insights of micro-projects of autonomous organizing that, from below, have radicalized broader political demands and movements' agendas. Nevertheless, despite the evident relevance of this politics 'from below' and the growing acknowledgment of it in academic studies, several authors[9] have remained suspicious of these experiences, labelling them as immature political expressions. Inherent in these analyses is the claim that the politics enacted by these sectors is somehow defective, inasmuch as it is incapable of channelling people's demands through institutional systems.

[6] See, for example, Garretón and Villanueva (1999); Thezá (2003).
[7] See, for example, Bro Khomasi (2011); Bartoletti and Mangiantini (2011); Silva and Romero (2013)
[8] See, for example, Hernandez (2013); Sandoval (2013); Zibechi (2012); Salazar and Pinto (2002).
[9] See, for example: Atria (2012); Urra (2012); Núñez (2012). Also, see my critique to these authors and analysis of the autonomous current within the Chilean student movement in Valenzuela-Fuentes (2015).

In light of the above, and considering: a) the growing emergence of autonomous political spaces in Chile and Latin America; b) the dominance of scholarship using 'old' conceptual lenses (Motta, 2009a) for the understanding (and misunderstanding) of autonomous politics in Chile; and, c) my experience as an autonomous[10] activist coupled with my strong commitment to this approach to social change and my desire to co-produce knowledge that is useful to contemporary struggles; is that I decided to carry out a doctoral research focused on the study of autonomous politics in Latin America.

If Chilean politics was a familiar terrain for me and my decision to continue with its study stemmed from my own experience and political motivations; bringing Mexico into the analysis became a challenging new endeavour. Although the autonomous approach to social change has become more popular in Chile during the last decade, its development is still modest in comparison to other Latin American countries such as Mexico, Argentina and Bolivia. The Zapatista rebellion in Southern Mexico in 1994, the Argentinean uprising in 2001/2002, and the water and gas wars in Bolivia in 2000 and 2003 were considered turning points in the Latin American history of radical social struggles. However, there is no doubt that the Zapatista self-governing project, developed over more than two decades, has become the hallmark of autonomous emancipatory struggles in the continent and worldwide. Interestingly, this powerful movement emerges and has survived in a context of the deep neoliberalisation of Mexico, a process that is entangled and supported by the authoritarian features of an eroded political system.

With significant differences regarding their history, evolution of political systems and intensities of socio-political and economic problems, both Mexico and Chile have been deeply shaped by processes of neoliberal restructuring and have not joined the wave of left-wing governments ruling other Latin American countries, such as Ecuador, Bolivia and Venezuela[11]. At different levels, the political systems of these two countries are

[10] In this thesis, I prefer the word 'autonomous' over 'autonomist'. With this choice, I have sought to prevent potential confusions between autonomous groups and the Chilean 'Autonomist Movement'. This is a left-wing current that pursues an electoral path and political change from above, therefore, it has no relationship with the ethos of the autonomous politics discussed in this research.

[11] Although Chile has been ruled for two periods (2006-2010; 2014-2018) by the member of the Socialist Party Michelle Bachelet, her governments cannot be considered left-wing, as they have remained loyal to the neoliberal agenda and despite some reforms, they have not changed the authoritarian constitution forged during Pinochet's dictatorship. In her last period, Bachelet has launched a process to draw up a new constitution, but by defining a process of non-binding participation, citizens' opinions can be easily neglected by the technocrats, putting in doubt the democratic tone of the future new constitution.

facing a serious legitimacy crisis, observed in people's distrust towards the Government, political parties and other formal institutions. This crisis has been accompanied by the upsurge of neoliberal subjectivities, dramatically absorbed by individualist and consumerist behaviours. But at the same time, both Chile and Mexico have also become seedbeds for the emergence of powerful social movements, such as the Zapatistas, the Oaxaca commune, the *Yo Soy 132* and *Ayotzinapa* movements in Mexico; or the Chilean students' rebellions of 2006 and 2011 and the long-lasting *Mapuche* indigenous struggle in southern Chile.

Considering the similar features defining the Chilean and Mexican society but also the significant differences and the 'Zapatista factor' that leaves Mexico as a unique case for the study of autonomous politics, this research seeks to analyse and contrast how the politics of autonomy is understood and enacted by urban groups from these two countries. Rather than studying their exemplar (and large) social movements, such as the Zapatistas or the Chilean students' mobilizations, my thesis is focused on micro projects of resistance or *'colectivos*' that perform an underground political practice in big cities. These groups follow their own specific agendas albeit they usually interrelate and are influenced by broader movements and struggles both from the city and the countryside. Accordingly, this thesis seeks to provide a glimpse of this interaction, exploring how small urban groups interact with broader movements or networks and which ideological perspectives influence their praxis and political stance.

While always needed, extensive research already exists about the 'big names' of Latin American social struggles, such as Zapatismo (Holloway and Pelaez, 1998; Khasnabish, 2008; Aguirre, 2008), the Chilean students' movements (Atria, 2012; Rojas, 2012; Garcés, 2012; Hernández, 2013), the Brazilian *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra - MST*[12] (Aznárez and Arjona, 2002; Fernándes, 2008; Motta, 2017) and the Argentinean (Dinerstein, 2002, 2003; Sitrin, 2012) and Bolivian (Gutiérrez, 2009; Zibechi, 2011) uprisings, among many others. However, not much attention has been paid to grassroots initiatives that without a large number of members nor material resources manage to have a substantial political impact in the territory where they are based[13]. Although my interest in '*colectivos*' stems from my own political practice, my

[12] In English: Landless Workers Movement.

[13] *JRA*, one of my case studies, is a good example. In the past, they have been producers of music festivals with more than 10 thousand attendees. These events were highly politicized and raised awareness on the

thesis also contributes to fill this gap in the study of 'less spectacular' although equally radical autonomous struggles.

In line with the previous point, the scholarship about Latin American autonomous politics has usually taken some of these 'big names' as examples for guiding their reflections. Many draw on the Zapatistas, the *MST* and other indigenous and peasant struggles for the identification of features and challenges in the politics of autonomy. However, as a Latin American activist woman who has grown and organised in the city, I have experienced for myself the difficulties of challenging the hegemonic system in a space that sometimes seem to be owned and ruled by capitalism and the state. Although urban and rural struggles share several features, it is clear that the quest for autonomy in the city takes a different form than those resisting in the countryside. Hernán Ouviña (2011) has developed an interesting work about urban autonomy, drawing the distinctions between Latin American movements in the city and those in the countryside. Unlike urban movements, rural struggles have a geographical space in which to develop alternative productive relations, they are bonded by strong community traditions and are less co-opted by the state, as its presence is greater in the city (Ouviña, 2011). With the lack of a geo-political territory, the predominance of individualistic subjectivities and a state that tries to control every single action of dissent, the enactment of autonomous politics in urban settings becomes an intricate path with specific challenges and contradictions. With similar concerns, in her insightful book *'Hacer común contra la fragmentación en la ciudad. Experiencias de Autonomía Urbana',* Mina Lorena Navarro (2015) analyses different experiences of urban autonomy in Mexico City and Puebla, Mexico, asking how we can deal with the limits imposed by the capitalist city and build sustainable community projects that enable the social reproduction of life in urban territories. Both Ouviña (2011) and Navarro (2015) have made great contributions to the underdeveloped field of urban autonomy in Latin American countries. My thesis seeks to add to their research by exploring in detail the features and challenges of urban autonomous politics both in Mexico and Chile.

importance of resistance in large numbers of people. Besides, they encouraged other groups to produce more politically-engaged festivals in Mexico City. In recent conversations with Mexican activists, it was also suggested that the massive *Ayotzinapa* Movement (2014) was strengthened in the cities thanks to the involvement of autonomous *colectivos*. In the case of Chile, and following Hernández's work (2011), it can be argued that the powerful student movements of 2006 and 2011 were nourished and enhanced by the political insights of students' *colectivos*.

Developing politically-engaged research generates another important dilemma: how to produce knowledge? In a context dominated by research that is compliant with the hegemonic system, critical scholarship becomes essential. The two original studies[14] that I carried out before my doctoral research clearly fit within the field of critical social sciences. However, despite my commitment to make visible the struggles of groups and communities in resistance, I did not challenge the mainstream epistemological and methodological approaches applied in social sciences, reproducing a division between myself as researcher and the research subjects. This thesis has followed a different path. Joining Mignolo's (2009) call to not only change the content but also 'the terms of the conversation' (p.4), I have pursued the development of sympathetic research about autonomous movements. By embracing feminist and prefigurative epistemologies and adopting militant ethnography as my methodological approach, I have tried to go beyond the traditional forms of knowledge production, committing to a collaborative form of research carried out from within rather than outside autonomous groups. Although the field of activist/militant research is somewhat emergent, previous scholars have already developed insightful reflections about the rationale, practicalities and challenges of this approach. Drawing on their experiences as activist researchers in Western Europe and North America, authors such as Juris (2007, 2008), Juris and Khasnabish (2013), Casas-Cortés (2008), Hale (2006) and Russell (2014), among others; have discussed in great detail the epistemological and methodological features of this type of inquiry. In the case of Latin America, Colectivo Situaciones (2007) has made a significant contribution too, proposing an innovative methodology of militant research with and within communities in struggle. Zibechi (2012), Sitrin (2012), Motta (2014) and Navarro (2015), among others, have advanced politically-engaged and collaborative forms of research with/within Latin American movements. Undoubtedly, this scholarship has managed to co-create theory from the ground-up, developing insightful analyses of autonomous movements in Latin America. Nonetheless, most of these authors[15] provide only a glimpse of the epistemological assumptions and methodological procedures guiding their studies. The same happens to their experiences as activist researchers or the account of ethical and methodological issues encountered throughout their research processes.

[14]Both studies were conducted in Chile. The first one, as part of my undergraduate degree dissertation, explored Chilean political '*colectivos*' (see Valenzuela-Fuentes, 2007). The second one, as part of my Master's dissertation, analysed 'grassroots housing organizations' after the earthquake of 2010 (see Simon and Valenzuela-Fuentes, 2017).

[15] Those focused on Latin America.

As these aspects have not been discussed enough by the previous scholars, my thesis seeks to take on that task. Through the 'thick description' (Denzin, 1989) of autonomous groups and a thorough account of my epistemology, methods and personal journey as militant ethnographer, I believe that my thesis provides a unique contribution to the emergent field of activist/militant research in Latin America.

1.3 Resisting within a Capitalist Society: An Overview of the Neoliberal Transformation in Chile and Mexico

In the previous section, I emphasised the importance of beginning from the 'we', with that collective force of dignity that refuses to accept the world as it is. Placing the 'we' at the core of this thesis is not a random choice. Agreeing with Holloway's (2016) reflections, rather than beginning with domination, I have deliberately decided to start from dignity, from the forces that can actually break the dominant structures. Following Holloway (2016):

> if we start with domination (…) then there is a great danger that we enclose ourselves, that we entrap ourselves within the structures of domination that we want to criticize (…) It's important to start with something that is not closure, with something that is openness, with breaking. In other words, it's important to start with ourselves (p.30)

At the risk of leaning too much on the side of agency, in this study I have chosen to tell the story of those (including myself) who are building new political practices from below, of those micro-projects of resistance that at a local scale are trying to crack the structures of domination. As the following chapters will show, my thesis remains loyal to this purpose, emphasizing how Latin American *colectivos* understand and enact autonomous politics and what are the challenges encountered in their praxis. Nevertheless, this emphasis should not be confused with a complete disregard of the role played by the structure. Pivotal to my analysis is an understanding that this alternative politics is being enacted in a field dominated by capitalist, patriarchal and neo-colonialist institutions and social relations. As Holloway (2016) points out, 'we don't live in some kind of after-capitalist heaven unfortunately. We live in this society and also live against it' (p.12). In light of this argument, in the following sub-sections I present an overview

of both Chilean and Mexican societies, stressing the neoliberal formula adopted by capitalism and how it affects these countries' political systems and subjectivities.

1.3.1 Chile: The Imposition of Neoliberalism

Chile has played an important role in the international account of neoliberalism. On the one hand, it was the first country where a systematic program of neoliberal restructuring was introduced (Taylor, 2006). On the other hand, it was violently imposed by a dictatorship (Garretón, 2012) that stole democracy from the Chilean people. In 1973, a military coup led by Augusto Pinochet overthrew the socialist president Salvador Allende. The coup put an end to the civic life of the country and to the dream of an institutional path to socialism. It prohibited the operation of political parties and electoral mechanisms, abolished most civic rights, subordinated the Judicial System to the military board (Garretón, 2007), crushed experiments from below articulated around the idea of popular power[16], and systematically violated human rights by murdering, torturing, imprisoning, disappearing and forcing into exile more than 30 thousand people across the national territory (*Rettig* Report, 1991; *Valech* Report, 2004). With the physical and symbolic extermination of the left and social movements' agents, the dictatorial regimes in the Southern Cone began the 'dirty job of eradicating the revolutionary dream' whilst paving the way for the implementation of the neoliberal phase of capitalism (Dinerstein, 2015, p85).

For 17 years (1973-1990), Pinochet's dictatorship developed a conservative capitalist counter-revolution, implementing neoliberalism as a new model of accumulation linked to a subsidiary state (Gaudichaud, 2014). With the technocratic support of economists from the School of Chicago (known as the *'Chicago Boys'*), Chile launched a new model of development based on the 'primacy of individualism, market liberalism, outward-orientation, and state contraction' (Onis and Senses, 2005). The new ideas were enforced through a 'standard package of economic policies (Stahler-Sholk et al., 2014), that later (1989) would come to be known as the 'Washington Consensus' by the economist John Williamson (Williamson, 2004). This (pseudo) 'consensus' encompassed a number of policy reforms, including financial liberalization, abolition of barriers to foreign

[16] Such as the Industrial Belts, bodies of workers' direct democracy. See Gaudichaud (2004).

investment, privatization of state enterprises and reduction of public expenditure, among others (Williamson, 2004). Here, the role of the state was to build and preserve an institutional framework able to 'secure private property rights and to guarantee, by force if need be, the proper functioning of markets' (Harvey, 2005b, p.2). This was precisely the role played by the authoritarian regime. By reducing the redistributive role of the state (Garretón, 2007), banning collective action and subsuming social relations to the market (Rojas, 2012), the dictatorship succeeded in building a 'neoliberal society' (Gómez Leyton, 2007) where a new individualist rationality and subjectivity emerged (Gaudichaud, 2014). Nevertheless, despite these transformations, Pinochet's dictatorship was unable to fully control Chilean society (Guerrero, 2004). In a context of extreme repression, new popular actors began to rearticulate. In the periphery of the society, a number of noninstitutionalized grassroots organizations quietly began to build networks of social support (Simon and Valenzuela-Fuentes, 2017), seeking to 'fill the void with independent initiatives in education, health care, nutrition, micro-production, credit and so on' (Carruthers, 2001, p.345).

Although this politics from below played a pivotal role in the resistance against the dictatorship and augured the beginning of a democratic new Chile, the 'pacted' democratic transition led by the military and political elites decided otherwise. From the 1990s, social movements suffered the effects of their exclusion from the new governability pact (Garcés, 2012). Under the argument of protecting the recently conquered democratic institutions, the newly elected centre-left governments from 'the *Concertación*'[17] focused on the maintenance of governability and order, disregarding the quest for social justice or greater equality (Simon and Valenzuela-Fuentes, 2016) and seeking to deactivate the anti-dictatorship movements. In this context, the restored new democracy retained Pinochet's authoritarian constitution (Winn, 2004), protected the autonomy of the military (Posner, 1999) and continued applying the neoliberal economic framework developed during the dictatorship (Garretón, 2012). By inheriting the 'authoritarian enclaves' of Pinochet's regime (Garretón, 2012), the new governments advanced an institutional system that, under the discourse of the 'protected democracy',

[17] The Concertación, '*Concertación de Partidos por la Democracia'* in Spanish or 'Coalition of Parties for Democracy', in English, was a coalition founded in 1988 that gathered a number of centre-left political parties in Chile. It was in force until 2013, as in 2014 the parties comprising the *Concertación* were re-articulated in a new coalition called '*Nueva Mayoría'* (New Majority, in English), incorporating the Communist Party as a new member.

defended the interests of the economic and political elites. A good example of this approach to democracy was the imposition of the binomial electoral system, in force until 2015. With a two-member district system, this regime replaced the proportional system existing in pre-authoritarian Chile, fostering the formation of 'two major electoral blocs of parties' (Olavarrría, 2003, p.22). Initially designed to favour the right wing parties (Siavelis, 2000), this bipartisan system ended up excluding independent candidates and misrepresenting the constituencies' preferences (PNUD, 2004). The authoritarian legacy in contemporary Chile is also observed in the Governments' maintenance of the privatisation and neoliberal agenda. As Barton (2002) argues, the Chilean state has 'retained and deepened its capitalist features (…) continuing the capitalist accumulation model imposed by the Chicago Boys economic team from 1975' (p.359).

The gendered dimension of the model of accumulation should also be noted, as women have become 'the preferred suppliers of cheap labour power' (Mora, 2006, p.45). This is clearly observed in the feminisation of the export agriculture sector, where in order to make a wage, women *temporeras*[18] have no option but to join low wages, precarious, deregulated and informal jobs (Schwendler, 2012).

With more than 25 years of democratic rule, and after several reforms seeking to mitigate social unrest, but without seeking to produce structural transformations, the social democratic coalition has followed a logic of pragmatic adaptation to the hegemonic order (Gaudichaud, 2014). This order is characterized by a 'mature' or 'deep' stage of neoliberalism, in which economic rationality has been extended to almost the totality of social relations (Agacino, 2006, 2013). The neoliberal project is not only dominant in the elite but in all the social groups, shaping the economy, culture, politics and people's life styles across social classes. Gómez-Leyton (2007), for instance, sees Chilean society as politically conservative, media-influenced, widely depoliticized, commodified, unequal, socially fragmented, individualist and competitive. This has led to the emergence of neoliberal subjectivities, such as 'credit-card citizens' (Gaudichaud, 2014,

[18] *Temporera*s/os are seasonal workers, usually women, who work in the fruit or vegetable-export industry under temporary contracts, and in some cases, with no contract at all. Following Bee and Vogel (1997), *temporeras* belong to the sector of the most unprotected workers in the country and are a good illustration of the extreme effects of neoliberalism in the labour market.

p.9), who reproduce consumerist and individualistic traits and usually withdraw from public matters.

Unlike the post-neoliberal discourses present in other Latin American processes, the 'post' in Chile is a misnomer. Forty years since its implementation, neoliberalism is deeply rooted, and despite the progressive reforms from the 'centre-left' governments, the country remains 'ruled by its owners' (Fazio, 2011; Gaudichaud, 2014). As a form of governance, neoliberalism has combined 'caring' forms of discipline, based on an anti-poverty rhetoric, with a coercive and punitive strategy. If the former seeks to provide pensions, health care and educational opportunities to the poorest, the latter relies on the use of force and coercion (Schild, 2013) towards those who potentially hinder the maintenance of the status quo. As Schild (2013) argues:

> 'State violence (…) has not become a thing of the past in Chile but has taken newer, explicit forms, as is illustrated by the systematic deployment of militarized police units in poor social and urban spaces (…) by the construction of prisons, and by the criminalization of dissent and social mobilization' (p.150).

But despite the evident dangers of dissent, the hegemonic system has not remained unchallenged. Several expressions of resistance have given birth to emergent political subjectivities that contest the neoliberalisation of Chile. Outbursts of indignation occur in the midst of a severe crisis of the political system, where growing sectors begin to openly question the legitimacy and credibility of the state and its institutions (Mira, 2011; Valenzuela-Fuentes, 2013; Garcés, 2012; Gaudichaud, 2013). The findings from the National Study of Public Opinion developed by CEP - *Centro de Estudios Públicos*[19] -seem to support this analysis. According to the last national survey (2016), the Government, the justice system, Parliament and the political parties are considered the four most-distrusted institutions (CEP, 2016). The growing mistrust of representative political models is observable in declining voter turnout in the last general elections. Here, the new president was appointed with an abstention of 50% in the first ballot and 58% in the final one. The same tendency was found in the last election of local authorities in 2016, with 66% voter abstention (SERVEL, 2016) and the lowest turnout since the 'return' to democracy in 1989.

[19] In English: Centre for Public Studies.

With growing social unrest and popular mobilizations, the last decade has made visible the cracks (Holloway, 2010b) of a model that has failed in its attempts to transform all problems into market issues (Agacino, 2013). The continuance and emergence of powerful and heterogeneous struggles in contemporary Chile is evidence of this 'awakening' (Garcés, 2012): thousands of people have refused to be subsumed under the logics of capital. The student's 'penguin revolution' (2006), the national mobilizations against the Hydroelectric Power Station *Hidroaysén*, the massive 2011 student movement, the *Mapuche* indigenous resistance (1990s onwards) and the regional uprisings in Aysén (2012), Freirina (2012) and Chiloé (2016); are only the most spectacular examples of the struggles, movements and community organizing processes that are partially cracking neoliberal capitalism.

1.3.2 Mexico: The 'Perfect Dictatorship' Unveiled

Unlike Chile and other countries from the Southern Cone, Mexico did not experience a military coup that laid out the foundations of the neoliberal project. However, the 'dominant and continuous single-party rule under the auspices of the PRI[20] for over seventy years' (Morton, 2011, p.176), reveals the authoritarian features of the Mexican institutional regime that enabled the implementation of a neoliberal agenda. The economic collapse of 1982 was a turning point for this shift in Mexico and the region (Stahler-Sholk et al., 2014). In that year, the Mexican government declared its incapacity to serve its debt. This announcement triggered a crisis that expanded throughout most countries in the region, facilitating the intervention of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) over domestic finances. The loans and control mechanisms imposed by the Bretton Woods institutions marked the beginning of a new epoch for Mexico and Latin America, characterized by the 'subordination to international financial institutions and the US multinational banks' (Dinerstein, 2015, p.98). In a similar fashion to the neoliberal package imposed in Chile, the Mexican restructuring was based on a 'market-driven, private sector-led, export-based strategy that opened up the country even more to foreign capital' (Cockcroft, 1998, p.244). If the early 1980s marked the beginning of the neoliberal restructuring in Mexico, it was under Salinas de Gortari's administration (1988-1994), that the project was accelerated and deepened. In 1991-1992, for example,

[20] *Partido Revolutionario Institutional* (Spanish). In English: Institutional Revolutionary Party

the Government reformed Article 27 of the Agrarian Law to privatize *ejidos*, the system of communal land tenure advanced by the Mexican Revolution and formalized in the Constitution of 1917 (Smith, 1992; Jones and Ward 1998). This reform was followed by the 1994 launch of NAFTA[21], a free trade agreement signed by Mexico, the United States and Canada that became the symbol of neoliberal consolidation. NAFTA, according to Erol (2013), led Mexico to intensify its domestic relations of production whilst securing its incorporation into the liberalized global market. In this period, a technocratic counter-revolution inside the state and the economy was completed (La Botz, 1995), meeting the wishes of the IMF (Cockcroft, 1998). During this and following administrations, up to the present, several powerful state-owned industries have been sold, a large number of public servants have become redundant, the state system of social protection has been gradually dismantled, health care and education are no longer considered social rights, and thousands have been forced to join the 'informal' sector, undertaking individual or family strategies for economic survival (Osorio, 2015; Cockcroft, 1998). The Mexican model of development has transformed the country into a platform for the export of manufactured goods under external control. Through the '*maquiladora*' system, transnational companies with branches in Mexico have full ownership and control over the production process, thus obtaining high profits due to low-paid workforce, cheap raw materials and over-exploitation of natural resources (Solis, 2016). Like the *temporeras* system in the Chilean agro-export sector, the *maquila* system exploits female workforces, subjecting women to routine sexual and gendered violence. The structural gendered violence observed in *maquiladoras* represents a good example of the dialectic between capitalism and patriarchy as intertwined systems of oppression (Livingston, 2004; Pantaleo, 2006; Morales and Bejarano, 2009). Additionally, the *maquila* sector interacts with an extractive model of 'accumulation by dispossession' (Harvey, 2005a), where natural resources are plundered, exploited and commodified at the expense of the communities and with no consideration for the upcoming generations (Redclift and Goodman, 1991; Navarro and Pineda, 2010).

The consolidation of the neoliberal project in Mexico has been aided by a low-intensity democracy with entrenched authoritarian features. For 70 years, Mexico was ruled by a political regime where one party, the PRI, controlled the most relevant political offices. Through the centralization of power in the presidential figure, selective repression,

[21] North American Free Trade Agreement

electoral fraud, and a corporatist model that fostered a culture of segmentation and clientelism, the political elite managed to control strategic sectors of society and secure their continuance in power (Lawson, 2000; Olvera, 2010). All these operations were made under the rhetoric of a liberal-democratic system, where the opposition parties were allowed to play a role, although in practice they could only access the margins of the political system (Lawson, 2000). That is why the Mexican political regime has been described by many as the 'perfect dictatorship'[22]. However, as Morton (2011) reminds us, this period has also seen the emergence of various political struggles for democracy that should not be neglected. Anguiano (2010), for example, identifies the rebellion of 1968 as the beginning of the historical transition against the authoritarian imposition of the country's rulers. Another important moment of contestation occurred over the electoral fraud of 1988. The victory of the PRI candidate Salinas de Gortari over the centre-left Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas collapsed the regime's legitimacy, triggering mass protests and popular mobilization. Consequently, Salinas de Gortari had no option but to negotiate with the conservative right wing party PAN[23], accepting the 'selective recognition of opposition electoral victories – aimed at securing foreign and PAN support' (Lawson, 2000, p.273).

With this background and after 70 years of PRI rule, the victory of the PAN candidate Vicente Fox in 2000 marked the beginning of the political alternation between PRI and PAN. This shift in the ruling party was considered by some as the hallmark of the democratic transition in the country, although others question this optimistic interpretation (Ackerman, 2015; Osorio, 2015; Modonesi et al., 2011; Modonesi, 2015; Oliver, 2015; Anguiano, 2012; Morton, 2011; Zepeda and López de Lara, 2013), arguing that political alternation did not necessarily enhance meaningful democracy. As Modonesi and others (2011) point out, the political transition was characterized by the continuity of the socio-economic policies and authoritarian political practices of the old regime. The electoral fraud of 2006 symbolises the continuance of authoritarianism in Mexico and its failed transition to democracy. With a 0.56% winning margin, the right-wing candidate Felipe Calderón (PAN) was appointed President of Mexico, ignoring the call for a full recount of votes demanded by the centre-left candidate Andrés Manuel López Obrador (PRD[24]). In the midst of a legitimacy crisis, the last two periods

[22] Expression popularized by the writer Mario Vargas Llosa. See: Vargas Llosa (1991).
[23] *Partido de Acción Nacional* (Spanish). In English: National Action Party
[24] *Partido de la Revolución Democrática* (Spanish). In English: Party of the Democratic Revolution

(Calderón [PAN], 2006-2012 and Peña Nieto [PRI] 2012-present) have been characterized by a deepening of neoliberalism, state's authoritarianism, clientelism, corruption, impunity, paternalism and increment of violence (Rodríguez, 2015; Pineda, 2015). Likewise, using organized crime as a pretext, these administrations accelerated the militarisation of Mexico and naturalized state repression through the systematic use of torture, imprisonment and murder, targeting organised crime but also social movements and political opponents (Solis, 2016, Santamaría, 2015).

The deepening of neoliberal restructuring (Laurell, 2015) has coexisted with a symbiotic integration of political elites with criminal sectors, supporting the consolidation of the market of drugs, weapons and human trafficking (Pineda, 2015). The forced 'disappearance' of 43 students from the *Ayotzinapa* rural teachers' college in 2014 was one of the most striking examples of this close relationship between the state and organized crime[25] (Rosen and Zepeda, 2016), triggering a powerful movement of indignation at the national and international level. But the *Ayotzinapa* movement has not been the only collective response to the decomposition of the political regime in Mexico. Various sectors of Mexican society have contested the submissive and individualistic morality (Roux, 2009) imposed from above, creating emergent movements and community spaces that reclaim the rights to life, democracy and dignity. In the last two decades, Mexico has shaped some of the most powerful movements in Latin America and worldwide, such as the Zapatistas; the student strike and shutdown of the National University of Mexico in 1999/2000; the Oaxaca and San Salvador de Atenco popular uprisings in 2006; the Electrical Workers Union (*SME*) national strike in 2010; the Movement for Peace with Justice and Dignity in 2011; the *Yo Soy 132* movement[26] in 2012; and the *Ayotzinapa* movement in 2014 and 2015. As in the Chilean case, these large movements are only the tip of an iceberg of micro and macro expressions of resistance against the capitalist catastrophe (Navarro, 2015).

[25] The authorities' version said that the students were abducted by the local police and 'turned over to members of a local drug gang, who killed them and incinerated their bodies'. However, investigations conducted by international panels of experts contradict this claim, unveiling the Government's unwillingness to tell the truth of what really happened to the students (Carasik, 2015, para. 1).

[26] This movement, mostly composed by students, targeted Mexico's private television duopoly and the fraudulent character of the presidential elections in 2012.

1.4 Case Studies.

Having outlined the structural conditions under which autonomous groups operate, this section will briefly introduce my case studies, the four *colectivos* that made this research possible. This account will be expanded in my empirical chapters (**Ch4**, **Ch5**, **Ch6**, **Ch7** and **Ch8**) where I discuss in detail the features, political stance and praxis of these autonomous projects.

1.4.1 Colectivo Feminista '*El Rebrote*'

Colectivo Feminista El Rebrote[27] (in English, Feminist Collective 'The Regrowth') is a group of 8 women based in Concepcion[28], a southern Chilean city. Created at the end of 2013, *El Rebrote* draws on the experience of a previous feminist group *La Ruptura, a* project that remained active between 2009 and 2012. *El Rebrote* is a feminist women-only group that aims to unveil and challenge patriarchal and capitalist structures of domination present in everyday life. More specifically, it seeks to make visible women's oppression, to foster feminist politicization of women, to bring feminism closer to women activists and to develop regular processes of self-education. *El Rebrote* is conceived as a space born from the rage against the hegemonic system but also from love, sisterhood and friendship. *El Rebrote* gives special attention to the politicisation of everyday life. This entails the quest for autonomy as an integral part of women's lives, starting from autonomy over bodies and health. It also involves the development of caring relationships, based on trust and solidarity, organized to prefigure alternative social relations in the here-and-now. The principle of autonomy embraced by *El Rebrote* also refers to its independence from patriarchal and hierarchical institutions, such as Government offices, political parties and traditional political organizations.

[27] From now referred to as *El Rebrote*.
[28] Concepcion is one of the largest cities of Chile after Santiago.



Figure 1: left: poster for only-women fundraising party; centre: *El Rebrote*'s logo; right: poster commemorating 'Day of the Young Combatant', a non-official commemoration day that is celebrated every 29th of March in Chile. *Source*: *El Rebrote*'s Blogpost.

Along with the principle of autonomy, members from *El Rebrote* incorporate horizontality and *autogestión* (self-management) as core dimensions of their political practice. This commitment is expressed in their constant attempts to shape an anti-hierarchical organization and to guarantee their political and financial independence. The praxis of *El Rebrote* encompasses providing regular workshops and informative materials about feminism, women's issues and social conflicts, targeted at feminists, women activists but also women who are not engaged in political milieus.

1.4.2 Jóvenes en Resistencia Alternativa – *JRA*

Founded in 2002, *Jóvenes en Resistencia Alternativa- JRA*[29] (in English: 'Young People in Alternative Resistance') is a *colectivo* of approximately 20 people based in Mexico City. Inspired by the Zapatistas, the alter-globalization movement and other emancipatory processes, this group is born with the purpose of creating a sustainable and independent platform to resist neoliberalism within an urban space. Over the years, they asserted their anti-capitalist stance and defined autonomy, horizontality and *autogestión* (self-management) as their core principles. One of the most important areas of action in *JRA* has been the development of spaces of political training and collective reflection, based on the methods of popular education. These activities are conducted

[29] From now referred to as *JRA*.

for the internal training of *JRA*'s activists, but also for the support and sharing of experience and knowledge with other movements, groups and communities. *JRA*'s expertise in popular education has become one of its hallmarks and it has also been expressed in the creation of innovative methodologies for collective deliberation, consensus decision making and conflict resolution (Navarro, 2015).



Figure 2: left: The Other Seminar (itinerant space of collective reflection and debate organized by *JRA*); centre: *JRA*'s logo; right: poster of 'Festival of Resistances', organized by *JRA*. *Source*: *JRA*, Internal Document.

Another important contribution of *JRA* has been the self-managed publishing project *'Bajo Tierra Ediciones'*. With 12 books published to date, this project seeks to produce materials that foster critical reflection of capitalism and the alternatives of autonomy and emancipation (Navarro, 2015). The education and publishing projects exist alongside *JRA*'s great efforts to foster national networks of resistance. Two important examples are the creation in 2010 of the '*Red de Resistencias Autónomas Anticapitalistas'* (in English, 'Network of Anti-capitalists Autonomous Resistances'), a national network gathering various movements, groups and communities in struggle; and the national campaign *'Campaña Nacional en Defensa de la Madre Tierra y el Territorio'* (in English, 'National Campaign in Defence of Mother Earth and Territory') launched in 2016. The production of mass rock festivals has also been part of *JRA*'s agenda. Through these concerts, they seek to make visible processes of resistance and to raise funds for Mexican emblematic social movements.

1.4.3 Agencia Autónoma de Comunicación *Subversiones*

Agencia Autónoma de Comunicación Subversiones[30] (in English, Autonomous Agency of Communications 'Subversions') is a group of approximately 16 activists based in Mexico City who run a non-commercial alternative media project informed by and devoted to social struggles and processes of autonomy in Mexico and Latin America. Created in 2010, *Subversiones* is an autonomous, horizontal and self-managed *colectivo* that develops investigative and militant journalism with the aim of breaking the siege imposed by mainstream mass media. Through its webpage, this group disseminates original news stories, interviews and articles covering social conflicts, movements, autonomous struggles and community experiences that have been silenced and rendered invisible by a hegemonic media agenda.

Against the instrumental character of mainstream journalism, *Subversiones* commits to a politically engaged praxis that seeks to provide truthful and reliable information about processes of resistance in Mexico and the world, from an insider perspective. This approach is based on the premise that the group is an integral participant of the network of anti-capitalist struggles. This means that the production of journalistic materials is only one outcome emerging from a complex process of solidarity' and knowledge' exchange developed with and within communities of resistance. Taking an anti-vanguard stance, *Subversiones* does not seek to 'give voice to the voiceless' but to amplify the voices of those who are not being listened to. In their attempts to make information accessible to broader audiences, *Subversiones*'s members are constantly combining the written material with videos, audios and photo stories. They also hold a *Copyfarleft* software license that allows people to freely use the contents of their webpage as long as they: a) acknowledge the source; b) distribute the materials under the same licence; c) do not use the contents to favour businesses, parties or any other institution sympathetic to the political and economic hegemony.

[30] From now referred to as *Subversiones*



Figure 3: left: article published in *Subversiones*'s website about '*Conciencias*', a gathering of scientists and Zapatistas that took place in December, 2016. Top right: *Subversiones*'s logo. Bottom right: poster about Women's struggles Seminar co-organized by *Subversiones*. *Source*: http://*Subversiones*.org/

1.4.4 Escuela de Comunicación Popular – *ECP*

Escuela de Comunicación Popular – ECP[31] (in English: School of Popular Communication) was a '*colectivo'* of 10 activists based in the Chilean capital city, Santiago in operation between 2010 and 2015. Launched by students of Journalism and Film Studies from *Universidad de Chile*, *ECP* sought to create training spaces focused on popular communication as a tool for social change. Drawing on the legacy of popular communicators, educators and organizers from Chile and Latin America, *ECP* was defined as autonomous from institutions and political parties and it was guided by a horizontal and assembly-based politics pursuing a radical transformation of society.

[31] From now referred to as *ECP*.



Figure 4: left: *ECP*'s logo; centre: poster 'Training in Communication Tools for Grassroots Organizations'; right: poster 'Training in Video Tools for Grassroots Organizations'. *Source*: Rodríguez and Valenzuela (2016).

As opposed to the commoditization of education, they engaged with popular education tools that fostered new knowledges and social proposals from below. This was achieved by running regular workshops with grassroots organizations. Here, they collectively discussed the features of mainstream media and the potential and challenges of popular and alternative communication. An important task for *ECP* was to unveil the politics of privatization and concentration of media in Chile and Latin America and to challenge official versions, fostering the development of alternative knowledge and information to that provided by mainstream media (Rodríguez and Valenzuela-Bello, 2016).

Well aware of the technical skills needed to properly disseminate counter-hegemonic information, *ECP* also run practical workshops for grassroots organizations. Here, local organizers get familiar with tools for video production, photography, community radio, design and creative writing. Through the implementation training, the group sought to encourage the multiplication of grassroots communication projects, so that new spaces of politicisation and resistance could emerge. Furthermore, they made efforts to join and/or build networks with other movements and groups, seeking to contribute to the reconstruction of the fractured Chilean social fabric (Rodríguez and Valenzuela-Bello, 2016).

1.5 A Brief Note on the Temporality of this Research

Before moving towards the core sections of this thesis, it is important to make clear the temporality of my work. My research draws primarily on my militant ethnography (see **Ch2**) carried out with and within four autonomous *colectivos* in 2013 and 2014. Having said this, it is also worth to mention that I have been in regular contact with the groups since then. This interaction has enabled me to update relevant information regarding the recent processes experienced by the case studies, amending and adding evidence to this document accordingly. Two years after my fieldwork, three out of the four *colectivos* analysed in this research are still in operation. With some members' departures, new activists joining and some organizational crisis that had been overcome, *Subversiones* and *El Rebrote* have managed to remain active, keeping their collective projects alive. *JRA* is operative too and is currently entering a transitional period[32]. The case of the Chilean *colectivo ECP* is different. After six years of relentless work, the group came to an end in the last months of 2015. As discussed in **Ch6** (section 6.4), former members have made some personal reflections to understand the causes of the group's dissolution. However, as no collective analysis has been produced by the former *ECP* activists yet, I have decided not to rush into early interpretations regarding the ending of this project. I acknowledge that this experience opens new questions not answered in my thesis that should be addressed in future research (see **Ch9**, section 9.3). In spite of *ECP*'s recent dissolution, I have decided to write my findings chapters in present tense, as a way to acknowledge the living character of the four case studies at the time of my research.

[32] As JRA is only beginning a process of collective reflection about the transition, no information about this debate is provided in this study.

1.6 Concluding Remarks and Thesis Outline

My thesis is structured into nine main chapters. In this introductory chapter (**Ch1**), I have presented the research questions guiding my study and the personal journey and motivations shaping this research. Drawing on my own experience as an autonomous activist, I embarked on the task of studying urban *colectivos* in Chile and Mexico with the goal of co-producing knowledge that is useful to contemporary struggles. As this chapter has shown, my militant ethnography of Latin American urban *colectivos* seeks to make a contribution to the study of autonomous politics in the region. Firstly, it aims to explore micro-projects of resistance, experiences that have been under-researched, compared with the more 'spectacular' Latin American social movements. Secondly, by looking at the specific features of autonomous politics in big Latin American cities, this thesis seeks to add to the underdeveloped field of urban autonomies in Latin America. Thirdly, it develops the field of autonomous politics, by comparing *colectivos* in two Latin American countries which have both entered into deep neoliberalism but which have quite different political trajectories. Fourthly, this research aims to contribute to the field of activist/militant research by developing an innovative epistemological and methodological approach and providing a thorough account of my journey as militant ethnographer. Finally, with this thesis I hope to contribute to the internal reflections of *colectivos* and movements regarding the potential, challenges and horizons of autonomous politics.

In order to situate my research within the geo-political and economic context, this chapter has also provided an introduction to Chile and Mexico. Here, I have traced the neoliberal transformation experienced by these countries in recent decades and its impact on their political systems and populations. I have clarified the temporality of my research, outlining some of the main changes experienced by the case studies. Finally, I have presented an overview of the four *colectivos* that made this research possible.

In Chapter 2 I will present the feminist and prefigurative epistemologies underpinning my research and the features of my 'militant ethnography'. I provide a detailed account of my journey as a militant ethnographer and the methods applied in the field. Methodological and ethical issues are discussed, stressing my commitment to a feminist 'ethics of care' as a guide for the entire research process. I also discuss my approach to

data analysis and how a constructivist approach to grounded theory can be useful for the production of 'knowledge from below'.

Chapter 3 provides a critical overview of the main theoretical approaches analyzing autonomous movements, moving from mainstream traditions in the field of social movement studies to radical scholarship on non-state-centred politics. While the first part of this chapter is focused on Western scholarship and its limitations to inform Latin American politics, the second part expands on the unique character of Latin American autonomous movements. Here, I explore the roots and features of autonomous politics in the region and some theoretical proposals for the understanding of these collective projects. This chapter is the first step in answering my main research question, as it provides an overall background of the political field in which Latin American urban *colectivos* operate.

The following five chapters present my empirical findings. These are divided into two main sections: one concerned with understanding autonomy and the other focused on the enactment of autonomous politics. It is important to clarify though, that this separation is an abstract exercise, made for analytical purposes, as these two domains usually overlap and intertwine with each other. Section 1 (*'Understanding Autonomy'*) comprises Chapter 4: '*Autonomy as Refusal*' and Chapter 5: '*Autonomy as Prefigurative Creation*'. In Chapter 4, I explore the understanding of autonomy as refusal of the systems of domination, focusing on the critiques of capitalism, patriarchy and state-centred politics developed by the research participants. This chapter helps to answer sub-research questions 1, 2 and 5.

In Chapter 5, I focus on the affirmative understanding of autonomy, analysing how research participants complement the negative conceptualization of autonomy with a positive dimension. As this chapter will show, autonomy is not only defined through acts of refusal but also through the creation of alternative political frameworks and practices that anticipate the participants' desired society. This chapter contributes to answer sub-research questions 1 and 5.

Section 2 (*'Enacting Autonomy'*) opens with Chapter 6, *'The 'doing' of Autonomy'*. This chapter begins exploring how the creative understanding of autonomy detailed in **Ch5** is put into practice by Latin American *colectivos*. Here, I provide a detailed account of the five main dimensions shaping the 'doing' of autonomous politics: affective politics,

autogestión, popular education, political networks and horizontality. Although all these dimensions are pivotal features in the praxis of autonomous politics, I argue that horizontality is the fuel of autonomy and the umbrella under which the other dimensions operate. For this reason, the following two empirical chapters are specifically devoted to the analysis of horizontality. This chapter helps to answer sub-research questions 1, 3, 4 and 5.

In Chapter 7, '*Horizontality: The Fuel of Autonomous Politics*' I present a 'thick description' (Denzin, 1989) of the principles, strategies and methods embraced by Latin American *colectivos* in their quest for horizontality. Particularly, I focus on six main dimensions: organizational structures, rotation and team working, spokespersons, consensus decision making, assemblies and sharing of information, knowledge and experience. This chapter contributes to answering sub-research questions 3, 4 and 5.

Chapter 8, *'Challenges of Horizontality'* is my final empirical chapter. Here, I expand on the main problems and challenges experienced by Latin American *colectivos* in the enactment of horizontality. The tensions derived from uneven levels of participation, differing political experience, skills and knowledge, the emergence of informal leadership and the activists' financial precariousness are some of the critical issues discussed in this chapter. **Ch8** helps to answer sub-research question 4.

Finally, in Chapter 9, I conclude this thesis with a summary of my findings, an outline of the main contributions made by this study, an acknowledgment of its limitations and some recommendations for further research.

CHAPTER TWO:

RESEARCHING AUTONOMOUS POLITICS: EPISTEMOLOGY AND METHODS.

2.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I introduced my commitment to the construction of knowledge that is built from within autonomous movements. In this regard, the exploration of non-traditional methodologies became a key part of my doctoral research.

This chapter presents my methodological and epistemological framework as well as the methods and procedures undertaken during my fieldwork and analysis. Firstly, I present my methodological approach, highlighting its qualitative, ethnographic and politically-engaged character. Then, I introduce my epistemological framework, focusing on feminist and prefigurative epistemologies as the main approaches informing my research. The third section of this chapter will focus on the 'doing' of militant ethnography and provides a detailed account of my journey as a militant ethnographer. I explain my case selection and how I gained access and negotiated the terms of my research. I also introduce the field methods undertaken and my approach to analysis and theory building. Finally, I discuss some ethical concerns and methodological issues experienced during my fieldwork.

2.2 Methodological Approach

In **Ch1**, I positioned myself as a Latin American activist-scholar who embarked on this research as part of my ethical and political commitment to radical social change. This departure point implied the need to carefully choose a methodological approach capable of articulating my own positionality as well as developing a rich and rigorous analysis of Latin American autonomous movements and producing defendable research findings. With this in mind, I decided to adopt a qualitative, ethnographic and politically-engaged approach to inquiry. This methodological choice was grounded in my disavowal of

positivist traditions and my engagement with feminist and prefigurative epistemologies (examined below).

Broadly speaking, the decision to conduct qualitative research is shaped by my epistemological stance and research questions. As explained in **Ch1**, my thesis inquiries into how autonomous activists understand and envision autonomy, democracy and social change, but also, how they collectively enact autonomous politics and what are the issues, contradictions and challenges surrounding their practice. Given these aims, a qualitative approach was chosen, as it focuses on research subjects' perspectives, reveals rich descriptions of the social world and examines this world in practise by looking at the constraints and complexities of everyday lived realities (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). Accordingly, I have tried to explore autonomous politics from 'the interior', taking the accounts and perspectives of my research participants as the starting point (Ormston et al., 2014, p.3). As Denzin and Lincoln (2011) argue, qualitative research examines social dynamics in context, 'attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them' (p.4).

Furthermore, my commitment to 'the first-hand experience' (Atkinson et al., 2007, p.4) and my interest to explore 'in situ' the complex world of autonomous politics, led me to choose an ethnographic approach. Conventionally, ethnography is understood as a set of methods that incorporates the researcher's participation with the researched as a strategy for the collection of meaningful data (Brewer, 2000). Drawing on the work of critical scholars (e.g. Conquergood, 1991; Geertz, 1994; Khasnabish and Haiven, 2012), I dispute this instrumental view, reclaiming a vision of ethnography as a form of knowledge production. As Geertz (1994) points out, ethnography cannot be defined as a series of techniques and procedures used by the researcher. Rather, it is an intellectual effort oriented towards a thick description of social realities by providing context and meaning to it.

In the specific field of social movements and resistance, scholars such as Ortner (1995, 1997) and Urla and Helepololei (2014) call for delivering greater ethnographic 'thickness' in order to generate a 'richly detailed, textured and contextualized understanding of our subjects' life worlds and cultural practices' (Urla and Helepololei, 2014, p.434). Following Ortner (1995, 1997) and Urla and Helepololei's suggestions (2014), I committed to an ethnographic approach focused on the performance of

autonomous politics, including the diversity of perspectives, tensions, asymmetries and ambiguities present in the movements.

Ethnography can also be understood as '…an embodied practice (…) and an intensely sensuous way of knowing' that privileges three communication processes: speaking, listening and acting together (Conquergood, 1991, pp.180, 181). The process defined by Conquergood (1991) as 'acting together', is precisely what makes ethnography suitable for a critical study of social movements, as it will be developed in this thesis. This leads us to the third and decisive component of my methodological approach: the politically-engaged character of my research.

Reflecting Marx's popular phrase 'the philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it' (Marx, 2000, p.173), I advocate a research approach that goes beyond the understanding of the world, in order to actively engage in the transformation of it. Accordingly, my research has followed the insights of activist (Speed, 2006; Hale, 2008; Hermes, 1998; Otto and Terhorst, 2011; Petray, 2012) or militant research[33] (Colectivo Situaciones, 2003; 2007; Shukaitis and Graeber 2007; Sandoval, 2013; Russell, 2014). These approaches refer to a collaborative process of knowledge production in which activist scholars and social movements come together with the aim of challenging social injustices (Otto and Terhorst, 2011) and fostering critical reflection amongst the activist community (Russell, 2014).

According to Greenwood (2000), activist research is neither a discipline nor a method. Rather, it can be understood as a set of multidisciplinary practices that respond to a structure of ethical, intellectual, and I would add, political commitments. Likewise, Russell (2014) argues that militant research 'is not an 'off-the-shelf' set of techniques for measuring, recording and assessing the world according to academic standards' (p.3). On the contrary, militant research needs to be open to encounters and improvisation, because in its endeavour of promoting a self-reflective critique of movements' praxis (Russell, 2014), militant research becomes an orientation and a process. As Casas Cortes and Cobarrubias (2010) argue, research is always contingent,

[33] The Anglo-American tradition has usually preferred the term 'activist research' over 'militant research', due to the tendency to associate 'militant' to political and religious terrorism (Garelli and Tazzioli, 2013). This connotation, however, is not present in the Hispanic tradition that prefers the notion '*investigación militante'* (militant research) when referring to partisan knowledge production. For the purpose of this thesis, both concepts will be used interchangeably.

it ‘is a process of searching for tools, putting together cartographies, registering our own steps…’ (p.234). Therefore, the idea of following some sort of manual on research militancy is redundant, because it is only during the reflective process in the field that things appear invested of functionality and coherence (Colectivo Situaciones, 2007).

Unlike traditional social movement approaches which seek to take ‘detached, static and explanatory snap-shots’ (Russell, 2014, p.5) of collective action, militant research attempts to contribute to critical reflection from within the movements. The practice of activist/militant researchers also differs from the solely committed scholars, who may produce sympathetic knowledge that is potentially useful to some movements or struggles but without necessarily getting immersed in the organizations. Conversely, activist/militant researchers ‘are called to produce knowledge from within the group’s experience (…) and to engage themselves into its political practices’ (Martinez and Lorenzi, 2012, p.168). By becoming empowered agents in collective action, militant scholars reshape research as a strong political tool. Militant research, then, becomes both a method of political action and a form of knowledge (Shukaitis and Graeber, 2007), allowing the groups to evaluate steps taken, to understand new contexts and to engage with new struggles (Casas-Cortes and Cobarrubias, 2007).

2.2.1 Militant Ethnography

Within the field of activist/militant research, I have engaged with Jeffrey Juris’s (2007, 2008) account of ‘militant ethnography’ and his insightful merger of political engagement and ethnographic practice. Drawing on the work of Scheper-Hughes (1995) with regards to militant anthropology, Juris (2007, 2008) proposes ‘militant ethnography’ as a research strategy that entails both politically engaged research and an explicit rejection of the division between observer and practitioner (Juris, 2008). By acknowledging that ‘…objectivist paradigms fail to grasp the concrete logic of activist practice, leading to accounts and models that are not only inadequate, but are of little use to activists themselves’ (Juris, 2007, p.164), Juris poses militant ethnography as a politically committed and collaborative form of research carried out from within, rather than outside, grassroots movements. According to him, the practice of militant

ethnography requires the development of three reflective tasks, all respectively attached to coherent practices:

> 1) collective reflection and visioning about movement practices, logics, and emerging cultural and political models; 2) collective analysis of broader social processes and power relations that affect strategic and tactical decision-making; and 3) collective ethnographic reflection about diverse movement networks, how they interact, and how they might better relate to broader constituencies. Each of these levels involves engaged, practice-based, and politically committed research that is carried out in horizontal collaboration with social movements. (Juris, 2007, p.173)

Taking Juris's (2007, 2008) suggestions, I have committed to an ethnographic inquiry focused on the activist practice of my research participants. In line with Ortner (1995, 1997) and Urla and Helepololei's (2014) views on thick ethnographies, militant ethnography does not aim to cover up internal tensions and conflicts within the movements. On the contrary, it produces critical analyses that can help the movements to identify collective issues and to develop suitable strategies to overcome them (Juris and Khasnabish, 2013). At the same time, this approach rejects the divide between an expert researcher and the research subjects. Alternatively, it believes in the self-reflexive nature of autonomous movements and the activists' capacity to 'produce and distribute their own analyses and reflections' (Juris, 2007, p.164). This last element exemplifies the commitment of militant ethnography to a radical epistemology that refuses to see social movements as simply objects of research interest. Beyond that viewpoint, militant ethnographers acknowledge the activists' milieus as spaces of knowledge production (Khasnabish and Haiven, 2012), challenging the Cartesian and positivist epistemologies (Casas-Cortés et al., 2008) that are present in traditional social movement research.

2.3 Epistemology

In the previous section, I explained the qualitative, ethnographic and politically-engaged character of my methodology and my engagement with Juris' (2007, 2008) militant ethnography. My selection of methodology drew on a deep commitment to critical epistemologies that challenge positivist paradigms of knowledge production. Within this

broad field of 'critical epistemologies', I have grounded my research in two main approaches: feminist and prefigurative epistemologies.

2.3.1 Feminist Epistemologies

Without a doubt, feminist epistemologies have played a pivotal role in challenging the patriarchal and dualist character of traditional knowledge production and advancing new emancipatory approaches. Although not always acknowledged in the literature on radical movements or activist research, I agree with Russell (2012) about the strong bond existing between critical research and feminist scholarship: '…it's perhaps no exaggeration to suggest that any research that makes claims to having 'critical' or 'radical' credentials must take account of these feminist critiques and the philosophical developments from which these critiques developed' (p.15).

One important feminist contribution to critical research has been the expanded critique of the idea of scientific objectivity (Sprague and Zimmerman, 1993) and the disavowal of the positivist attempts to conduct value-neutral research. As Harding points out:

> …the researcher appears to us not as an invisible, anonymous voice of authority, but as a real, historical individual with concrete, specific desires and interests (…) Class, race, culture, and gender assumptions, beliefs, and behaviours of the researcher her/himself must be placed within the frame of the picture that she/he attempts to paint. (Harding, 1987, p.9)

Against the principle of scientific detachment, feminist thinkers understand researchers as socially situated beings with only a partial vision of the phenomena under study (Haraway, 1988; Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002). Therefore, by acknowledging that every research process is, to an extent, shaped by the position and interests of those who deploy it (Taylor, 1998), feminist scholars call for the incorporation of reflexivity and situatedness as core dimensions of any critical inquiry.

The re-conceptualization of objectivity developed by the feminist scholar Donna Haraway (1988) has informed my methodological approach. By introducing the notion of 'situated knowledges', Haraway (1988) provides a strong epistemological support to politically-engaged research. As Casas-Cortés (2006) argues, Haraway's contribution

on ‘situated knowledges’ has become ‘one of the most powerful foundations for reclaiming research as a site of politics’ (p.80). From Haraway’s (1988) perspective, knowledge is situated, local and partial. This means that objectivity does not entail transcendent goals but it responds to a ‘particular and specific embodiment’ (Haraway, 1988, p.582). Against positivism and relativism, Haraway defines objectivity as a particular and embodied vision as opposed to general and universal understandings of knowledge. Moreover, this perspective fosters a critical approach that enables us to articulate reflection and political action.

Along with their critique of positivist objectivity, feminists have also brought attention to the asymmetric power relations reproduced in research settings (Stanley and Wise, 1983; Harding, 1987; Wolf, 1996). This awareness has led feminist scholars to critically reflect on their own practice, trying to restructure the power dynamics existing between themselves as researchers and the researched. In this regard, Lather (1991) stresses the importance of developing self-reflexivity as a way to identify the ways in which we ‘contribute to dominance in spite of our liberatory intentions’ (p.150). Through reflexivity, overt disclosure of choices, positions and identities, and opening conditions to scrutiny, feminist researchers attempt to unsettle and balance power relations between themselves and the participants, fostering conditions for reciprocity and empowerment (Maguirre, 2001).

Drawing on the work of feminist scholars (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1987; Lather, 2001; Maguirre, 2001; Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002; Naples, 2003), I acknowledge the situated character of the knowledge produced in this research. Likewise, I have committed to a self-reflective practice that is constantly scanning the power dynamics embedded in the research process. The recognition of my own positionality has also been pivotal in the definition of my epistemology. I am a *mestiza* Latin American woman, feminist, autonomous activist and young scholar. I have been privileged enough to pursue doctoral studies in the United Kingdom and to combine my career with my commitment to radical social change. I come from a working class family whose members managed to achieve social mobility due to their higher education studies. I have experienced multiple forms of oppression, both in my continent and in Europe, due to my politicised, gendered, classed and racialized existence. As the next section will show, this appraisal of my situated self as a researcher has been essential throughout the

research process, but it had special relevance in the process of gaining access and consent from my research participants.

The acknowledgment of a researcher's positionality can contribute to the development of ethical research 'based on relations of mutual respect and recognition' (Sultana, 2007, p.376). Nevertheless, this endeavour requires considerations of researchers' power and authority in relation to the research participants (Speed, 2006) and the integration of potential structural differences as conscious elements during the research process (Otto and Tershorst, 2011). In my attempts to create a transparent research process and an honest and nourishing dialogue with my research participants, I followed Speed's (2006) and Hale (2006)'s suggestions for activist research. On the one hand, I committed '…to acknowledge power relations up front, deal with tensions as they arise, and find solutions in dialogue with [my] research subjects' (Speed, 2006, p.74). On the other hand, I made explicit from the very beginning my political commitment as an activist researcher and constantly tried to foster an ongoing dialogue with the research participants (Hale, 2006).

2.3.2 Prefigurative Epistemologies

My research has also been informed by Sara Motta's (2011) notion of prefigurative epistemologies and the work of other critical scholars (Casas-Cortés, 2006, 2008; Colectivo Situaciones, 2007; Juris, 2007, 2008; Juris and Khasnabish, 2013, Russell, 2012, 2014) who have sought to place social movements as 'knowledge-producers in their own right' (Casas-Cortés et al., 2008, p.20). All these authors share the disavowal of the detachment between thinking and doing politics. As Colectivo Situaciones argues, thinking is immediately political and politics involves thinking 'because there are forms of thinking against established models implicit in every radical practice…' (Colectivo Situaciones, 2007, p.75)

Drawing on this epistemological assumption, militant research refutes the idea that activism and research are somehow opposed, as if 'activism is some form of uncritical mindless 'campaigning' whereas research is armchair 'intellectual' work' (Russell, 2014, p.6). In her attempts to overcome the duality between (the supposedly) practical, tacit and empirical knowledge created by social movements, and the theoretical and

abstract knowledge created by intellectuals, Motta (2011, 2014) calls for an engagement with prefigurative and post-representational epistemologies. As opposed to disempowering, vanguard-oriented and hierarchical understandings of knowledge, a prefigurative epistemology understands knowledge construction as immanent to the concrete political experiences of the movements (Motta, 2011). Under this approach, knowledge is a collectively co-constructed process in which both the researcher and the researched, engage in a politics of dialogue (Motta, 2014). As a way to challenge the privileged theoretical and epistemological role of the academic, Motta (2014) proposes the figure of the storyteller. *Vis-à-vis* the conventional role of the researcher, the storyteller helps us to conceptualize the practical, analytical and existential issues involved in the enactment of prefigurative epistemologies:

> The storyteller enters in her integrity and wholeness in this process of epistemological reinvention. She does not enter as an external liberated knower to educate and speak for the unfree masses. She does not reproduce a victim representation of the oppressed in her practice, but rather begins from a commitment to weaving together subjects, practices and stories of agency, dignity and survival. She becomes part of the creation of prefigurative epistemologies premised upon the collective construction of multiple readings of the world in which we speak in multiple tongues, rethinking and creating what it means to speak, to write, to theorize. (Motta, 2014, p.38)

When research is informed by prefigurative epistemologies, it is especially important to avoid trying to educate and speak for the movements. Very much in line with the anti-hierarchical and anti-vanguard character of autonomous movements, this principle clearly sets out the boundaries of the researcher's role. Accordingly, as a militant ethnographer and a storyteller, I refused to see myself as an expert with the role of explaining disembodied knowledge to powerless research subjects. Instead, I embraced a position of humility, emphasising the importance of listening and acknowledging the participants' knowledges. This epistemological stance accepts that the movements can actually speak for themselves. They are able to posit their own cartographies, vocabularies and concepts of the world, as well as articulate their own categories of analysis (Casas-Cortés, 2008). Bringing this assumption into my own praxis as a militant researcher was a challenging and insightful endeavour. I began my PhD journey as a not very confident student, with a lack of English proficiency and a strong need to fit into in

a country, a culture and a university that were aliens for me at that time. During the first year of my PhD studies, I attended a talk given by a critical professor, who emphasised the pivotal role of theory in our research projects. He told us that we must have a strong theoretical framework before beginning our fieldwork. That we need to decide whether we are a Marxist, a post-structuralist, a post-modernist or whatever. That we cannot combine theories. On the contrary, we shall take a stance and analyse our data according to our pre-determined framework. After these words I panicked. My intuition was telling me that I should conduct fieldwork as soon as possible and begin the theoretical construction from the ground-up[34]. However, the advice of this important scholar said otherwise. As a consequence, I got overwhelmed reading post-structuralism, post-anarchism and open Marxism. I tried hard to find 'my theory', to unravel abstract philosophical notions, using them as explanatory frameworks for the praxis of radical Latin American movements. As I got really stressed and physically ill, I decided to step back, honouring my intuition and concentrating my efforts in planning my fieldwork. After one year of militant ethnography, all my anxiety for defining a framing theory disappeared. I did not have to prove anymore that my work was academic, abstract and 'good enough'. I began trusting the beautiful process of collective knowledge-production achieved during my fieldwork and understood that emancipatory theories are not just black or white. Only when I deeply listened to my research participants, to my *compañeros* and *compañeras*[35], and allowed their voices to emerge, I realized that the focus of my thesis was not 'social movements' or 'collective action' but the understandings and enactment of 'autonomy'. As a consequence, I acknowledged their own vocabularies and updated my categories of analysis for the writing up process.

Furthermore, during my fieldwork I had the chance to speak with the activists about political theory and share names of inspiring authors[36]. Through this rich process of exchange and learning, I realised that some of the macro-theories that I had been studying in the past fail to inform the current practice of autonomous groups.

[34] An intuition that was attuned with alternative approaches to the study of politics such as Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 2000, 2006) or Militant Ethnography (Juris, 2007).
[35] In the Latin American vocabulary of the Left, *compañero* (male) or *compañera* (female) is the name given to the person who shares a number of political values, principles and practices and who usually belongs to the same (or similar) political groups or movements. This notion has also an affective dimension, as it entails to acknowledge the other not only as a political associate but as a comrade, as a friend, as family.
[36] For instance, thanks to my debates with *compañeras* and *compañeros* from Mexico, I discovered the work of Raquel Gutiérrez or some works of Raúl Zibechi that have been exclusively published in Mexico.

Alternatively, I engaged with middle-range theoretical analyses grounded in the practice of movements of resistance. Moreover, I committed to the decolonising task (Mignolo, 2011; Quijano, 2007) of refusing to see Western radical thought as a universal framework to be applied to radical politics in my continent. This does not mean that I have not recognized the contributions of remarkable critical scholars from the West. I have engaged with them when they provide insightful analyses that are relevant for my research. Having said that, my decolonising commitment is expressed in the special significance that I have given to Latin American scholarship and the work of activist scholars focused on the specific field of Latin American autonomous politics.

By embracing a prefigurative epistemology, I have worked alongside four autonomous groups, acknowledging them as 'lively actors producing their own explanations and knowledges' (Casas-Cortés, 2008, p.27). By taking this epistemological stance, I have questioned the conventional dichotomy between the knower (researcher) and the known (research subjects). In doing so, I have recognized the significance and validity (Casas-Cortés et al., 2008) of the knowledge presented in this thesis, knowledge that is the fruit of a process of dialogue and collaboration with and within these four activist communities. A detailed account of the practicalities and challenges of this process is presented in the following section.

2.4 The "Doing" of Militant Ethnography: Recounting Fieldwork and Methods

My fieldwork was conducted over a period of 11 months and two weeks, spending half of this time in Mexico and the other half in Chile. This decision was made taking into account the suggestions of activist researchers (Hale, 2008; Russell, 2014; Greenwood, 2000; Petray, 2012) and critical ethnographers (Juris (2007, 2008; Bhattacharya, 2008; Madison, 2012; Lassiter, 2005; Rappaport, 2008) who recommend long-term engagement in the field in order to build trustworthy and reciprocal relationships between the researcher and the participants. Although a longer stay in both countries would have been more suitable for an ethnographic practice, this was not possible due to the regulations of my funder and university. The table below summarizes my fieldwork timetable:

Countries	Cities	First Fieldwork Stay	Second Fieldwork Stay	Total Fieldwork Period
Mexico	City of Mexico	1st October – 23rd December 2013	9th February – 15th May 2014	6 months
Chile	Santiago and Concepcion	24th December 2013 – 08th February 2014	17th May – 17th September 2014	5 months, 2 weeks
				11 months, 2 weeks.

Table 1: Summary Fieldwork

2.4.1 Selection of my Case Studies.

In the selection of my potential case studies I took into account four main criteria: 1) the commitment to autonomous politics; 2) the urban character of the groups, to be based in the major cities of Chile and Mexico; 3) the size of the groups (between 8 and 20 permanent members)[37], and; 4) the lifespan of the groups, with at least one year of operation prior to the time of my fieldwork[38]. For the identification of groups meeting these criteria, I relied on three main strategies: online searching and email contact (see appendix 1); asking key informants and my pre-existing first-hand knowledge.

Unlike Chile, my home country and the place where I developed 13 years of activist practice; Mexico was a strange territory for me and I lacked strong personal and political networks there. For this reason, online searching was my first strategy. I looked at webpages, blogs, Facebook and twitter accounts, trying to identify urban groups embracing autonomous politics at discursive and practical levels. Concomitantly, I contacted key informants who could recommend some groups to me with the features I was looking for. Regarding this point, the ethics of activist research clearly defines who can be considered key informant or gatekeeper. As Martinez and Lorenzi (2012) state,

[37] This size would enable me to develop a thick description of the *colectivos*. At the same time, I could examine the challenges of more complex groups regarding division of labour, decision-making and organizational structures.

[38] With this criteria, I sought to narrow my research to already established *colectivos* that had succeeded in developing sustained process of political organizing.

activist research fosters the autonomy of the research process from 'State authorities, for-profit corporations, external organizations and non-activist individuals…'(p.168), which means that these actors cannot be considered reliable advisors in any militant research design. In line with this idea, I ensured that all my key informants had an activist background. Hence, I contacted two Chilean left-libertarian activists who might know people in Mexico, three activists engaged in Mexican autonomous struggles and four activist scholars with interest in autonomous social movements[39]. From the information I gathered, I mapped different radical autonomous groups in the major cities of Mexico[40] and I got a better understanding of the autonomous political trend in the country. By cross-referencing my searches with the references given by these key informants, the group '*Jóvenes en Resistencia Alternativa – JRA*' was highlighted as an interesting potential participant. After emailing them, they showed interest in my research although they did not formally confirm their participation. Therefore, I decided to focus on confirming *JRA*'s participation and later, at this group's suggestions, to apply snowball sampling to identify another suitable group. This strategy was successful and I managed to identify my second Mexican case study, '*Agencia Autónoma de Comunicación Subversiones'*.

Given all the learning gained during my fieldwork in Mexico and my experiential knowledge of social movements in my home country, the identification of cases in Chile was easier, quicker and less challenging. With the idea of achieving comparability between autonomous groups in two Latin American capital cities, I decided to look at political experiences in Santiago[41]. However, as my activist networks are predominantly from my home town of Concepcion[42] in the south of the country, I decided to work with one case in each city. In the case of Concepcion, I chose my potential case study based on my previous political background. Using my first-hand knowledge of autonomous collectives, I selected the autonomous feminist group '*El Rebrote*'. This collective was mostly composed of women who were part of a previous radical feminist project in which I was involved some years ago.

[39]Including the Mexico-based scholar John Holloway and the Uruguayan journalist Raul Zibechi, among others.
[40] City of México, Oaxaca, Puebla, Guadalajara, Monterrey and San Cristóbal de las Casas.
[41] Santiago is Chile's capital city.
[42] Concepcion is the second major city of Chile.

In the case of Santiago, I applied three strategies simultaneously: asking key informants; first-hand knowledge and online searching to corroborate some of my sampling criteria. By applying a snowball sampling strategy, I asked some activists from my political network, both in Chile and Mexico, about Chilean autonomous collectives which could be potentially interested in my research. From this exercise, I chose '*Escuela de Comunicación Popular – ECP'*, which became my second Chilean case study.

2.4.2 Gaining Access and Negotiating with Participants.

The process of gaining access to my case studies was one of the most challenging stages of my fieldwork. Drawing on my militant ethnographic approach, I committed to ethical ways to enter onto the terrain of the research subjects (Madison, 2012) and encourage their involvement in this collaborative inquiry. Three aspects helped me to achieve this goal: my activist identity; trustworthy activists' gatekeepers and a common educational background between myself and the participants.

As militant researchers (Juris, 2007, 2008; Speed, 2006; Petray, 2012, Martinez and Lorenzi, 2012) point out, 'activist identity' is essential in the process of both gaining access to activist settings and developing collaborative research. Adding to this scholarship, my own fieldwork experience confirmed the importance of the activist identity for 'getting into' the organizational spaces of autonomous collectives. Without my political background it would have been impossible to be accepted into the groups as *colectivos* are usually suspicious of the elitist and hierarchical production of knowledge produced in the academy (Martinez and Lorenzi, 2012; Russell, 2014).

With the exception of the feminist collective *El Rebrote*, my other three case studies did not know first-hand about my political experience and beliefs. My research design emphasised the importance of sharing my personal and political experience with the potential participants, but in order to achieve this, it was essential to arrange a first face-to-face meeting with them. Here, the support of activist gatekeepers was crucial. They established direct communication with some group members, emphasising my political background and describing me as a trustworthy activist researcher. This strategy allowed me to arrange my first meetings.

The process of gaining access in the context of militant research compelled me to assume the ethical responsibility of situating myself as a researcher by overtly recognizing my own background, expectations and political commitment (Hale, 2008; Speed, 2006; Sultana, 2007). I addressed this endeavour by elaborating what Madison (2012) has called "lay summary". As the researcher has the responsibility of explaining her/his presence in the research participants' lives, the lay summary serves to explain the research project to the potential participants by clarifying the researcher's background, what the project is about and the participants role in the process (Madison, 2012). My lay summary replied to the following questions: a) Who am I? b) What are the aims of this research? c) How will this research be developed? d) What kind of research are we talking about? By using a friendly format, this information was presented in a lay summary[43] that was sent by email to the groups. Additionally, hardcopies were available during the first meeting with each group and the topics addressed here helped me to structure my presentation. During these meetings, I summarised my personal and activist experience, my political trajectory and why I decided to undertake an academic career.

I also made transparent my own contradictions: being a Latin American activist researching the Global South but undertaking doctoral studies in the Global North. After explaining my positionality, I talked about my research, its aims and methodology, emphasizing the importance of defining mutual goals. As suggested by Speed (2006) and Lassiter (2006), research participants have a direct role in defining 'what it would be useful to know (…) how we should go about gaining that knowledge' (Speed, 2006, p.71) and 'what will be explored and what will not' (Lassiter, 2006, p.21). Consequently, I invited the activists to be part of meaningful participatory processes during the whole study, from the definition of mutual aims and data collection strategies to the analysis phase. For example, I suggested group interviews, workshops and observant participation as methods for producing data but I stressed that the pertinence of these tools had to be assessed by us all. I clarified that I was not pursuing an instrumental relationship, neither from my side (me using them for my purpose of collecting information) nor from theirs (to the extent that they could see me as someone 'useful' who can do the undesired tasks of the groups). In other words, I made clear my attempts to challenge research hierarchies by creating horizontal relationships among us.

[43] See Appendix 5 for full version in Spanish.

After my presentation, most of the members gave their opinion about my project. In general terms, they found my project interesting with regards to its concrete contribution to their own struggles. They also sympathised with my attempts to develop a critical analysis of autonomous politics in Latin America, a topic that, according to them, is much needed. They agreed with my research questions and with my methodological and epistemological framework, but due to their busy agendas and time constraints, they asked me to change some of the suggested field methods[44]. They also raised some questions and concerns regarding my research. These were mainly related to the research techniques for collecting data; the level of immersion I wanted to achieve with them; the reasons for my interest in Mexico (in the case of Mexican groups); confidentiality and the use of the information gathered. The ethical implications of these issues are discussed in section 2.6 of this chapter. Additionally, I invited the groups to think of potentially useful actions that I could undertake in case they decided to get involved in the research, such as workshops, reports, history of the groups and so forth.

In addition to my activist identity and the detailed presentation of my project, the common educational background between the activists and myself became an important facilitator in the process of negotiating the access to the groups. Unlike other militant/collaborative research in which great educational inequalities are found between researcher and researched (for example, Bhattacharya, 2008; Hermes, 1998; Speed, 2006), in my research most of the participants have gone through the higher education system[45]. This aspect was pivotal for the horizontal and collaborative relationships finally achieved with the groups. Moreover, most of the participants have undertaken studies in areas such as humanities, journalism, social sciences and education: their backgrounds enabled them to understand the meaning and methods of militant research. At the same time, all my case studies are engaged with processes of popular education, a tradition that definitely helped them to understand my methodological approach.

[44] Section 2.6 in this chapter describes the methodological changes effectively made due to the collective discussion with the groups.
[45] Most of the participants in my research are undergraduate students, postgraduate students and licensed professionals.

2.4.3 Field Methods.

As explained above, the epistemology and methodology framing my research call for a collaborative process of knowledge production (Otto and Terhorst, 2011) which is contingent (Casas-Cortés and Cobarrubias, 2010), reflective and essentially non-instrumental (Colectivo Situaciones, 2007). Under this approach, the research subjects are not merely seen as 'informants' or 'data sources' but as knowledgeable and empowered participants during the entire research process (Hale, 2008). Similarly, the 'data collection' is not considered the exclusive goal of fieldwork (Rappaport, 2008) and the methods are not 'simply tools for taking or discovering something…' (Hermes, 1998, p.166). In order to put these principles into practice, I gave high priority to the development of non-instrumental relationships between myself and the research participants, placing mutual respect and reciprocity as core principles of the research process. Furthermore, as the aim of my fieldwork was to engage in a horizontal process of learning with the groups under study, I took the recommendations of several activists scholars (such as Hermes, 2010, p.157; Martinez and Lorenzi, 2012; Colectivo Situaciones, 2007; Parra, 2013; Russell, 2014) and understood the methods as situated responses that might change over the course of the research. Accordingly, I suggested a provisional set of methods, including observant participation; group interviews and participatory workshops as the core techniques for gathering information. These methods were discussed in the groups' assemblies and some changes were made. While observant participation remained unchanged, group interviews and participatory workshops were adjusted. Time constraints were one of the major causes of these changes. From the participants' point of view, while group interviews might be difficult to schedule, individual interviews were preferred: they would allow me to adapt my time with the individual agendas of the members. Besides, I was told that individual interviews would enable me to gather the perceptions of members who are too shy to express their opinions in front of the whole group. Changes were also made to my original proposal of participatory workshops, as section 2.4.3.3 will detail. In what follows, I outline the methods applied during my fieldwork process.

2.4.3.1 Observant Participation

One of the core methods of my research is what Nigel Thrift (2000) calls 'observant participation'. By inverting the traditional notion of participant observation, Thrift (2000) emphasizes engagement rather than detached observation for the exploration of political phenomena. In this regard, the notion of 'observant participation' overcomes some positivist features of the conventional participant observation. Despite the immersion into the communities under study, traditional participant observers maintain a level of scholarly detachment that, in their view, enables them to secure an 'objective description of what they observed…' (Wadada, 2008, p.65). This approach reproduces the elitist conception of research as an exclusive task of academics (Greenwood, 2000) and privileges observation as the central goal, using participation as an instrumental way of acquiring proprietary knowledge (Greenwood, 2000).

Observation in militant ethnography assumes a different meaning: the researcher and the researched are all participants *and* observers, sharing their analysis in order to support social change (Greenwood, 2000). Observant participation entails the researcher doing the same things as the research subject, getting involved and intervening in the experience (Andrews, 2014) by explicitly acknowledging the type of collaboration undertaken. This method became the mainstay of my ethnographic practice.

Once accepted by the groups, I got actively involved in most of their activities. Usually, each group ran 2-3 activities and/or meetings per week, although in some cases they had to attend extra sub-team meetings. On average I attended at least 5 meetings/activities per week (working with two groups in each country). These were, broadly: a) weekly general assemblies (3-4 hours); b) sub-team meetings (3 hours), eg., for planning, developing strategies/actions, preparing materials, workshops and proposals; c) self-education workshops (3-8 hours), where the members shared tools for activism and engaged in reflective discussions about political issues through popular education methodologies; d) outreach events (3 hours) such as colloquiums, forums and activists gatherings; e) popular education workshops (from 3 hours to 2 full days) targeted at popular organizations, activists and interested persons; f) demonstrations (3 hours), usually in solidarity with other national struggles, for example, demonstrations against underground fare hikes in Mexico City; in support of Mexican families fighting for

dignified housing; denouncing ongoing State repression and violence against Chilean indigenous communities; and supporting Chilean women's to abortion.

My participation in these activities helped me to develop close relationships with my participants and provided me with a deep understanding of their logics, dynamics, practices, structures and contradictions. The time required to get fully involved varied from group to group. With some of them, I reached high levels of participation and confidence from the outset but with others, trust and participation developed more slowly.

Becoming a reflective and observant participant was challenging: I was not sitting from the side-line observing and analysing my cases studies. Conversely, I was sharing with them a number of experiences and during these embodied practices I needed to listen, observe and reflect. I shared stress, disappointment, tiredness, fears but also joy, hope, pride, laughter and creativity. Borrowing Burton's (2012) words about his experience as a militant researcher, I was 'running the same risks, taking similar responsibilities, living (…) getting hurt and burning-out together' (p.89). This led me to develop contingent participation processes (Russell, 2014) with the groups, by assuming multiple roles throughout the research. In some moments, and due to the different groups' needs, I prioritized my involvement in practical tasks such as decorating workshops' spaces; cooking for activist gatherings; buying and preparing materials for participatory activities; note-taking during meetings; collecting information for training sessions; facilitating workshops and planning demonstrations' performances. In other moments I assumed more analytical tasks, such as supporting the elaboration of participatory methodologies and training sessions' contents; transcribing and summarizing important meetings; and planning, conducting and systematizing workshops, among others. As Rappaport (2008) rightly argues, the aim of this multiplicity is '…to allow our activism to enter into dialogue with our individual research projects, so that, in a sense, we were simultaneously external analysts and internal actors…' (p.11)

My role both as a participant and a reflective observer constantly shifted and overlapped. Nevertheless, in my attempts to keep up with the pace of the groups, sometimes I found it difficult to focus on my role as a researcher. In this regard, it was crucial to maintain a process of reflection on my condition as both activist and researcher. Accordingly,

keeping an updated field-notebook helped me to persevere in my observant-listener account.

2.4.3.2 Semi-Structured Individual and Group Interviews

An interview can be described as an encounter between two or more people, a face-to-face 'interactionary performance' (Berg, 2001, p.67) aimed at gathering information for the understanding of the lived experiences of the research participants and the meaning they make of those experiences (Seidman, 2013). A semi-structured interview involves an enquiry into pre-determined topics, using open questions and a conversational style (Millwood and Heath, 2000). Usually, this form of interviewing is carried out by following an interview-guide, which avoids exact or standardized questions but rather, is focused on certain themes or open questions (Kvale, 1983). Here, the interviewer skilfully guides the conversation in order to systemically cover the main research themes, but at the same time he/she encourages the interviewees to talk freely and in detail about these topics (Mayorga, 2004), ensuring flexibility in the way the issues are addressed by the informants (Clifford, French and Valentine, 2010).

Drawing on the methodological principles of militant ethnography, I rejected the objectification of the interviewee and attempted to conduct my interviews in a more reflective and interactive way (Legard, Keegan and Ward, 2003). Engaging with this non-instrumental interviewing approach means leaving behind the traditional *question-answer-question* structure, to be replaced by a more reciprocal and fluid dynamic between interviewer and interviewee. Thus, by becoming 'conversational partners', my research comrades and I were able to 'construct memory, meaning and experience together' (Madison, 2012, p.28).

In line with the political idea of horizontality developed by the participating groups, I believed that all the members of the collectives could contribute in some way to my project and that they all had something to say about my research questions. Based on this political and ethical commitment, I undertook the endeavour of interviewing all the members of my case studies. Following Madison's (2012) and Hermes's (1998) suggestions, the interviews were only conducted after several weeks of participation. This allowed me to build respectful and reciprocal relationships with participants and to gain knowledge about their culture and context before undertaking the interviews. As a

consequence, I developed comfortable and reliable interviewing processes, gathering detailed and thoughtful data[46].

My first protocol included audiotaped interviews of 150 minutes divided into 2 sessions. I conducted five interviews under this protocol but soon realized that there was insufficient time for interviewing each activist twice. Accordingly, I adjusted my protocol and the remaining interviews were conducted in one session, most lasting 70-100 minutes. In four cases I was asked and agreed to conduct group interviews. Three group interviews were conducted with 2 people and one with 3 participants. All the interviews were conducted in Spanish.

The interviewees were informed in advance about the approximate duration of the interview. Before starting the interview, I explained to them the broad topics to be discussed; the voluntary character of the interview; their right to ask me to stop the recording device if they wanted to say something 'off the record'; the return of the interview once transcribed and their right to add or to modify any part of it. Each participants signed an informed consent form.

The next table shows a summary of the interviews actually carried out:

Country	Groups	N° of Members	N° of Members Interviewed	N° and Type of Interviews
Mexico	*JRA*	20	17	10 individual interviews
				3 group interviews
	Subversiones	16	15	13 individual interviews
				1 group interviews
Chile	*ECP*	10	9	9 individual interviews
	Rebrote	9	7	7 individual interviews
Total		*55*	*48*	*39 individual interviews*
				4 group interviews
43 interviews (individual and group) conducted in total				

Table 2: Summary Interviews

Seven activists could not be interviewed for the following reasons: two were abroad; three had very busy schedules and it was impossible to arrange the interviews in spite of

[46] See Appendix 3 for Interview Guide (Spanish Version)

all my attempts; one recently joined the group and did not feel ready for an interview, one refused to be interviewed due to security concerns.

2.4.3.3 Participatory Workshops

A participatory workshop is a method that enables groups and communities to reflect on their own issues, assess their actions and plan future projects (Chambers, 2002). It is a collective building space based on an exchange of discussions, ideas, agreements and other imaginative standpoints that contribute to the emergence of new views and solutions to shared problems (Candelo, Ortiz and Unger, 2003). In general, participatory methods challenge traditional social science approaches 'where the outside researcher sets the agenda, decides on the questions to be asked and implements the interview or questionnaire survey for later analysis' (Kindon, Pain and Kesby, 2007, p.17). Participatory methods emphasize shared learning, shared knowledge and flexible collaborative analysis, creating a process of transformative reflexivity in which both the researcher and the participants negotiate the meaning of the information generated together (Kindon et al., 2007).

It is important to acknowledge the impossibility of planning fixed contents, methodologies and strict timetables in advance (Chambers, 2002), because good participatory processes are always open to contingent changes and collective assessments. Agreeing with Chambers (2002), I drafted a general idea of my workshops and the final decision on the themes and methodologies was taken collectively among all the research participants. For instance, in my original plan I wanted to bring together the activists from different groups within each country. However, participants found this plan unworkable. As an alternative, we agreed on developing separate workshops within each group. With this new strategy, the workshops would be focused on the particular needs of each collective, being useful both for my research and for the groups. With *Subversiones*, *ECP* and *El Rebrote*, this strategy was undertaken. All the workshops attempted to be prepared collectively, but while in some cases the group got highly involved in the preparation of the session, in others they only gave me feedback of my workshop proposal. In the case of *JRA* and because of its particular organizational process, they suggested a different approach. As they were already conducting a series of internal workshops focusing on the same issues that I was interested in; they invited

me to attend these events, allowing me to record and to use the data for the purposes of my research. I agreed with this and participated actively in the preparation of 2 of these workshops.

While in *ECP* and *El Rebrote* one workshop was conducted per group, in the case of *Subversiones* three internal workshops were finally conducted due to their request to work in-depth on political, organizational and historical analysis. Three topics were addressed in the workshops: a) memory of the groups; b) autonomous politics; and c) organizational analysis. Through the production of a collaborative timeline and group discussion sessions, the memory workshops attempted to reconstruct the history of the groups by identifying their main stages, key moments, crises and organizational changes. Along with this, they fostered a self-assessment of their current performance and the identification of future challenges. The workshops focused on autonomous politics explored their views on representative politics, their understanding of autonomy, alternatives to current oppressive structures and their own political performance. Finally, in the organizational analysis workshop we applied an adjusted version of SWOT Matrix for evaluating the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats involved in one of my case studies. The following table summarises the implementation of this method:

Groups	Workshops Research-Oriented	Internal Workshops attended	Topics Addressed	Methods
Subversiones	3	-	Organizational Analysis	Adjusted version of SWOT Matrix
			History of the Group	Timeline and Reflective questions
			Autonomous Politics	Participatory group discussion
JRA	-	2	History of the Group	Timeline and Reflective Questions
			Autonomous Politics	Participatory group discussion
ECP	1	-	History of the Group	Timeline and Reflective questions
Rebrote	1	-	Autonomous Politics	Participatory Group Discussion
Total	5	2		

Table 3: Summary Participatory Workshops

2.5 Analysis

If militant research accounts provided me effective tools for planning and conducting my fieldwork, they did not shed much light on a systematic approach to data analysis. The lack of detailed information regarding data analysis in the different strands of action-research led me to try an alternative route. Drawing on Dick's (2007) suggestions, I acknowledged militant ethnography as my guide for the intervention process but I incorporated some 'grounded theory' strategies for the stages of analysis and theory building. More specifically, my analysis has been informed by Kathy Charmaz' (2000, 2006, 2008) constructivist approach to grounded theory. According to Charmaz (2006), grounded theory is:

> …a method of conducting qualitative research that focuses on creating conceptual frameworks or theories through building inductive analysis from the data. Hence, the analytic categories are directly 'grounded' in the data. The method favors (…) fresh categories over preconceived ideas and extant theories, and systematically focused sequential data collection over large initial samples. (Charmaz, 2006, p.187)

Taking distance from the positivist stance of its originators (see Glaser and Strauss, 1967), Charmaz (2000, 2006, 2008, 2011) recuperates the strategies of grounded theory but re-frames them in accordance with social constructionist assumptions. Here, rather than seeking theoretical generalizations, the goal is to develop an interpretative understanding of the phenomena. Social reality is considered multiple and constructed under particular conditions, and researchers and researched co-construct the data through interaction. Furthermore, the subjectivity of the researchers is acknowledged, making visible their positionality, interactions, privileges and perspectives during the entire research process. This approach emphasizes the importance of the research participants' voices both in the analysis and its presentation, unlike traditional grounded theory which gives priority to the researcher's voice (Charmaz, 2008, 2011). As can be seen, the main assumptions of constructivist grounded theory fitted in well with my overarching methodological and epistemological framework and with my commitment to build theory from the ground-up. Considering the complementary character of both approaches, I worked with two main strategies of Charmaz's version of grounded theory: coding and memo-writing.

After my fieldwork, I transcribed verbatim (and in Spanish) all my interviews (43) and workshops (5) and wrote an electronic copy of my field-notes. Additionally, I gathered and created an electronic folder with documents, leaflets and online articles produced by my case studies. Once transcribed, each interview was sent back to the respective interviewee, so each participant could have the chance to review, amend, delete or add information to their interviews if they wanted to. From this process, 9 participants sent me back amended interviews whilst the rest declared to be happy with the original transcriptions.

Once this process was done, I stored all my raw data in the data analysis software package Nvivo 10.0 and began with the coding process. According to Charmaz (2006), 'coding is the first step in moving beyond concrete statements in the data to making analytic interpretations (…) [It] means naming segments of data with a label that simultaneously categorizes, summarizes, and accounts for each piece of data' (p.43).

Firstly, I conducted 'initial coding' (Charmaz, 2006). For this purpose, I chose a sample of sixteen interviews, four per group, for a close reading of the data. I examined the interviews line-by-line and developed simple codes that best represented the data I had in front of me. Drawing on the idea that initial codes are meant to be 'provisional, comparative and grounded in the data' (Charmaz, 2006, p.48), I made conscious efforts to focus purely on the labelling (Johnson, 2014) and avoid the use of pre-existent theorizations at this stage. With this procedure, I managed to identify some clear analytical directions that guided my second phase of coding. During this and the following stages I used 'memo-writing' as a complementary strategy. This strategy proved helpful for increasing the level of abstraction of my ideas, comparing data and codes, and refining my main categories (Charmaz, 2006). In other words, memos became the methodological link, the 'distillation process' that allowed me to transform my data into a coherent theoretical corpus (Bex, 2007, p.245).

After the early coding, I conducted 'focused coding' (Charmaz, 2006) in all my data, including the interviews, workshops' transcriptions, field-notes and secondary sources. In this second stage I selected the more frequent codes and those which made most analytical sense for categorizing my remaining data in a more refined fashion. Unlike the initial coding, this phase was more theoretical and analytical because it required me to reflexively interact with the active codes and the data (Johnson, 2014). The 270 codes

generated here were then subjected to a final 'axial coding' (Charmaz, 2006). With the axial coding I specified the dimensions and properties of my main categories and clarified the relationship between them and their sub-categories. I reassembled the data initially fractured by my early coding in order to give coherence to my emerging analysis (Charmaz, 2006). As a consequence, I managed to transform some of these meta-categories into the main themes that will guide the discussion of the following chapters.

Once I had mapped my main themes, categories and sub-categories and identified the most relevant quotations associated with them, I started the task of translation and writing my empirical chapters. Here, I entered into a creative phase that allowed me to refine my categories, re-link codes, integrate my ideas and strengthen my core arguments. I remained loyal to the participants' voices, including their own words in the text as much as possible. I also connected my own findings to existing research, putting my contribution in a wider context.

All the analytical steps discussed above were extremely time-consuming but they helped me to create a rich and original narrative of Latin American autonomous politics. Although I am pleased with the final outcomes of my analytical approach, I acknowledge that the levels of collaboration achieved in this stage were poor compared to my other research phases. Initially, I was excited by the idea of developing participatory analysis, in which the research participants would 'act on their own behalf as peer co-reporters, co-interpreters, and co-analysts…' (Muller and Wu, 2006, p.2). In my attempts to bring collaboration into the stage of writing, I sent a couple of in-progress reports to each group, waiting for feedback from them. They were very happy with these accounts, but unfortunately, their busy agendas stopped them from providing me much feedback. My distance from the field, relying solely on on-line communication with the activists after my fieldwork and the academic and financial pressures of completing my thesis on time were other factors that hindered the possibility of developing a more collaborative analysis.

Having acknowledged that the writing of my thesis was an individual endeavour, it is important to remember that the analysis presented in the following chapters is the product of a collective process in which, both myself and the research participants reflected and learnt from each other. Nonetheless, acknowledging the issues around representation and authorship is an unavoidable task in any politically engaged research.

Creating a fairly written representation of a political current and the people who bring it to life is, at least, 'a contested and loaded arena' (Krumer-Nevo and Sidi, 2012, p.299). Researchers can easily fall into the objectification of their research participants, imposing their control and dominance over those who are being represented (Krumer-Nevo and Sidi, 2012). As a way to resist, or at least, mitigate this danger, I committed to some key principles and guidelines. Firstly, I did not intend to write 'on behalf' of my case studies. Thanks to my methodological decisions, I was able to critically observe, engage and interpret a contemporary political approach that I am passionate about. However, in no way should my work be understood as an 'authoritative representation' (Woodsworth, 2008, p.109) of the politics performed by these activist communities. Secondly, my analysis sought to communicate the multiple voices of my research participants, 'so that their experiences [were] heard and understood and their actions ma[d]e visible' (Holloway, 2005, p.272). In this process, multiple perspectives came together, including my own stance as a researcher and those of the researched. Accordingly, I tried to make visible the contradictions, nuances and sources of conflict within the narrative of autonomous politics, including diversities of opinion (Woodsworth, 2008). Thirdly, I tried to foster collaboration during all the stages of my research. Here, along with the in-progress reports sent to the groups, I offered participants the chance to check how I quoted and interpreted their words. I sent my final draft to the groups and had Skype meetings with them in order to discuss the main findings of my thesis and the adjustments to be made following their feedback[47]. Finally, I have used reflexivity as a guiding principle during the entire research process, including the analytical phase. This has invited me to be critically conscious of how my positionality, self-location and interests (Pillow, 2003) have influenced my own writing.

[47] I met via Skype with 4 members from *Subversiones*, who read my draft and gave me detailed feedback. The same process was done with 1 member from *ECP*, who skimmed the thesis and read thoroughly one chapter. The members from *El Rebrote* were unable to read the draft due to their lack of English proficiency but I had a 3 hours meeting with 5 of them where I explained all my findings chapters and received feedback. The draft was also read by 1 bilingual member of *JRA*, who shared his impressions with the rest of the group. Additionally, I had a 3-hours meeting with 3 *JRA* members, where we discussed the thesis findings.

2.6 Ethical Concerns

As autonomous political milieus can become easy targets of criminalization by the Government or by the mainstream media; the ethical issues around autonomy, privacy and confidentiality were pivotal in my research design. Accordingly, all the research participants were informed about their right to define whether they wanted to disclosure their identity in the research (individually and collectively) or if they preferred to keep anonymity on it. All my case studies agreed to make public the groups identity, and most of the activists (individually) rejected the use of fictitious names, by preferring the use of their forename or nickname[48].

The consent of the groups regarding my research was attained through face-to-face encounters and collective discussions and agreements based mainly on trust. However, an informed consent form (Appendix 4) was employed during the interviewing process. This document explained the voluntary character of the research; participants' right to decline to reply any questions; and the participants' freedom to withdraw from the study at any time without giving any reason and without any negative consequences.

But my ethical approach did not only revolve around standard procedures defined by institutional Ethics Committees. Unlike deontological ethics focused on universal principles guiding the research process, or consequentialist approaches, based on cost-benefit pragmatic analyses, my research draws on a feminist 'ethics of care' (Noddings, 1984; Sevenhuijsen, 1998; Edwards and Mauthner, 2002). This approach emphasises responsibility and care as pivotal dimensions of the research process, challenging traditional ethical models based on abstract principles, rules and obligations (Edwards and Mauthner, 2002).

Following Sevenhuijsen (1998), an ethics of care involves 'responsibilities and relationships rather than rules and rights. Secondly, it is bound to concrete situations rather than being formal and abstract. And thirdly, [it is an] 'activity of caring' rather than a set of principles which can simply be followed.' (Sevenhuijsen, 1998, p.107).

As the previous sections have shown in great detail, the ethical dimension is present throughout my research project. Conducting militant ethnography demands us to understand 'ethics' as an open and negotiated procedure that respects the contingent and

[48] Only 2 members asked for fictitious names.

fluid nature of [the] relationships' (Russell, 2012, p.36) established between the researcher and the research participants.

A central dilemma for research grounded in a feminist ethics of care refers to issues around power difference and hierarchical dynamics within the research process. According to Wolf (1996, p.2), power is discernible in three interrelated dimensions:

> (1) power difference stemming from different positionalities of the researcher and the researched (…) (2) power exerted during the research process, such as defining the research relationship, unequal exchange, and exploitation; and (3) power exerted during the postfieldwork period –writing and representing.

As shown in the previous sections, reflecting about unequal power dynamics between myself and the research participants has been a constant practice performed throughout my inquiry. This awareness and my commitment to strive towards horizontal and dialogical relationships with the activist communities I engaged with, led me to propose a number of strategies to unsettle potential hierarchies. The collaborative character of my research and the active involvement of the research participants during all the fieldwork stage is clearly the most powerful one. Nonetheless, as section 2.5 of this chapter shows, the post-fieldwork period has brought a series of ethical problems around writing and representation. The lack of collective analysis inevitably undercut my goal of conducting collaborative research during all the research stages. Despite these hindrances to collaboration, by making this situation explicit, doing my best to write a fair and honest interpretation of the political experiences I studied, and devoting time to the sharing and amending of my final draft with the research participants, represent modest attempts to address this issue in an ethical way. As Edwards and Mauthner (2002) point out, 'ethics is about how to deal with conflict, disagreement and ambivalence rather than attempting to eliminate it' (p.27).

Another important ethical issue stemming from my research, refers to the distance between the location of the institution where I undertook my PhD studies and the movements I worked with. My decision to study in England comes from the impossibility to get a fully-funded scholarship in Universities other than those that are internationally top-ranked. This immediately left Latin America out of the picture and my options were restricted to USA, England, Australia, Canada and France, among other few countries. Besides, due to the regulations of my scholarship, I was supposed to live

in the city where I was pursuing my studies but I was allowed to go abroad for fieldwork. These constraints framed my opportunities to conduct politically-engaged research. Although I am aware of the insurmountable advantages of engaging in long-term activist research, I could only devote one year to full-time activist research practice, whilst in the remaining three years I have been away from the groups I worked with. This has been extremely difficult for me, feeling many times guilty and politically inconsistent. I often felt that I was betraying my comrades for being far away from the struggle and enjoying the comforts of a privileged country. As a way to address the political commitment expected from a militant researcher, I have been politically active during most of my PhD studies, whether engaging in solidarity activities with Latin America or joining critical initiatives in England and Europe. These activities slightly attenuated these strong feelings albeit they did not disappear.

The requirement to write my thesis in English is another key ethical dilemma. Although some research participants were able to read my thesis in English, I could not share the document with those who only read Spanish. Considering this issue, I have a strong commitment to translate my thesis into Spanish as soon as I obtain my doctoral degree.

2.7 Methodological Issues during Fieldwork

As explained in the previous sections, undertaking activist collaborative research was a very challenging endeavour, especially in the case of Mexico, an unfamiliar country for me. Gaining access and building trust in a short period of time was the first methodological issue experienced during my fieldwork. Firstly, my Mexican case studies were involved in oppositional politics against an authoritarian and intolerant regime which means that they were constantly under threat of government surveillance. As my methodology required me to get fully involved in their activities, I needed to gain high levels of trust from my research participants in order to work alongside them effectively. This took a longer time than I expected, nonetheless, I eventually managed to get immersed in the groups. Secondly, I could not avoid feeling emotionally affected by the hostile side of Mexico, characterized by high levels of violence, government repression, a national drug war, routine sexual violence against women on the streets, poor conditions of public transportation, and so forth. Along with this, I had several

difficulties in finding accommodation and I experienced some serious abdominal health problems which required hospitalization.

Fortunately, my later experience in Chile was less difficult because: a) the cultural and political background were familiar to me; b) the levels of violence and conflict were significantly lower; c) I had strong personal and political networks; d) one case study was known to me. In ethical terms, working with activists who had been my comrades in the past was a consistent decision, because this facilitated my entrance into the group and the trust-building process was faster and easier. However, as I was also working with a group in the capital city, during my whole stay in Chile I travelled at least two times per week from one city to another; sometimes by plane (1 hour of journey) but due to my student budget, most of the time by bus (6 hours of journey). This turned out to be exhausting.

Finding ethical and ideological cohesion between researching and researched parties when conducting activist research was another important issue stemming from my fieldwork experience. In my attempts to achieve ethical consistency between my research procedures and the principle of horizontality shared with the research participants, I decided to conduct interviews with all the members of my case studies. This task was overly ambitious, physically exhausting and time consuming. However, it enabled me to give space to the voice of all participants, rather than accepting a few 'key actors' as representatives. Similarly, the idea of conducting politically engaged research entailed turning my epistemological assumptions into concrete outcomes for the groups. This led me to be overwhelmed as I took over several responsibilities, such as preparing workshops, transcribing important meetings, writing summary documents of outreach events and reports.

2.8 Concluding Remarks

In this chapter I have explored the methodological and epistemological assumptions underpinning my research and the methods and procedures carried out throughout the inquiry. Drawing on feminist and prefigurative epistemologies, I have conducted a qualitative, ethnographic and politically-engaged research, informed by the tradition of activist/militant research and Juris's (2007, 2008) account of militant ethnography. This framework led me to pursue a collaborative form of research performed from within rather than outside autonomous movements.

By embracing this approach, I have committed to a process of knowledge construction that rejects positivist ideas of objective, detached and value-neutral research. Alternatively, I have called for a particular and embodied vision of objectivity that understands knowledge as local, situated and partial. Throughout this chapter, I have highlighted my understanding of autonomous movements as knowledge-producers in their own right. Alongside this idea, I have recognized the knowledge produced in this thesis as the fruit of a collective process of critical analysis and political praxis. Through these principles, I have tried to challenge the dichotomies usually reproduced in conventional research settings, such as the binary thought/practice and the duality between research expert and research subjects.

In line with this epistemological stance, I have committed to a feminist 'ethics of care', placing responsibility and care as guiding principles throughout the entire research process. Accordingly, this approach led me to constantly strive towards more equal, dynamic and reciprocal relationships between myself and the research participants. The collaborative character of my research is clearly the most powerful strategy seeking to reach a power balance within the research process. Nevertheless, despite all my efforts, a number of ethical issues were identified during my research. The most problematic of these issues are located in the post-fieldwork stage and revolve around the issues of writing and representation and the impossibility to remaining politically involved with the case studies due to my distance from the field. Reflexivity has been pivotal during the entire research process: situating myself as a researcher, acknowledging existing power relations and mitigating them when possible.

Achieving consistency between my methodological and epistemological assumptions and the practical methods and procedures to be applied in the field, became a great challenge that required creativity, flexibility and resilience. In order to convey some of the complexity of this process, this chapter has provided a detailed account of my journey as a militant ethnographer. I have explained the procedures undertaken for selecting case studies, gaining access and negotiating with them, as well as some of the ethical and methodological issues encountered during my inquiry. I have stressed that my own activist identity, trustworthy activists' gatekeepers and a common educational background between me and the participants were pivotal for succeeding in my fieldwork endeavour. Additionally, and drawing on my willingness to conduct collaborative research, I have explained how my original methods were adapted according to the research participants' suggestions. Observant participation, individual and group semi-structured interviews and participatory workshops were the methods that I ended up applying in the field, becoming a rich source of insightful and in-depth data. Finally, I have discussed the importance of avoiding writing 'on behalf' of the groups I engaged with, preferring an analysis that includes the multiple voices of the participants and myself. I have also argued that a constructivist approach to grounded theory can be a useful tool for the production of knowledge from below.

CHAPTER THREE:

APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF AUTONOMOUS POLITICS

3.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I presented the methodological and epistemological approaches guiding my research. Inspired by feminist and prefigurative epistemologies, I stressed the importance of pursuing 'situated' knowledge production, built 'from below'. In line with my epistemological and ethical commitments, I refused a deductive rationale, where a pre-defined theory is deployed to explain empirical findings. Alternatively, I pursued an inductive approach, considering the participants' voices and reflections as the main guides of my empirical chapters. This means that it was only after I had mapped the main themes, categories and sub-categories found in my empirical data, that I was able to interweave these themes with the relevant literature on autonomy and social change. This is not an 'anti-theoretical' move. As my whole thesis shows, my work discusses a wide array of scholarship, engaging with some authors more than others. However, it does not asphyxiate the phenomenon under study with a pre-defined rigid and confined theoretical framework. On the contrary, I rely on a range of critical scholars and activist/researchers whose contributions add to my empirically-grounded analysis.

Throughout my research journey, I realized that while some scholarship is unable to capture the richness and specificities of the politics of autonomy in Latin America, other works are acknowledging its uniqueness and radical potential. They are also developing contextual analyses, helping to identify the existing challenges at a theoretical, epistemological and political level. This chapter attempts to map this diversity and to discern which analyses resonate with my own work.

In the first section, I outline two theoretical paradigms that have dominated the field of social movements' studies: the European 'New Social Movements' approach and the North American framework. I discuss why these paradigms cannot inform autonomous politics in Latin America. The following section moves through the analysis of autonomous politics in Western settings. Here, I explore how the notion of autonomy has been shaped by Western radical scholarship and which movements have been

considered good representatives of this political approach. Finally, in the last section I expand on the unique character of Latin American autonomous movements, exploring their roots and key features, along with theoretical debates and proposals for the understanding these collective projects.

3.2 Sociology of Social Movements: A Critical Account

Recent decades have witnessed the emergence of heterogeneous and powerful popular struggles across Latin America. In this 'explosion of rage and hope' (Dinnerstein, 2015, p.1), large movements have coexisted with less spectacular, although equally radical, grassroots initiatives. Drawing on the sociological terminology developed in the West, these expressions of collective insubordination are referred to under the label of 'social movements', opening up both political and academic debates about their rationale and emancipatory potential. According to Gutierrez (2015), the popularization of this notion in Latin America was important inasmuch as it restored the political and public presence of collective subjects of struggle. It also shed light on the diversity of these new subjectivities in resistance, overcoming the rhetoric of the organized working class as the only effective political agent for social change. However, what was supposed to be an opening in the understanding of social struggles, has gradually closed down its analytical force (Gutierrez, 2015) through the imposition of rigid frameworks that pre-define the features, structures and goals of social movements.

Broadly speaking, two theoretical paradigms have dominated the field of social movement studies: the European 'New Social Movements' approach (Melucci, 1985; Touraine, 1985; Castells, 2015) and the North American framework, including the theories on 'Resource Mobilization' (Mc Carthy and Zald, 1977), Political Process (Tarrow, 1989) and 'Political Contention' (McAdam, Tarrow, Tilly, 2004).

Without doubt, the models advanced by the North American social movements' scholars represented an important improvement over the collective behavior theories[49], as they moved from 'conceptualizing social movements as genuinely political actors rather than as aberrant psychological phenomena' (Staggenborg 2012, p.18). Born in the 1970s,

[49] Collective behaviour theories understood social movements as irrational collective manifestations of social dysfunction (Smelser, 1962).

Resource Mobilization Theory explains social movements as a result of long-term changes in groups' resources, organization, and opportunities for collective action (Jenkins, 1983). Accordingly, this theory seeks to provide 'detailed attention to the selection of incentives, cost-reducing mechanisms or structures, and career benefits that lead to collective behavior' (Mc Carthy and Zald, 1977, p.1213). In an attempt to combine this theory with a political-structural focus of analysis, the Political Process approach (Tilly, 1999; McAdam, 19997; Tarrow, 1989) draws on the former but it emphasizes the political and institutional environment in which social movements operate. Special attention is placed on the relationship between institutional political actors and the movements (Della Porta and Diani, 2006) and how exogenous factors: a) enhance or inhibit prospects for social mobilization; b) determine the influence of movements over institutional decisions and policies (Meyer and Minkoff, 2004). The emphasis given to the relationship between social movements and formal political institutions is also observed in the 'contentious politics' analysis. Here, movements are in a contentious relationship to the state and other formal institutions, expressed by the former making claims or demanding reforms from the latter (McAdam et al., 2004).

Applying this framework to the study of autonomous politics in Latin America is problematic for various reasons. First of all, this approach understands social movements from a liberal and Western-centric perspective. Accordingly, it stresses the individual and utilitarian motivations behind collective action, giving little space to the analysis of an altruistic desire for social change, such as the one inspiring the praxis of my case studies. Second, the emphasis on the rationality of collective action usually overlooks the role played by emotions (Della Porta and Diani, 2006), personality transformation and cultural change (Flynn, 2011). These features that are pivotal in the new expressions of resistance observed in Latin America. Most importantly, this framework fails to explain autonomous and 'non state-centred' *colectivos*, such as the ones studied in this research. These theories understand social movements as extensions of institutional operations. This means that the practices of movements are seen as instrumental actions oriented towards the change of formal political institutions and/or government policies. But, how do we understand the politics of movements and collectives that are not merely interested in reforming the current political and economic system? Drawing on liberal assumptions, this framework is unable to address this question, and, as a result, is

inappropriate for the analysis of contemporary autonomous movements. As Sitrin (2012) argues:

> These contemporary autonomous movements are attempting to organize themselves outside of the state and traditional forms of hierarchical and institutional power (…) Their energy is placed in creating new societies and communities rather than (…) asking for things from the state (…) these movements are clear in not desiring a contentious relationship to power but rather in their desire for (and creation of) alternative powers. (Sitrin, 2012, p.214)

Under the North American paradigm, social movements are claim-makers seeking to influence institutional decisions and foster change 'within the established socio-political and economic order' (Haiven and Khasnabish, 2013, p.474). Although this framework can be useful for explaining the praxis of certain type of movements, its rationale clashes with the very nature of the anti-capitalist, anti-patriarchal and non-state-centric politics analysed in this research.

The second main paradigm in the study of social movements is the European tradition known as 'New Social Movements' Theory'[50] (Melucci, 1985; Touraine, 1985; Offe, 1985, among others). If the American School emphasizes movements' organisational resources, the European tradition, usually with a neo-Marxist or post-Marxist lineage, places processes of identity constitution and the creation of solidarity at the centre of analysis (Gibb, 2001). This tradition argues that social movements should be analysed as a product of the post-material age, distinguishing them from the working class movements of the industrial period (Pichardo, 1997). Accordingly, Offe (1985) compares the specialized, comprehensive and highly institutionalized setting of the old politics with the new paradigm of social movements, in which a non-institutional politics is developed and values such as autonomy and identity are highly regarded. If the old labour movement upheld 'class' as the core category of analysis, the 'New Social Movements' theory [NSM] focuses on struggles over symbolic, informational and cultural resources. By challenging the economic reductionism of classical Marxism and its privileging of class-based identity, NSM theorists go beyond the sphere of production, looking at the domains of politics, ideology, and culture. As a result, they

[50] From now on referred to as NSM.

highlight new sources of collective identity such as ethnicity, gender, and sexuality, among others (Kozinets and Handelman, 2004).

Certainly, this tradition has made a great contribution to the study of social movements 'in ways that [exceeds] the functionalism of collective behaviour and the materiality and liberalist rationality of political process/resource mobilization' (Haiven and Khasnabish, 2013, p.475). Nevertheless, and similar to the North American tradition, the applicability of this approach to the analysis of Latin American autonomous movements does not seem appropriate. Firstly, uncritically applying a European-based framework to Latin American experiences of struggle entails a Eurocentric turn that is highly problematic. A good example of this concern is observed in the presumed disinterest of new social movements concerning issues related to material-economic conditions and their shift towards personal and cultural struggles. The previous features described by NSM scholars are called into question when we compare movements in the Global North with Latin American movements. If the former are concerned with post-materialist values, the latter are often struggling against starvation and authoritarian governments (De Sousa Santos, 2001). Hence, by focusing on the so called 'immaterial struggles', the NSM approach has tended to overlook the structural nature of oppression, violence and exploitation, favouring struggles that usually belong to more privileged classes or societies (Haiven and Khasnabish, 2013). Unlike the movements described by NSM's theories, several Latin American movements from below are imminently material and nonmaterial (Motta, 2009a). Interestingly, they have transcended the dichotomy 'old-new' through an understanding of resistance that merges material struggles with the creation of alternative subjectivities and social relations.

A second dimension that problematizes the applicability of this approach stems from the value given to representative structures for pursuing social change. Touraine (1985), for example, indicates that one of the risks of the socio-cultural character of the post-industrial struggles is the complete separation between state and social movements. As stated by Touraine (1985), this distance may lead to a situation where 'social movements can easily become segmented, transform(ing) themselves into defense of minorities or search for identity while public life becomes dominated by pro or anti State movements' (Touraine, 1985, p.780). Likewise, Melucci (1985) defends the importance of representative channels and institutional actors capable of translating the demands of the

movements into policies. For Melucci (1985), this intermediate public space is pivotal for preserving social movements from atomization.

This reliance on a state-centered paradigm brings NSM theories closer to the American tradition, as both give State and formal political institutions a leading role (Cox, 1996). As Day (2004) points out, NSM approach has remained 'within a hegemonic conception of the political [as it is] only marginally aware of the possibilities inherent in actions oriented neither to achieving state power nor to ameliorating its effects' (Day, 2004, p.723). This hegemonic conception of the 'political' has also been noticed by Urrutia (2004), who develops a critical analysis of Touraine's sociology of social movements. According to Urrutia (2004), Touraine's work is part of a concrete 'regime of enunciation' that narrows the meaning of politics to something inextricably linked to state administration and the creation of law and its institutions. Under this framework, the praxis of autonomous collectives are equated to 'utopian fevers' and 'radical adventurism', thus failing to see the new political paths built by these movements and their great emancipatory potential. The challenge, then, is to go beyond these frameworks and their explicit or hidden premise that, sooner or later, movements have to interact with the state as a way to foster social change or gaining some kind of access to power (Pecorelli, 2012).

The importance given to these two dominant traditions has been observed in Latin America, where several scholars have taken the North American framework (Yashar, 1998; Roberts and Portes, 2006; Houtzager, 2000; Wolff, 2007; Bidegain, 2012) or the European NSM approach (Navas, 2007; Reyes and Garza, 2016) for the analysis of regional social movements. Nevertheless, later works have tried to correct some of the lacunae left by these traditions. The works of Aguilera (2014), Pinilla (2015) and Quitral and Ameghino (2015), among others, have tried to overcome this duality in the region, seeking to integrate the best analytical elements of each approach whilst acknowledging the specificities of Latin American politics. Recent scholarship from the West has attempted to improve the classic social movements' approaches. Goodwin, Jasper and Polleta (2009), for example, have emphasized the pivotal role played by emotions in the functioning of social movements, as well as stressing the importance of historical specificity in the analysis of practices (Goodwin and Jasper, 2004; Goodwin et al., 2009). Benford and Snow's (2000) work on 'framing' has acknowledged social movements as agents that are actively involved in the creation and maintenance of

meaning, taking part in what they refer to as 'the politics of signification'[51] (p.613). Della Porta (2006, 2015), Smith and Johnston (2002), Cohen and Rai (2000), and Moghadam (2013) have explored the implications of globalization for popular mobilization and the ways that social movements engage in transnational struggles.

Unquestionably, all this scholarship (the two dominant traditions and the later social movements' research) has provided valuable insights for the exploration of contemporary social movements. Nonetheless, many of these studies remain tied to state-centered conceptions of politics, lacking the appropriate lenses for exploring autonomous and radical collective experiences. Furthermore, several studies have approached social movements as 'objects' of inquiry (Haiven and Khasnabish, 2013), seeking to explain and, on occasions, generalize social movement behaviour (Casas Cortés et al., 2008). Here, the development of new analytical frameworks and categories are seen primarily as explanatory tools, as the researchers maintain the distinction between the movements' 'doing' and the knowledge derived from their academic work. As a consequence, this scholarship does not allow the movements 'to speak for themselves, to posit their own vocabularies, cartographies and concepts of the world and to articulate their own categories of analysis' (Casas Cortés et al, 2008, p.26).

This section outlined the dominant traditions of social movements' studies, their limitations in the understanding of Latin American autonomous politics and their divergences with a different type of research (including my own) that acknowledges movements as knowledge-producers. The following parts of this chapter review the contributions of explicitly politicized social science researchers (Haiven and Khasnabish, 2013, p.477) who try to go beyond the constrictions of these dominant frameworks. Firstly, I will present some of the existing debates around the study of autonomous politics in the West. Then, I will expand and contrast this scholarship with the insights of critical scholars and activist researchers working *with* and *alongside* autonomous movements in Latin America.

[51] In the 'politics of signification', social movements, the state, local governments and the media, among others, 'seek to establish, among contested frames, the dominant meaning ascribed to persons, experiences, objects and events' (Bartholomew et al., 2006, p.174).

3.3 Autonomous Politics in the West

3.3.1 Reclaiming 'Autonomy' as a Political Category

The rise of the alter-globalization movement[52] in the latter half of the 1990s represented a key turning point in the practice and theorizing of social movements. Although the same dominant frameworks (explained in the previous section) continued to be applied for the explanation of this transnational movement, the radicalism and novelty of these mobilizations opened up space for a much more politically engaged scholarship advanced by critical and activist researchers. As the notions of 'autonomy' and 'autonomous politics' became some of the hallmarks of varied forms of activism in this period (Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006), several scholars from the West embarked on the endeavour of exploring these concepts in light of the radical practices enacted by contemporary social movements. These analyses also led them to debate the political and ideological roots of this autonomous approach to social change, recuperating historical experiences and theoretical accounts that had remained obscured in the mainstream analysis of politics.

Derived from the Greek *autonomos*, with *autos* referring to self and *nomos* to law, autonomy can be broadly understood as self-legislation or self-government. When applied to the narrative of social struggles, the concept has taken a specific meaning, albeit retaining a high degree of conceptual oscillation (Modonesi, 2010) as a moveable, historically specific and contextual notion. Against the Kantian-inspired[53] liberal and individualist understanding of autonomy, a more radical scholarship has stressed its collective dimension. Although with a different emphasis, various autonomist Marxists and anarchist-inspired writers have seen autonomy as both an individual and collective project 'fulfilled only through reciprocal and mutually agreed relations with others' (Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006, p.733). When the renewal of democracy is the goal, individual and collective autonomy are highly interrelated with each other and they both play an essential role. Under this approach:

[52] Also called 'global justice movements' or 'anti-corporate globalization movements'.
[53] Where autonomy has been mainly associated to the independence of individual subjectivity (Katsiaficas, 2009) through the use of reason as a set of moral principles. (Bohm et al., 2010).

> Individual autonomy implies individuals' capacity to make choices in freedom, while collective autonomy implies a given society's or group's self-rule through the freedom of its institutions and equal participation in institutions. (Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006, pp.733, 734)

Autonomy, then, is understood as the push towards both freedom and connectedness, albeit the former can only be achieved if the latter is involved. In other words, interaction, negotiation, communication and collective action are essential in the purpose of seeking freedom (Notes from Nowhere, 2003).

In line with this quest for freedom and emancipation, autonomous politics refers to collective experiences pushing for independence from institutions, regimens, nation-states or social systems, in general (Cleaver, 2009); and from political parties, trade unions and Marxist-Leninist ideological projects, in particular (Katsiaficas, 2006). Along with this claim for independence, autonomy entails the creation of alternative ways of being (King, 2016), living and pursuing social change. Autonomous politics carries a strong rejection of authoritarianism and hierarchical structures and it calls for alternative organizational models that foster consensus, horizontality and collective self-management (Chatterton, 2010; Katsiaficas, 2006). Hence, by enacting radical experiments of democracy, those embracing the idea of autonomy are prefiguring[54] the social world they want to live in (King, 2016; Day, 2005). Nevertheless, it is important to stress that autonomy is never fully achieved, it is 'a partially fulfilled desire that is fought for and struggled over' (Chatterton, 2010, p.899). As Pickerill and Chatterton (2006) point out, autonomous politics is not built outside capital relations but within and against the dominant order. Autonomy, then, should not be equated to 'liberated spaces'. Following Holloway, 'all that exists is the constant drive towards self-determination (…) the drive against-and-beyond the negation of self-determination, and as part of that drive, the creation of extremely fragile spaces or moments in which we live the world that we want to create' (Holloway, 2010c, pp.910,911).

Although tracing the beginning of autonomous politics in the West is almost an impossible task, acknowledging political experiences throughout history that brought autonomy to the foreground is a doable and necessary endeavour. The Paris Commune in 1871 (Tombs, 2014), the Spanish Revolution of 1936 (Dolgoff, 1974), the escalation

[54]See section 3.3.2 in this chapter for an account of prefiguration.

of social struggles in the sixties, the emergence of the New Left and 1968, the *Autonomia* movement in the Italy of the sixties and seventies, and the *Autonomen* movement developed in Germany in the eighties and nineties (Katsiaficas, 1987; 2006), these are only a few examples of collective processes that embraced an autonomous approach to social change. Along with these more or less spectacular struggles, we can also highlight the role of workers' autonomism deployed by the American Johnson-Forest Tendency in the forties and fifties (Cleaver, 1979), the French group *Socialism ou Barbarie* (SoB) in the fifties and sixties (Castoriadis, 1997) and the Italian *Operaismo* in the sixties and seventies (Tronti, 1964). The exploration of these experiences would be a fascinating task, but for the purpose of this research I will focus primarily on the development of autonomous politics in Western contemporary movements. More specifically, I will look at the alter-globalization movement, Occupy mobilizations and localized autonomous projects revolving around these two broad networks.

3.3.2 Autonomy in Action: From the alter-globalization protests to Occupy

As mentioned above, the alter-globalization movement represented a key turning point in the Western history of resistance[55]. In a context dominated by international trade liberalization and structural adjustments (Pleyers, 2010), this movement stood against neoliberalism and reclaimed the possibility to build alternative worlds. In its diversity, this movement sought to create 'alternative globalizations from below' (Juris, 2004, p.341) or 'grassroots globalization', forging wider alliances as a response to peoples' exclusion from global neoliberal structures (Routledge and Cumbers, 2009, p.15).

The 1999 protests against the meetings of the World Trade Organization (WTO) taking place in Seattle, made the movement well-known at a global scale and became a symbol for activists' networks organizing in other regions. This mobilization was followed by a number of counter-summits and direct action protests against multilateral institutions and expert meetings, along with the organization of social forums seeking to gather activists from different parts of the world (Juris, 2004; Pleyers, 2010). Undoubtedly, these global and regional convergences were the most visible actions carried out by the

[55] Although I acknowledge that the alter-globalization movement was also composed by networks and movements from the Global South, in this section I focus particularly on the activism and analyses of the movement developed in the Global North.

movement, yet not the only ones. According to Pickerill and Chatterton (2006), the alter-globalization activism was also manifested through localized autonomous projects, such as social centres, eco-villages, co-operatives and self-education experiments, among others. Adding to this point, Maeckelbegh (2013) emphasizes the convergence between global and local scales, as most activists' involvement within the global movement was based on their participation in local struggles for autonomy.

Drawing on their political engagement with the alter-globalization movement, a number of Western critical scholars (Graeber, 2002; Juris, 2004; 2008; Juris and Pleyers, 2009; Maeckelbergh, 2011, 2013; Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006; Routledge and Cumbers, 2009) have tried to explore '*from within*' the dynamics, features and emancipatory possibilities opened by these processes of resistance, without confining them to pre-defined analytical frameworks. An important point of agreement among these authors is the recognition of the heterogeneous character of this movement and the co-existence of different political perspectives. For this reason, Juris (2008) refers to alter-globalization movements 'in plural', to recognize the diversity of the agents. Likewise, Routledge and Cumbers (2009) reject the idea of a single, coherent movement, preferring the term 'global justice networks', a concept that acknowledges the 'many fissures and fault lines' that divide the movement (p.2). The approach to social change, the forms of practicing democracy and the definition (or not) of an anti-capitalist stance, are just a few dimensions that divide the members of these transnational networks. Pleyers (2010), for example, distinguishes between alter-globalization *activists* and alter-globalization *citizens*. On the one hand, the *activists* hold a bottom-up approach to social change, engaging with the creation of autonomous spaces 'where they experiment with horizontal networks, alternative consumptions and participatory processes' (p.12). On the other hand, the *citizens* favour a more institutional and top-down approach to social change, 'focusing on global standards and policies, global institutions and strongly structured civil society actors able to put their issues on the agendas of national and global policy-makers' (p.13). Similarly, Juris (2008) identifies tensions between the activists coming from libertarian networks, who support decentralized, although globally coordinated networks of autonomous communities; and those with a more orthodox Marxist or social democratic background, who do not abandon political representation and see the movements as lobby groups with the role of applying pressure to institutional actors. As several authors (Flesher Fominaya, 2007; Juris, 2008; Pleyers,

2010) notice, the division between institutional left-wing and autonomous strands has been a central feature of the alter-globalization movement both in North America and Western Europe. This fissure is particularly relevant for the field of social movement studies, because it brings to the fore the growing legitimacy obtained by the autonomous approach to social change. Interestingly, some authors (Graeber, 2002; Lynd and Grubacic, 2008) see in the Zapatista uprising[56] a source of inspiration for the alter-globalization movement, strengthening both the autonomous currents and the movement as a whole.

Despite the coexistence of these two political approaches in the alter-globalization movement, the discursive dominance of autonomous principles over more traditional political frameworks was unquestionable (Flesher Fominaya, 2007). With a clear influence of autonomous strands, principles such as decentralization, horizontality, consensus decision making, assembly-based politics, openness and diversity became central features for several global networks (Maeckelbergh, 2011, 2013; Flesher Fominaya, 2007), and although not advocated by all, they were able to set 'the parameters of discussion' (Maeckelbergh, 2011, p.10). Through experimentation with new forms of organization, the alter-globalization movement tried to reinvent democracy against the frames imposed by states, parties and corporations. As a result, they successfully brought forward horizontal and decentralized networks, enacting democracy in non-hierarchical and consensual ways (Graeber, 2002).

Although often misrecognized and neglected (politically and theoretically), feminist organizing played an important role in the alter-globalization movement in general, and in the autonomous strands, in particular. According to Eschle and Maiguashca (2010), feminism had a vibrant presence within this movement and shaped a 'distinctive form of collective action' (p.4) that they called 'feminist antiglobalization activism'. With a diverse array of political views, feminist sections of the alter-globalization movement challenged both gender hierarchies and the global economy (Eschle and Maiguaschca, 2010). For example, they challenged systematic forms of male domination and marginalization of feminism existent in the movement, and raised the contradictions of this 'putatively open, egalitarian and emancipatory space' (Conway, 2011, p.56). By insisting that the movement is also embedded in the social relations that it seeks to

[56] See section 3.4.2 in this chapter and section 5.6.4 in Ch5 for a more detailed account of Zapatismo.

transform (Conway, 2011), feminists called for a transformation that is both personal and global (Hewitt, 2011). Accordingly, they insisted on the importance of combating all forms of discrimination and hierarchy, questioning the notably 'ungendered and deracialized discourse on activism against globalization' (Conway, 2011). Regarding the less institutionalized feminist strands, we find some similarities with the broader autonomous current of the movement. Here, feminists made big efforts to foster participation, embracing horizontal organizational forms, avoiding the division of labour as much as possible and making decisions based on consensus (Eschle and Maiguaschca, 2010).

Similar features were adopted by the Occupy movements spread across the globe since 2011. With a higher presence in North America and Western Europe, these movements pursued two main goals: on the one hand, they sought to target inequality and the power of corporate and financial interests in political and economic systems. On the other hand, they attempted to produce alternative forms of community and democracy from below (Juris, 2012). Although largely inspired by the alter-globalization movement, the Occupy mobilizations introduced important innovations in their political praxis that made them different from their precursors. The strategy of occupation was the most salient one, as it represented a turning point between the transient character of the alter-globalization mobilizations and the decision to resist in a specific location on a permanent basis, whether in the occupation or in a given territory (Maeckelbergh, 2012). This also entailed a shift in the assembly practices, which moved from 'more self-contained physical spaces such as social centres and activist assemblies to public arenas, and the resulting unprecedented intensity of direct engagement with 'ordinary citizens'' (Flesher Fominaya, 2015, p.155). As Maeckelbergh (2012) argues, due to the various political topics addressed by the Occupy movements, and unlike the experience of the alter-globalization gatherings, the new occupations targeted larger audiences and welcomed different people, from hard-core activists to strangers and curious passers-by.

Along with these innovations, important continuities can be traced between the alter-globalization movement and the broad phenomenon of Occupy (Graeber, 2011; Klein, 2011; Maeckelbergh, 2012; Razsa, 2012; Flesher Fominaya, 2015). Interestingly, many of these continuities are related to political views and organizational practices grounded in what I have called autonomous politics. Drawing on her research on the Spanish 15-

M mobilizations[57], Flesher Fominaya (2015) demonstrates that the autonomous approach not only achieved legitimacy, as in the alter-globalization protests, but became the dominant perspective within the movement. This tendency was expressed in the widespread refusal of formal participation of parties and unions in the movement and the limited involvement of institutional left groups. Although agreeing with Flesher Fominaya (2015) on the pivotal role played by autonomous strands, Pickerill and Krinsky (2012) provide a more nuanced vision of the dynamics between Occupy activists and institutional left-wing actors in Oakland. According to these authors, Occupy Oakland managed to build successful ties with one of the strongest trade unions, organizing together a massive general strike and mobilizations that closed several coastal ports.

Although some of the continuities apply to the movements as a whole, in what follows I will focus exclusively on the common dimensions shared by the autonomous strands of both the alter-globalization and Occupy movements. For the purpose of this review and at the risk of over-simplifying the richness of this political approach, I have outlined four main dimensions that define the praxis of autonomous politics in these movements. The first line of continuity refers to the development of a multifaceted critique of representative democracy, portraying it as a 'contested form of government that, although ideologically dominant, is anything but universally accepted' (Maeckelbergh, 2013, p.29). These movements exposed the capture of political representatives by the economic elite and how political parties have become the representatives of major corporations and financial institutions (Razsa and Kurnik, 2012).

Secondly, these two movements defended an alternative model of direct democracy and self-governance. This encompassed the creation of horizontal and non-hierarchical structures and tactics, consensus decision-making and rotation of responsibilities, among others. According to Graeber (2002), this resulted in:

> a rich and growing panoply of organizational instruments—spokescouncils, affinity groups, facilitation tools, breakouts, fishbowls, blocking concerns, vibe-watchers and so on—all aimed at creating forms of democratic process that allow

[57]The 15-M or movement of *Indignados* emerged in Spain, in May 2011. Here, people took the streets and camped in urban squares protesting against austerity measures and expressing their indignation for the lack of real democracy. It is considered a direct precedent and source of inspiration for the subsequent Occupy movements across the world (Castañeda, 2012).

> initiatives to rise from below and attain maximum effective solidarity, without stifling dissenting voices, creating leadership positions or compelling anyone to do anything which they have not freely agreed to do (Graeber, 2002, p.71).

Thirdly, these movements fostered a prefigurative strategy to social change, trying to create the desired alternatives in the here and now (Maeckelbergh, 2011). Popularized in the eighties by the sociologist Wini Breines, prefigurative politics refers to a political approach aimed at creating and prefiguring 'in lived action and behaviour the desired society' (Breines, 1988, p.542). Prefiguration is based on the assumption that 'the ends a social movement achieves are fundamentally shaped by the means it employs' (Leach, 2013, p.1). This link between ends and means is clearly observed in the praxis of both the alter-globalization and Occupy movements. By developing radical democratic practices, these movements experimented in their present the potential alternatives to 'market-driven, neoliberal, representative, homogenizing politics' (Maeckelbergh, 2011, p.16). Unlike the traditional paradigm of revolution, prefigurative transformations are not meant to be achieved through an evolutionary process of transition, progress and reform in representation (Nail, 2012). As Nail points out, 'prefigurative struggles are neither reducible to the reform of the past or the revolution of the future, they are the committed political belief that one will have been laying the groundwork for a better world now' (Nail, 2010, p.85).

By looking at the experience of Occupy movements, and most specifically at the Spanish 15-M case, Dhaliwal (2012) identifies two different modes of prefiguration: a closed and an open one. Closed prefiguration is enacted by movements or groups focused on their internal projects, usually operating as insular enclaves. Open prefiguration, instead, seeks to contest the existing hegemonic order, 'albeit not in a totalizing, state-centric fashion' (p.268). Drawing on her exploration of the 15-M movement, Dhaliwal (2012) argues that this movement was committed to an open prefigurative strategy, as it created alternative social and spatial relations that allowed them to contest the hegemonic order. Similarly, in her analysis of the alter-globalization movement, Maeckelbergh (2011) emphasizes the twofold character of prefigurative politics. On the one hand, it seeks to confront existing political structures; on the other hand, it aims to develop an alternative politics. These two sides of prefiguration complement each other as the 'desired structural changes' (p.15) cannot be achieved without the engagement with both.

Finally, these movements are characterized by a heterogeneous and usually flexible ideological base. They question the prescriptive nature of ideologies as they represent a closure of the collective autonomy to experience its own path (Flesher Fominaya, 2007). From this perspective, 'theory should arise from practice and should remain open to question, change and modification' (Flesher Fominaya, 2007, p.339). This approach finds similarities with the features of *Autonomen*, a powerful autonomous movement developed in Germany during the eighties and nineties. The multiplicity of views found in this movement were often oriented to action rather than to ideology. Disputing the voices that question the isolation of activism from theory and the elevation of pragmatic values, Katsiaficas (2006) argues that these aspects are not necessary consequences of autonomous politics. As he asserts: 'theory is contained within the actions of autonomists rather than being congealed in rigid ideologies that precede action' (Katsiaficas, 2006, p.193).

In their analysis of more localized autonomous groups in England, Chatterton and Pickerill (2010) found a similar approach to ideology and political definitions. According to them, many collectives take a pragmatic stance, prioritizing work on their specific projects and campaigns and refusing to engage in a definition of their political ideals. Chatterton and Pickerill (2010) raise concerns regarding this practice. In their opinion, if political visions are taken for granted, remain implicit or are not thoroughly interrogated, this can lead to 'a neglect of discussions of the wider socio-institutional arrangements or political contexts' in which the groups enact their politics (Chatterton and Pickerill, 2010, p.487).

3.4 Autonomous Politics in Latin America: Thinking from the South

By exploring some mobilizations and theoretical accounts developed in the West, in the previous section I have indicated some of the specific features of an alternative approach to social change that has embraced autonomy both as a strategy and a political horizon. These analyses have made significant contributions to the critical scholarship, as they have moved beyond the conventional frameworks for the study of social movements (discussed in section 3.2, above) and have reclaimed the potential and peculiar character of collective projects that are neither state-centred nor simply claim-makers. As I will explain later, some of the trends observed in autonomous movements from the Global

North concur with those found in Latin American experiences. In fact, as my findings chapters will show, the work of various critical scholars focused on Western contemporary movements have been of great help for developing a deeper analysis of some of the political features identified in my own case studies. Nevertheless, relying solely on this scholarship is neither enough nor appropriate for a study that pursues the production of contextual and situated knowledge (see **Ch 2**). In line with my epistemological assumptions and adding to them, I have committed to an 'epistemology of the South' (De Sousa Santos, 2012) that acknowledges the rich knowledge production developed in Latin America 'with or alongside' autonomous movements. Following De Sousa Santos, I understand an epistemology of the South as:

> …the retrieval of new processes of production and valorisation of valid knowledges, whether scientific or nonscientific, and of new relations among different types of knowledge on the basis of the practices of the classes and social groups that have suffered, in a systematic way, the oppression and discrimination caused by capitalism and colonialism. The global South is thus not a geographical concept, even though the great majority of these populations live in countries of the Southern hemisphere. The South is here rather a metaphor of the human suffering caused by capitalism and colonialism at the global level, and a metaphor as well of the resistance to overcome or minimise such suffering (De Sousa Santos, 2012, p.51)

Embracing an epistemology of the South entails the need to reinterpret critical thinking in light of the realities and historical experiences of Latin America (Zibechi, 2016). It is a call for taking distance from Eurocentric or West-centric analyses, including critical Western thinking. This conscious exercise of distancing allows the development of new analytical possibilities 'more attuned to the political needs of radical social transformation' (De Sousa Santos, 2012, p.45). Nonetheless, as Zibechi (2016) and De Sousa Santos (2012) argue, this does not mean discarding or neglecting the critical thinking produced in the West. Ignoring this knowledge would be to overlook the historical experience of emancipation from other territories, thus closing the possibilities to learn from the past and from other contexts. On the contrary, the task is to place the traditions of resistance deployed in Latin America as the core of our analysis, and from there, to include the insights of Western critical thinking (Zibechi, 2016). It is about creating a playing field between the Western legacy and our own, where we can

autonomously recreate our thinking and try to overcome the colonial schizophrenia still present in the contemporary social sciences and humanities (Rivera Cusicanqui et al., 2016).

3.4.1 The Uniqueness of the Politics of Autonomy in Latin America

In recent decades, Latin American countries have become a seedbed for the emergence of popular mobilizations, radical action and local collective projects that have challenged the hegemonic system. From the Zapatista uprising in Mexico and the Argentinean insurrection in 2001 and 2002, through to the more recent mobilizations of indigenous and student movements spread across the continent, all these processes have caught international attention due to their high levels of political impact and great emancipatory potential. They share key features with Western autonomous movements, such as the critique of representative democracy and state-centred politics, the creation of new democratic repertoires and the enactment of prefigurative politics[58]. However, if we consider the contexts, roots and specific movements' practices, we will find significant differences between these two traditions of resistance that have been overlooked by both mainstream and radical (allegedly non-eurocentric) scholarship from the West. (Esteva, 2001; Dinerstein, 2015). Grubacic and Graeber (2004), for instance, assert that global revolutionary movements in the twenty-first century are closer to anarchism than to any other tradition. Similarly, Newman (2007) suggests that 'anarchism –as a political philosophy and activist tradition – can be seen as the hidden referent for radical political struggles today' (p.4). Although in some cases Latin American movements have been inspired by anarchist ideas, they usually draw on other traditions as well. The powerful Landless Workers Movement (MST) in Brazil, for example, draws more on Marxism and Liberation Theology than on Anarchism (Dinerstein, 2015). Likewise, the Zapatista movement has been able to combine various traditions, ranging from indigenous autonomy, critical theory and feminism, among others (Zibechi, 2012). According to Dinerstein (2015), the 'era of Anarchism' (p.12) advocated by some Western radical scholars does not necessarily inform the praxis of Latin American autonomous movements. In her words: '…in Latin America, the politics of autonomy draws on anarchist and Marxist traditions in higher or lesser degrees which

[58] I will come back to these features later in this chapter.

have been amalgamated with own versions of anarchism and other influential currents such as indigenous insurgency and LT[59]' (Dinerstein, 2015, p.12).

In his work with several autonomous movements across Latin America, Raúl Zibechi (2008, 2012, 2016) identifies four main political and cultural currents, all born in the region, that shape the ideological and cultural frame of the largest Latin American social movements and mobilizations. They are the grassroots Christian communities linked to liberation theology, the Freirian tradition of popular education, Guevarism and indigenous insurgency. According to Zibechi (2012), these currents of thought and action have converged, 'giving rise to a rich "mestizaje" or mix that is one of the distinguishing characteristics of Latin American movements' (p.13).

Inspired by liberation theology, the grassroots Christian communities born in the seventies gathered around collective readings of the Bible and a praxis guided by an ethics of social commitment. This tradition contributed to a critical analysis of poverty, exploitation and oppression and it fostered collective problem-solving through popular organization. With presence in all the continent, these communities inspired different movements, such as landless peasants, indigenous peoples and the urban poor (Zibechi, 2008, 2016).

In close connection to the grassroots Christian communities, the Freirian-inspired tradition of popular education is a second approach that informs the praxis of social movements in Latin America. In the sixties, the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire developed an insightful approach to literacy education that reclaimed the pivotal role of the oppressed in their process of liberation. In his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (2005) calls for a pedagogy to be forged 'with, not for, the oppressed' (p.48). Popular education brings to life this pedagogy, taking oppression and its causes as the central themes of collective reflection. From this reflection, it is expected that a process of *conscientização* or conscientization will lead the learners to engage in a 'fight for their own liberation' (Freire, 2005, p.53). This approach fosters dialogue, collective analysis and critical thinking, based on the assumption that all people are knowledgeable enough thanks to their own lived experiences. By enabling 'people to become 'subjects' of change themselves, not followers of leaders' (Kane, 2010, p.277), popular education became a strong tradition that challenged hierarchical and vanguard-led approaches to

[59] Liberation theology.

social change. This approach has been adopted and radicalized by several movements and grassroots collectives across Latin America (Kane, 2010), which have taken popular education as their strategy for knowledge production.

A third current that inspires Latin American movements is Guevarism. For authors such as Kohan (2007), Guevarism is a political project that updates Leninism to the contemporary reality of Latin America. It is a revolutionary reading of Marxism that recuperates, from an anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist perspective, the importance of taking power and fighting against all forms of social domination. I take distance from this reading of Guevarism and agree with the radically different one advanced by Zibechi (2008, 2016). According to Zibechi (2008, 2016), Guevarism has been a source of inspiration for Latin American movements inasmuch as it recuperates the example of life and militancy of the Argentinean revolutionary Ernesto Che Guevara. For autonomous movements, Guevarism is not seen as the commitment to the revolutionary party. On the contrary, it refers to the ethical and militant commitment of generations of selfless activists devoted to the grassroots, to the people who struggle from below.

The fourth influential current identified by Zibechi (2008, 2012, 2016) is found in the indigenous insurgency and its non-western cosmologies (Zibechi, 2008, 2012, 2016). The struggles for indigenous autonomy are not new in Latin America. On the contrary, they were already present at the time of the conquest of the Americas, in the consolidation of the national states, in the republican period, during the twentieth century and they have become increasingly present throughout the twentieth first century until now. Not always using the notion of autonomy, all of them have raised autonomous claims, such as demanding their right to preserve their own identity and culture, claiming the control of territory and natural resources and exerting their own systems of organization, representation, justice and development (López Bárcenas, 2011).

Unlike Western understandings of autonomy, the struggles for indigenous autonomy do not aim to create something completely new; conversely, they emphasise the importance of recuperating traditions that have become invisible or unimaginable by the Western hegemonic modernity (Dinerstein, 2013). In the context of Latin American indigenous peoples, the notion of autonomy implies the recognition and respect of what they already possess (Esteva and Pérez, 2001). The words ‘we walk in the footsteps of our ancestors’, pronounced by an Ecuadorian indigenous leader (in Zibechi, 2012, p.328) is the best

example of the specific indigenous' approach to autonomy. Here, the past inspires action, not a modernist future, which implies a critique of 'forwards looking' revolutionary theories, such as Marxism and Anarchism (Zibechi, 2012). Drawing on this indigenous understanding of social change, Latin American movements engage with a critical recuperation of tradition, reinterpreting and actualizing it in light of the present challenges (Ceceña, 2012).

In Latin America several indigenous movements, particularly those from the Andean and Amazon region, draw on the cosmology of '*buen vivir'* (Dinerstein, 2015; Escobar, 2012). In English *'buen vivir'* could be translated as 'living well' or 'living in plenitude' and it refers to a 'different way of imagining life' (Escobar, 2012, p.xxiii). Here, the human is not the centre and the locus of explanation of the real, challenging modernity's dichotomy between human and nature and the objectification and subordination of the latter to the former (Vásquez, 2012). Nature, then, becomes part of the social world and political communities are expanded, including in some cases, to non-human actors such as animals, plants, spirits or ecosystems. Hence, the cosmology of *buen vivir* clashes with the Western agenda of development, going against and beyond the reductionism of life to economic values and the commodifization of almost everything (Gudynas, 2011). The affirmation of their own cosmologies is also related to a decolonising project. Unlike movements in the West, indigenous movements understand decolonization as a pivotal pre-condition for emancipation. Therefore, autonomous politics in these movements challenges coloniality as much as state and capitalism (Dinerstein, 2015), understanding them as inseparable systems of domination.

Grounded in indigenous cosmologies and emancipatory claims, several Latin American movements are challenging the hegemonic model of development and society (Escobar, 2012), giving birth to autonomous projects of education, health, housing and food sovereignty. Although these autonomous projects exist in several indigenous communities across the continent, the Mexican *Zapatismo* is undoubtedly the clearest and most famous exemplar of a successful autonomous movement with a self-governing project.

3.4.2 Zapatismo and the Reinvention of Revolution.

After more than 10 years of internal political training and revolutionary activity within the Mexican Lacandon jungle, in 1994 the Zapatista Army of National Liberation – EZLN, screamed a loud *¡Ya basta!* (Enough is enough!), refusing neoliberal globalization and the 'Empire of Money' (El Kilombo Intergaláctico, 2007, p.4). With a series of public interventions, this large armed group, composed in its majority by indigenous peoples from Chiapas, confronted the federal state; rejected the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and demanded democracy, freedom and justice. Since the uprising in 1994, the movement has tried to 'reinvent revolution' and create a world of dignity and humanity (Holloway and Peláez, 1998; Holloway, 2010a), inspiring hundreds of movements in Latin America and around the world. Particularly, the notion of 'dignity' has played a pivotal role in the Zapatistas' reinvention of revolution. It refers to 'the refusal to accept humiliation and dehumanisation, the refusal to conform (…) is the struggle of (and for) human existence in an oppressive society (…) is the struggle against its own negation' (Holloway, 1998, pp.160, 169).

One of the most salient features of the 'dignity revolt' embraced by Zapatistas is the refusal to pursue state power, 'neither through the ballot box nor through any form of seizure of power' (Holloway and Peláez, 1998, p.4). With this idea, Zapatismo has advanced a political approach based on dignity that challenges the classical canon of revolution and its premise that the seizure of state power by a revolutionary vanguard is the main goal of social struggles (Tischler, 2013). Suspicious of this fixed and predefined approach to social change, Zapatistas call for a self-creative revolution based on the principle of *'preguntamos caminamos'* (asking we walk). This entails a revolution that listens and not only speaks, a revolution that is created from below and in the realm of everyday struggles (Holloway and Peláez, 1998).

In the long journey of the Zapatista movement, they have been able to combine two essential processes: the incessant construction of local autonomy and the national and international struggle seeking to challenge the modes of domination (Zibechi, 2012). Regarding the first process, the outcomes speak for themselves. Nowadays, over 2,200 communities (over 100,000 people) are federated into 32 autonomous municipalities. These municipalities are grouped into five '*Juntas de Buen Gobierno*' or local self-

governments (Nail, 2012) which follow the principles of '*mandar obedeciendo'* (rule by obeying). In these self-governing bodies, the important decisions are made by the whole community using consensus and the delegates are immediately recallable if they do not answer to the voice of the community (Holloway, 1998). With this alternative grammar of democracy, Zapatistas have overcome the dichotomy between the ruler or decision-maker and the ruled who accept the decisions and actions taken from above (Zibechi, 2000).

Along with its democratic structures, the Zapatista movement has created a number of autonomous institutions that operate throughout its territory. Primary and high schools, community health centres, libraries, an alternative juridical system and various co-operative projects are just a few examples of how Zapatistas are building another world in the present (El Kilombo Intergaláctico, 2007; Zibechi, 2012).

This local autonomy has been accompanied by national and international actions seeking to build larger networks of global resistance (El Kilombo Intergaláctico, 2007). From the Intercontinental Encounters in the nineties; the Other Campaign and the World Festivals in the 2000s, to the more recent *Escuelita Zapatista* (Little School) that gathered hundreds of activists from across the world, Zapatistas have connected the local and the global, 'bridging indigenous and non-indigenous worlds of resistance' (Dinerstein, 2015, p.109). Albeit mostly composed by indigenous peoples, the EZLN has asserted that its struggle is not only concerned with indigenous communities. Its struggle is much broader and it seeks human emancipation (Holloway, 2013). As they pronounced:

> Behind us, we are you. Behind we are the same simple and ordinary men and women, who are repeated in all races, painted in all colours, speak in all languages, and live in all places. The same forgotten men and women. The same excluded, the same untolerated, the same persecuted; we are you (EZLN, 2001 in Khasnabish, 2008, p.127)

The meaning of these words is precisely what gives Zapatismo a prominent place in the struggles for emancipation in the continent and worldwide. By unifying the struggles under the ideal of human dignity, Zapatistas have reintroduced hope in those who resist in different parts of the globe, laying the foundations 'for autonomy to become a mobilizing utopia' (Dinerstein, 2015, p.110).

3.4.3 Autonomous Politics in Latin America: Main Features and Debates

In the previous sections I discussed some dimensions that make Latin American movements distinctive from those developed in the West. I focused primarily on the peculiar political roots informing contemporary movements in the region, in the unique cosmologies embraced by indigenous communities, how they shape their views on emancipation, and in the pivotal role played by Zapatistas in 'reinventing the language of revolution' (Dinerstein, 2015, p.3). Drawing on critical scholarship produced with/alongside autonomous movements in Latin America, in what follows I will outline the main features of this type of politics, along with some theoretical debates and proposals for the understanding of these collective projects.

In dialogue with autonomous movements from the West (see section 3.3 in this chapter), Latin American autonomous projects have developed a strong critique of state-centred politics, targeting representative democracy and political vanguards as integral parts of this broader political approach (Motta, 2009b, 2014; Holloway, 2010a, 2010b, 2013, 2016; Sitrin, 2012; Zibechi, 2012, 2016; Gutiérrez Aguilar, 2011, 2015; Dinerstein, 2013, 2015). According to Gutiérrez (2011), a state-centred approach directs all its efforts to seizing state power with the aim of monopolizing decisions and public resources. It also refers to the practice of claim-oriented movements seeking to win concessions or acknowledgment from governments. Undoubtedly, the power of the Zapatista uprising in the nineties (see section 3.4.2) strengthened a critique of this tradition and influenced the emergence of movements and revolts that joined the *¡Ya Basta!* (Enough is enough!), seeking autonomy from the state and its institutions. This 'explosion of rage and hope' (Dinerstein, 2015, p.1) was triggered as a response to neoliberal policies implemented in the region and their devastating economic, political and social consequences. Witnessing the compliance of political elites with the neoliberal project, growing numbers of Latin American movements began to view the state and political parties with suspicion (Motta, 2009a), opting for autonomous political practices from below that do not rely on these institutions for bringing about social change.

Inspired by the Zapatista uprising, John Holloway explored this new paradigm of revolution in his edited book '*Zapatista! Reinventing Revolution in Mexico'* (1998) bringing this debate forward in his popular book '*Change the World without Taking*

Power'[60]. Here, Holloway (2010a) challenged the paradigm of revolution which had been dominant through most of the twentieth century by asserting that the world cannot be changed through the state. According to him (2010a), the challenge for those resisting oppression is to rescue revolution from the state and power illusions, by focusing not on the conquest of power, but on the dissolution of power. He criticises the 'apparent' autonomy of the state, arguing that the state itself is a 'form of social relations that is embedded in the totality of capitalist social relations' (Holloway, 2002, p.1). The state is an organizational form and a relation created for the reproduction of capital, therefore, it is naïve and self-defeating to use it for the purpose of social change (Grubacic, *Preface* to Holloway, 2016).

Holloway's pioneering argument triggered a number of reactions. On the one hand, it reinvigorated radical scholarship worldwide, bringing the crisis of the conventional left and the potential of autonomous politics into the political and academic debate. Sergio Tischler (2002, 2008), for example, analyses the crisis of the Leninist subject of revolution as a theoretical and historical issue. According to Tischler (2008), recent struggles in Latin America are thinking revolution beyond the Leninist paradigm of revolutionary organization and action. As radical movements have become aware of the ways in which the party and state forms contradict and pervert the ends of emancipation, they have created new political languages for naming social change (Tischler, 2008). However, not all critical scholars took the side of Holloway. Holloway's work also provoked a strong debate with the opponents of autonomy, who criticised the weakness of this approach inasmuch as it avoided 'the 'real' issue: the state' (Dinerstein, 2015, p.4). Authors such as Boron (2003), Sader (2001) and Robinson (2007), for instance, question Holloway's argument and the political experiences on which he draws. According to these authors, the paradigm of 'changing the world without taking power' fails because it underestimates the role of the state and the indispensable political mediations required by any movement interested in the construction of socialism and a new world. Although well argued, the analysis developed by Boron (2003), Sader (2001) and Robinson (2007) seem to overlook the 'new political languages' (Tischler, 2008) forged by contemporary radical movements[61], in which the refusal of a politics of

[60] Book first published in 2002.

[61] Boron (2003), for example, insists in the futile character of romantic invocations calling for 'new ways of doing politics'. For him, these political projects are not more than 'loincloths' helping to conceal the brutal dictatorship of the market (para 41). Robinson (2007) criticises autonomous movements as they

representation is more a strength than a weakness. Following Motta (2009a), the conceptual lens provided by orthodox Marxism tends to reify 'current structures as the limit of political possibility' (p.50), reproducing a conceptual elitism that invalidates 'the people' as legitimate political agents. Alternatively, Motta suggests to change the focus of analysis. In her words:

> …if we instead focus on a conceptualization of the political that theorises the everyday, subjectivities, and social relations as sites of political change, then our analysis of a movement's practice, projects, and imaginaries will reveal a contradictory site of social change, a place of political fullness, as opposed to political marginality (Motta, 2009a, p.51)

But the critique of representation and state-centred politics is not the only feature defining autonomous movements in Latin America. In their 'political fullness' (Motta, 2009a, p.51), radical movements not only reject the conventional paradigm of social change. Along with this refusal, they embrace new democratic cultures, structures and strategies, 'prefiguring the world that they wish to create' (Sitrin, 2012, p.4). In a similar fashion to the autonomous projects developed in the West (see section 3.3), autonomous movements in Latin America have taken prefiguration as a pivotal dimension of their struggle. These movements have embarked on the task of creating the desired new society and social relations in their everyday lives. This stance challenges the traditional understanding of revolution in which social change or the 'promised land' (Holloway, 2013, p.114) can only be achieved under the direction of the party and after the big seizure of state power (Sitrin, 2011). As opposed to this forward-looking and vanguard-based revolutionary strategy, autonomous movements have sought to build their utopias in the present (Motta, 2013), by developing alternative models of radical democracy in the here and now. These new political formats are characterized by a horizontal vocation, expressed in non-vertical, non-elitist and non-hierarchical organizational structures and practices (Stahler-Sholk et al., 2014; Gutiérrez, 2011, Zibechi, 2012).

Without a doubt, horizontality (or horizontalism) is a pivotal dimension shaping the politics of autonomy in Latin America. For Stahler-Sholk et al. (2014), it connotes 'the

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have forgotten the key question for bringing about social change: 'how popular forces and classes can utilize state power' to transform society? (p.62). Similarly, Sader (2001) highlights the importance of a radical and democratic reform of the state, where citizens will have the power to control their own Governments.

flattening out of relations of power that promote equity and equality within society and the social movements' (p.8). Horizontality seeks to remove the inequalities of decision-making and leadership, exploring forms of participatory democracy as alternatives to both liberal and Leninist representative models (Stahler-Sholk et al., 2014). Likewise, for Sitrin (2012) the underlying idea of horizontality is the break with vertical ways of relating and organizing. It is a social relation 'that implies (…) a flat plane upon which to communicate, but it is not only this. [It] implies the use of direct democracy and striving for consensus: processes in which attempts are made so everyone is heard and new relationships are created' (Sitrin, 2012, p.8). But horizontality should not be conceived merely as a technique or methodology. As Ouviña (2011) argues, horizontality operates as a political principle that is both a starting point and a constant exploration, both a path and a horizon to reach. There is no such a thing as pure horizontality, but various and fluctuating attempts to get closer to this idea.

Several mechanisms have been forged by autonomous groups in their attempts to get closer to achieving horizontality. First of all, they have implemented rotating and flexible organizational structures as a way to prevent the emergence of traditional political leadership structures (Motta, 2009a). Second, they tend to reduce bureaucracy, prioritizing face-to-face relations that are held without intermediaries. Third, they refuse the division between leaders and the base, fostering rotating roles and responsibilities (Zibechi, 2012, 2016). Fourth, they have committed to horizontal decision-making in which all the members have the chance to speak and are active participants in the decisions reached in collective (Sitrin, 2012; Dinerstein, 2015). Fifth, they have given high importance to '*la asamblea*' (the assembly), understood as a collective space where decision-making takes place, but also where equal participation is fostered and new democratic subjects are forged (Motta, 2009b). Lastly, in their attempts to overcome the distinction between doers and thinkers, autonomous movements have developed pedagogical practices and collective processes of knowledge production in which all the participants are able to learn from each other (Motta, 2014; Zibechi, 2012).

The emphasis on 'the pedagogical' is an especially relevant feature of autonomous movements in Latin America. Drawing on the Freirian tradition of popular education (see section 3.4.1), autonomous collectives in the region are developing 'their own theoretical and strategic readings of the world' (Motta, 2013, p.7). These readings are twofold. On the one hand, they seek to unveil the hegemonic strategies reproducing

oppression. On the other hand, they foster the creation of innovative tools seeking to change and/or challenge those circumstances (Motta, 2013). Autonomous movements engage in permanent processes of self-education. This involves 'placing reflection and ongoing evaluation of what is happening at the forefront of [their] activities' (Zibechi, 2012, p.27), converting each action and space into an opportunity for collective learning and growth.

The politics of autonomy in Latin America has also been characterized by the territorialisation of the struggle. New democratic subjects such as indigenous communities, landless movements and unemployed groups, among others, have taken their own path by recuperating or securing their territories. By means of material and symbolic appropriation, these movements have instituted alternative territorialities where new practices and social relations have emerged (Zibechi, 2012). Within these geographical spaces, several movements and communities are trying to produce and reproduce life (Zibechi, 2016), embarking on productive projects that enable them to secure their everyday subsistence whilst challenging the logic of the market (Motta, 2009a). Unlike the alter-globalization movements from the Global North that prioritized the virtual character of mobilizations and subsumed their practices to the agenda of financial international institutions, the movements in Latin America have taken a different path. By engaging in territorial practices, their fight for emancipation is not detached from the everyday. On the contrary, in their attempts to pursue an integral transformation of life, they are seeking to merge the political with the economical in order to forge new social relations (Ouviña, 2004).

Coupled with the previous feature, Latin American movements have tended to lead rebellions from the margins (Ouviña, 2004; Dinerstein and Deneulin, 2012). Unlike movements from the Global North, some of the most powerful movements in Latin America have been led by the 'excluded' and not by the old or new educated middle class (Ouviña, 2004). As Dinerstein (2015) argues, the struggles against global social injustice in the Global North do not completely inform the praxis of autonomous movements in Latin America 'whose collective actions are directly connected to everyday concerns and vital needs usually under conditions of state repression, misery and poverty' (p.33).

Finally, the feminisation of resistance is an important feature defining contemporary Latin American movements (Motta, 2012; Zibechi, 2012). Women have had a decisive presence in larger mobilizations and uprisings happening in the region, and many hold important positions within their organizations. According to Zibechi (2012), 'this is just the visible part of a much broader phenomenon reflecting the new gender relations established in social and territorial organizations…' (p.17). Nonetheless, many social movements continue to disregard women's claims and reproduce patriarchal dynamics in their spaces. In this context, feminist organizations have become an alternative for women who want to organize around their specific demands and struggles. Particularly, the autonomous strand of Latin American feminism (see **Ch5**, section 5.6.3) has targeted various forms of oppression, developing a multifaceted critique of domination that underlines the rejection of patriarchy, racism and capitalism (Curiel, 2005). In line with the features of autonomous movements described in the previous pages, this current of feminism seeks to achieve financial, ideological and political autonomy (Curiel, 2005), developing alternative forms of political action that are performed outside the sphere of formal politics (León, 1994). But clearly, one of the most salient contributions of feminist organizing in autonomous politics, is the focus on emancipation in everyday life (Lamus, 2009). Here, Latin American feminists broaden the notion of struggle and reclaim their racialized bodies and sexualities as a political battlefield.

3.4.4 Autonomous Politics: A Contradictory Path Within, Against and Beyond Capital and the State

In his inspiring work, Raúl Zibechi (2016) contends that autonomous movements in Latin America are creating an alternative type of society that differs from the hegemonic one shaped by capitalism and the state[62]. In these new spaces, communities are carrying out both survival strategies and political action, building non-capitalist social relations. As Zibechi wants to draw attention to the emancipatory character of this new society, he replaces the notion of social movement with what he calls *'sociedades en movimiento'* (societies in movement). Moreover, by drawing on the Zapatistas and other indigenous

[62] Some of the autonomous movements examined by Zibechi are the Zapatistas in Mexico, the workers-controlled factories in Argentina, Colombian grassroots projects and the Mapuche movement in Chile, among others.

movements, he moves away from the idea of prefiguration, claiming that these new projects of emancipation are not walking gradually towards the desired society. They 'are already' that new society.

In a similar attempt, Raquel Gutiérrez (2015) uses the notion of *'entramados comunitarios'* (community weavings) to name a heterogeneous multiplicity of life-worlds that create alternative societies guided by diverse rules of respect, collaboration, dignity and reciprocity. However, unlike Zibechi (2016), Gutiérrez (2015) is more vocal regarding the tensions existing between these autonomous projects and capital. As she (2015) points out, we should not forget that these community weavings are being constantly intimidated and attacked by capitalist forms.

Adding to Gutiérrez's (2015) point, authors such as Dinerstein (2015) and Holloway (2010b, 2010c, 2016) find problematic the understanding of autonomous politics as self-liberated and self-sufficient spaces able to recreate alternative social relations. Dinerstein (2015) and Holloway (2010b), argue that this type of analysis risks forgetting that the dynamics of autonomy are always operating within the realms of capital and the state. Holloway (2016), for instance, emphasizes the self-antagonistic character of the struggles for emancipation. In his words: 'We don't live just beyond the society. We don't live in some kind of after-capitalist heaven, unfortunately. We live in this society and also live against it' (Holloway, 2016, p.12). According to him (2010b, 2010c, 2013, 2016), capitalism is based on the extraction of our creative power and capacities. Through the commodity or the operation of money, capitalism drags our richness into a form of social cohesion that is out of our control. It transforms our 'doing' into abstract labour. Yet, there is hope. As Holloway (2016) points out, '…our creative ability is not entirely lost within the capitalistic system, we overflow from that. We go beyond, we exist beyond that (…) we are trying to create something that doesn't follow the logic of capital' (p.25). For this author, current struggles are revolts of 'doing' against labour. They embody a refusal of the capitalist transformation of our creative-productive human activity (doing) into oppressive, abstract and non-self-determining labour (Holloway, 2010c). These spaces of refusal and creation, of interstitial movements from below are called cracks. These are fissures within the capitalist system, spaces of rebellious negation and creation in which we attempt to break down the logic of domination by asserting our capacity to decide for ourselves (Holloway, 2010b). Holloway (2010c, 2016) prefers the notion of 'cracks' over 'autonomies', because the latter could be

equated to closed liberated spaces, disregarding the fact that we live in a world that negates self-determination. Cracks, instead, represent explorations and creations of a world that does not yet exist. They are pushes against the logic of capital and towards self-determination (Holloway, 2010b, 2010c).

Another author that has made a great contribution to the contested and self-contradictory essence of autonomous struggles is Ana Dinerstein. In her book *The Politics of Autonomy in Latin America: The Art of Organizing Hope*, Dinerstein (2015) develops an insightful analysis of autonomous politics in the region, overcoming the idea of autonomy as 'exodus' as well as the scholarship that neglects this political approach. According to Dinerstein, most autonomous struggles contain tensions between rebellion and institutionalisation. This means that autonomous practices are always 'at risk to be distorted and integrated into the capitalist social synthesis' (p.10). But, are autonomous movements always fluctuating between rebellion and integration? In her attempts to address this question, Dinerstein (2015) poses four modes of autonomy, each one representing different features of autonomous practices. The first mode is *negation*, where autonomy is understood 'as negative praxis' (p.10), expressed in the refusal of power and the major systems of domination. The second mode is *creation*, where autonomy is seen as a creative force that builds new worlds with political imagination. The third mode is *contradiction*, where autonomy is placed in a contested relation with, against and beyond capital and the state. As a contradictory process, autonomy is always at risk of being integrated into the logic of domination, it is 'chance and contingency, it is surrounded by danger' (Dinerstein, 2015, p.69). Finally, we have *excess*. This feature refers to the capacity of certain autonomous movements to produce surplus, an overflowing of radical possibilities that cannot be subordinated to power (Dinerstein, 2015). In addition to providing an original categorization of autonomy in Latin America, Dinerstein's work has the merit of problematizing, expanding and contextualizing the notion of prefiguration. She disagrees with the analysis of prefigurative autonomous politics produced by Western scholars (see section 3.3.2), arguing they try to detach prefiguration from political economy and disregard the fact that insubordination takes place in a deeply consolidated capitalist society. According to Dinerstein (2015), any analysis of prefigurative politics should acknowledge that prefiguration is a practice rooted in the process of the valorisation of capital. Secondly, it should include 'the negation of the given; the creation of the alternative; the struggle with, against and

beyond the state, the law and capital; and the production of excess' (p.18). Finally, it should be contextual, acknowledging the decolonising nature of prefiguration in indigenous movements.

The contradictory nature of autonomous politics mentioned both by Holloway (2016) and Dinerstein (2015), is also addressed by Gutiérrez (2015). Although she personally stands for a non-state-centred approach to politics, she emphasizes that the performance and decisions made by autonomous politics should not be commanded by external or prior limits, even if these refer to the rejection of the state. Therefore, autonomous politics should not prescribe what 'must' be done, but should encourage deeply collective reflections about the practical challenges encountered along the way. For this reason, Gutiérrez understands social emancipation as a difficult, ambivalent and contradictory trajectory where multiple movements decide to both evade and confront the hegemonic order in the middle of constant tensions and antagonisms (Gutiérrez, 2015).

3.5 Concluding Remarks

In this chapter I have summarized the existing literature on autonomous movements, moving from mainstream approaches in the field of social movements' studies to more radical scholarship focused on non-state-centred politics. Exploring the North American school of collective action and the European New Social Movements' tradition, I have argued that both approaches are unable to capture the complex and diverse realities of Latin American movements nor the specificities of radical politics. Moreover, by giving the state and formal political institutions a leading role in the interaction with social movements, these approaches remain tied to a state-centred conception of politics, lacking the appropriate lens for the exploration of autonomous collectives. Lastly, as most studies grounded on these conventional frameworks see social movements as 'objects of inquiry', they end up blocking the chances for the movements to 'speak for themselves' and posit their own categories of analysis.

Having raised the limitations of these conventional approaches, I then explored the literature advanced by Western critical scholars, who have shaped rich debates about the theory and praxis of autonomous politics. These works have the merit of reclaiming

autonomy as a political category and recuperating political experiences and theoretical accounts that had remained obscured in the mainstream analysis of politics. Especially relevant are the empirically-grounded analyses of the alter-globalization and Occupy movements in the Global North, where autonomous principles gained significant legitimacy among various activist groups. In general terms, four main dimensions have defined the praxis of the autonomous currents within these movements: a critique of representative democracy; the implementation of alternative models of direct democracy and self-government; the adoption of a prefigurative approach to social change; and a heterogeneous and flexible ideological base. These accounts provide valuable insights for the analysis of autonomous movements, nonetheless, they are not enough for the exploration of the politics of autonomy in Latin America.

In an attempt to move beyond Western and Eurocentric scholarship, I have committed to a theoretical exercise of decolonization and to an 'epistemology of the South' that acknowledges the rich knowledge production developed with or alongside autonomous movements in Latin America. Despite some evident similarities between radical politics in Latin America and in the West, this positioning invites us to recognize the unique character of autonomous politics in the region. A good example of this uniqueness is the rich mix of ideological and cultural traditions that have influenced the largest Latin American social movements and mobilizations. Besides drawing on the legacy of indigenous peoples, some struggles for emancipation in Latin America do not merely target capitalism and the 'bad governments'[63], but coloniality (Quijano, 2000) and racism as well. Along with the decolonizing character of some Latin American movements, the resistance in the region has also been characterized by the territorialisation of the struggle and the emergence of rebellions from the margins.

The pivotal role played by Zapatistas is also discussed in this chapter. Several movements and collectives have been inspired by the Zapatista uprising, embracing an autonomous approach to social change that questions the classical canon of revolution and the seizure of state power as the main goal of the social struggles. At a theoretical level, the Zapatista experience triggered a number of debates, especially between those claiming that the world cannot be changed through the state and those defending the state as a central figure for revolutionary change.

[63]Well known Zapatista expression.

But the critique of state-centred paradigms is not the only distinguishing feature of Latin American autonomous politics. Along with this refusal, autonomous movements have created new democratic cultures, structures and strategies that try to prefigure in the present the desired society. They have forged powerful mechanisms for reaching horizontality, such as rotating organizational structures, consensus decision-making strategies, assembly-based politics and pedagogical practices for the sharing and production of knowledge. Although these projects are prefiguring in the present (to a greater or lesser degree) some of the desired forms of an alternative society, it is problematic to see them as self-liberated and self-sufficient spaces. By emphasizing the ambivalent and self-antagonistic character of the struggles for emancipation, I discuss the importance of situating autonomous movements within, against and beyond capitalism and domination.

SECTION ONE: UNDERSTANDING AUTONOMY

In this section I will explore how the politics of autonomy is understood and defined by Latin American *colectivos* and what are the hallmarks of this type of politics.

What is autonomy? What does it mean to be a *colectivo* or autonomous group? These were some of the key questions guiding my research in an attempt to understand the cornerstone notion in the field of autonomous movements. It did not take me long to realize the complexity of this concept and how it articulates a series of political standpoints, principles, horizons and practices that together put autonomous collectives into motion. Well aware of the multidimensional character of this notion and only for analytical purposes, I decided to divide my empirical findings into two main sections: this one, concerning the conceptualization of autonomy, and the following one, focused on the enactment of autonomy. It is important to clarify, though, that this separation is an abstract exercise exclusively made for analytical purposes as these two domains usually overlap and intertwine with each other.

The twofold understanding of autonomy is a first important finding of my thesis. By exploring the research participants' discourses, I realized that the notion of autonomy has two sides: a negative one, based on the refusal of the main systems of domination; and an affirmative one, based on the creation of an alternative politics able to challenge those hegemonic systems. This aspect has also been noticed by authors working on autonomous politics both in Western (Chatterton, 2004; Pickerill and Chatteron, 2006; Deslandes, 2007; Holloway, 2010a, 2010b, 2010c, 2016) and Latin American (Dinnerstein, 2015; Motta, 2009a; Holloway, 2010a, 2010b, 2010c, 2016; Zibechi, 2012) settings. This research adds to the aforementioned literature by providing a detailed examination of the grounds, experiences and standpoints that shape the idea of 'autonomy as refusal and creation' in four Latin American autonomous groups.

In line with the dual character of autonomy, this section is divided into two chapters: 'Autonomy as Refusal' **(Ch4)** and 'Autonomy as Prefigurative Creation' **(Ch5)**. Both present empirically grounded discussions about the understanding of autonomy and they are supported by relevant literature when necessary. **Ch4** explores the negative understanding of autonomy, focusing on the critique of the main systems of domination

developed by the research participants. **Ch5** expands upon the affirmative understanding of autonomy, looking at how the activists envision and create alternative political frameworks that challenge domination and anticipate their desired society.

CHAPTER FOUR:

AUTONOMY AS REFUSAL

4.1 Introduction

In the introduction to this section I explained the two-sided character of autonomy. While one side refers to the refusal and critique of the main existing systems of domination, the other side emphasises the creation of radical alternatives to those systems. In this chapter I will focus on the former, analysing the relationship that the research participants establish between autonomy and the refusal of what they assess as the main oppressive systems in the present: capitalism, patriarchy and state-centred politics. Overall, the four case studies position themselves 'against' these three oppressive structures and from this positioning they move towards the 'creative' understanding of autonomy, as the following chapter **(Ch5)** will show.

This chapter begins by exploring how the case studies shape their understanding of autonomy as refusal of capitalism. Here, I discuss the anti-capitalist stance taken by the groups and the big tensions resulting from the attempts to reject capitalism whilst being part of a capitalist society. Next, I analyse the rejection of patriarchy as another dimension of autonomy. In this section I give special attention to the critique of patriarchy developed by the Chilean feminist group, focusing on how this system of domination is linked with capitalism and how it is reproduced within leftist and anti-capitalist milieus. I also discuss the difficulties that the case studies face when it comes to putting this refusal into practice. The chapter concludes by analysing the refusal of state-centred politics, focusing specifically on the critique of electoral politics and representative democracy and in the problems of state-centred revolutionary strategies. As the *colectivos* draw strongly on this critique to articulate their own distinctive approach to social change, greater attention is given in this chapter to this dimension.

4.2 Refusal of Capitalism

Refusal of capitalism[64] is one dimension of autonomy in which all the research participants agree: 'We may not really know what we want for the future society but we are clear about our rejection of capitalism …' (Nico, *ECP*, Chile). With these words, Nico highlights the commitment of *ECP* to an anti-capitalist politics, a feature that is shared among the other case studies. By defining themselves as anti-capitalists, the research participants are categorical about the role that capitalism plays in the reproduction of injustice and oppression; hence they try to actively oppose it either at a discursive and practical level. As we will see in this and in the following chapters, this opposition goes beyond an abstract critique of capital as the groups target specific life activities imposed by capitalism and try to develop concrete projects to resist it (Holloway, 2010c). *Subversiones*, for example, is defined by its members as an anti-capitalist group because it openly questions the role of corporate media as the new missionaries of global capitalism (Herman and McChesney, 2004).

> There is a deep media siege in Mexico today, the mainstream media are sold, even the so called 'progressive media', journalism has become a commodity (…) we are anti-capitalists because we believe in the importance of deep change (…) we don't get money out of our work in the group, we don't seek profit… (Sari, *Subversiones*)

Following Sari's words, *Subversiones* criticises the profit-driven character of mainstream media and their evident biases due to their alliances with the economic and political elites[65]. Alternatively, they have created a wholly self-managed media project that challenges the organizational structures, journalistic approach and stories told by mainstream media. They do this by making visible several struggles standing against

[64] Following Holloway (2010a, 2010b), capitalism will be understood as a 'complex weave of domination which is generated by the way in which our activity [or doing] is structured as abstract labour' (Holloway, 2010a, p.197). Under capitalism, we are told that the only way in which we can access to the means of doing (and living) is by selling our capacity-to-do (now transformed into labour power) to those who 'own' the means of doing (or 'means of production). Capitalism, then, is 'the assertion of command over others on the basis of 'ownership' of the done and hence of the means of doing, the preconditions for the doing of those others who are commanded' (Holloway, 2010a, pp.21, 22).

[65] Throughout the thesis, political and economic elites are referred to wealthy and influential people holding positions of power in Governments, mainstream political parties and institutions, corporate sector (such as owners, company presidents and CEOs), among others.

capital, by disseminating 'the stories from below'[66] that corporate media render invisible.

Unlike some definitions of anti-capitalism confined to those seeking to limit corporate power or opposing the implementation of neoliberal programmes (Gilbert, 2008), the *colectivos* engage with a much broader understanding of anti-capitalism. For them, anti-capitalism involves the wholesale rejection of the existing economic, social, political and cultural order and a determination to replace it with an entirely different one (Gilbert, 2008). Speaking about the struggles that *El Rebrote* supports or is sympathetic with, Esperanza makes clear this radical anti-capitalist stance:

> We support the Mapuche struggle, educational struggles, but those that are deeply questioning the educative system (…) we support struggles seeking radical change, struggles that are not negotiating or trying to bring reforms or slight amendments within the boundaries of capitalism… (Esperanza, *El Rebrote*)

As this quote illustrates, the research participants are suspicious of reformist approaches seeking to improve communities' life quality without questioning the role of capitalism in the perpetuation of inequality and injustice. On the contrary, they begin with a critique of capitalist society, rejecting its individualistic and consumerist values and the commodification of most aspects of social life. During my fieldwork, I usually joined informal conversations with the *compañeros* and *compañeras* where we shared our perceptions about people's lives controlled by capitalist values. It was very emotional and sad to speak about relatives or former friends, who are only concerned about earning more money, buying things, consuming and competing with others. In a society mostly dominated by these values, we often have felt rejected for swimming against the tide and trying to live differently. However, we overcome that rejection with our own refusal of the capitalist society. Following Holloway (2016), as we are forced to exist in a capitalist word, we are also forced 'to protest against it, to rebel against it, to reject it' (p.32). A Mexican activist beautifully summarises this idea:

[66] Such as the stories of indigenous autonomy in Cherán, Ostula, Oaxaca and Chiapas. These are only a few examples of political and community projects in Mexico that have been deeply and ethically covered by *Subversiones*.

> We negate capital; we negate an individualistic, consumerist and commodified society. We negate this disgusting society, ruled by God money, venerated every Sunday at the shopping centres and every day at the stock exchange (…) I don't want to live in this society because it destroys everything, it kills us (…) but we negate capitalism in a constructive way, trying to build something different, another politics, a politics from below… (Enrique, *JRA*)

Through this emphatic refusal, the *colectivos* embark on the endeavour of going beyond capitalism, of creating something else, of constructively negating capitalism, as Enrique states in the above quote, and as the next chapter (**Ch5**) will explore in more detail. But the practices of refusal operate within a big tension between rejecting the dominant order and being subjected to it (Deslandes, 2007). As discussed in **Ch3** (section 3.4.4), the refusal of capitalism by no means occurs outside the capitalist system or from some sort of liberated place (Dinerstein, 2015; Holloway, 2010c). On the contrary, the research participants negate capitalism whilst acknowledging their embeddedness within it: '…it's hard to build collective projects while living in a neoliberal society, because capital gets into your head in a way that you struggle to be strong with your values…' (Richi, *ECP*). Here, Richi refers to the difficulties of refusing neoliberal capitalism and creating something new while living in a neoliberal society[67]. The danger of reproducing patterns of behaviour acquired in the rejected society (Holloway, 2010b) represents a contradiction well illustrated in an internal workshop carried out by the *ECP* members. Here, they analysed the features of the neoliberal subject, which practices they tend to reproduce from this subjectivity and what can be done in order to break down these capitalist values.

Acknowledging their conflicting position within and against capitalism and devoting significant time to activism, are some of the ways in which the research participants have dealt with their own contradictions and have fought the risks of being reintegrated into the dominant logic. Esperanza, for instance, illustrates this point as follows:

> *El Rebrote* gives meaning to my life, just imagine if I did nothing more than work, I would get crazy! I'm already full of contradictions, I'm a teacher and I don't believe in the formal system of education (…) My assumption is: the more

[67] As discussed in **Ch1**, section 1.3, neoliberalism is understood as a particular form of capitalism applied since the late seventies in different countries. Therefore, throughout the thesis, I understand neoliberalism not as a neutral package of economic policies but as an explicit expression of the capitalist system.

> time I steal from capitalism the better, I'm happy giving as much time as possible to resist, at least I try to do something against the system and I don't get sucked in by it… (Esperanza, *El Rebrote*)

In this quote, Esperanza explains how she tries to navigate her contradictions between economic survival and political consistency. As a teacher, she works in a system that is nourished by capitalism. At the same time, she devotes as much time as possible to collective projects that challenge the capitalist system. This tension is similarly experienced by the other research participants, who commit to a refusal of capitalism without negating their inevitable embeddedness within it.

4.3 Refusal of Patriarchy

Alongside the refusal of capitalism, the research participants identify patriarchy as another system of oppression that needs to be rejected and challenged. Rediscovered by the feminist movement as a 'struggle concept' (Mies, 2014), patriarchy refers to a 'system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women' (Walby, 1990, p.20). Similar has been the general definition of patriarchy coined by the feminists from *El Rebrote*: 'it is a social system that gives supremacy to men both in the social and family realm, subordinating women[68] to this power' (Leaflet *Feminicidio*[69], *El Rebrote*)

Unsurprisingly, I found in the Chilean feminist group a much more solid and consistent critique of patriarchy. On the one hand, they try to define and theorize this concept, to link it with the notion of capitalism and to analyse its impact on women's lives. On the other hand, they attempt to unveil patriarchal patterns reproduced both in mainstream institutions and anti-capitalist milieus, as the next pages will detail.

In line with the work of autonomist Marxist feminists (Federici, 2004; Mies, 2014, Dalla Costa and James, 1975), I found that the members from *El Rebrote* develop an

[68] Although in this section I have referred in general terms to the ways in which patriarchy puts women in a position of subordination, it is important to acknowledge that not all women experience patriarchy's oppression in the same way. For example, a lesbian woman will deal with many more challenges than a heterosexual woman. The same differences can be found between younger and older women, poor and middle class, indigenous and non-indigenous and so forth.
[69] In English: Femicide.

interesting linkage between capitalism and patriarchy, refusing to analyse them as two separate systems of oppression. This can be observed in the mission statement of the group: 'we seek to radically transform our lives and to question all forms of oppression, we believe that together and organized we can be a threat to the capitalist-patriarchy' (Blog *El Rebrote*). With no prior knowledge of Mies' work, the group uses the same notion developed by this thinker in the eighties. According to Mies (2014), it is not possible to explain women's oppression by only looking at the functioning of capitalism. By bringing the concept 'capitalist-patriarchy' into the analysis, Mies asserts that:

> …capitalism cannot function without patriarchy (…) the goal of this system, namely the never-ending process of capital accumulation, cannot be achieved unless patriarchal man-woman relations are maintained or newly created (…) Patriarchy thus constitutes the mostly invisible underground of the visible capitalist system. (Mies, 2014, p.38)

Understanding that these systems are deeply interrelated has important political consequences[70]. The refusal of patriarchy claimed by *El Rebrote* entails to struggle against all capitalist-patriarchal relations, 'beginning with the man-woman relation, to the relation of human beings to nature, to the relation between metropoles and colonies' (Mies, 2014, p.38). In other words, it means to take into account the dimensions of class and race along with gender, so radical change can be brought about. As Esperanza argues:

> We know that the patriarchal, racist and capitalist systems are so entangled with each other that you can't really change one if you're not going to change the others. I don't believe that only women are gonna liberate this world, we can't ignore the class oppression in which we are living… (Esperanza, *El Rebrote*)

As expected, the feminist group has a higher level of commitment than the other case studies when it comes to challenging patriarchal relations. Without dismissing the class and race dimensions, these activists put the anti-patriarchal struggle at the forefront, by running a series of activities that seek to unveil women's oppression.

[70] The intersection of systems of oppression and social identities has been largely studied by feminist intersectional theorists. See Crenshaw (1989); Hill Collins (1990), McCall (2005); Walby (2009).

Male violence is one of the topics addressed by the members of *El Rebrote*. One example is the production of leaflets denouncing femicide. Here they explain how this practice, commonly portrayed as domestic violence in mainstream media, is a central expression of patriarchy. As explained in one of these leaflets: 'throughout human history, the murder of women has become a systematic form of abuse from one human group (men) over the other half. This is not a coincidence, it's the expression of patriarchy…' (Leaflet *Feminicidio, El Rebrote*).

Another way in which the Chilean feminists express their refusal of patriarchy, is by denouncing the oppressive structures hidden under the myth of romantic love. Written material and workshops are some of the tactics used to share this topic with broader audiences. At an internal level, they are always discussing their own experiences about relationships and sexuality, encouraging constant self-criticism and caring feedback (see section 7.6 in **Ch7**) amongst them.

As regards the other *colectivos*, they also take an anti-patriarchal stance; however, they do not give priority to this topic when it comes to planning and undertaking collective projects and/or activities. According to one male member of *ECP*, despite the lack of collective debate about this dimension, the anti-patriarchal definition of the group is expressed in the everyday behaviours of the *compañeros*, who try to be consistent with their speech: '…We haven't discussed this as a collective (…) but I want to believe that we bring the anti-patriarchal to our everyday lives (…) Patriarchy is rooted in people's environments, they can say something but then they behave in a totally different way…' (Nico, *ECP*, Chile). In this quote, Nico acknowledges the deep-rooted internalization of patriarchy and the inconsistencies that, as a consequence, may arise. Nevertheless, this critique is developed in general terms and when it comes to speaking about themselves as *ECP compañeros*, he is much more optimistic about the consistency of their behaviours. Although most women from this group agree with Nico, some differ, identifying practices that don't fit with the anti-patriarchal standpoint embraced by the members. Speaking about one specific activist, Toti reveals:

> I challenge him all the time, he has a very macho behaviour with this *compa*, she is his friend, but he always dismisses her: how are you gonna know that thing!, he says (…) and it's difficult to address these issues because in general he is not

> *machista*[71], but there are behaviours that we all reproduce because they are naturalized…' (Toti, *ECP*)

Toti's words are useful for understanding the contradictory space in which *colectivos* try to reject patriarchy. At a discursive level they can easily engage in an abstract refusal, but they have much work ahead regarding the practical implications of this dimension: '…in formal terms, we are against *machismo* (…) we fight against patriarchy, against homophobia, but many individual practices within the group are related to the patriarchal environments in which we were raised…' (Enrique, *JRA*, Mexico). This Mexican activist agrees with Toti and Nico regarding the deep internalization of patriarchal structures in their everyday lives and the difficulties of putting this refusal into practice. Following the same reflection, in one of the participatory workshops carried out with members of *Subversiones*, they try to provide a way out of this tension by acknowledging their embeddedness into the patriarchal system and understanding the refusal of patriarchy as a long-term work:

> The anti-patriarchal definition of the collective (…) is a horizon to move forward but it's dangerous to presume that it has been achieved 100% (…) we can't ignore the deeply oppressive and patriarchal system in which we are immersed and from which we can't get fully liberated, despite our best efforts. However, it's valuable that we are acknowledging these modes of domination and persevering in breaking down with oppressive practices even if we know that this is a long-term work. (Workshop *Subversiones*)

If in general this was the tone of most of the members of *Subversiones*, there were a couple of more critical voices denouncing severe patriarchal behaviours inside the group. Anda, for example, asserts: '*machismo* and patriarchy are serious things in the collective. There is a man who is the centre of everything and most of the members are women, but nobody wants to talk about it or about how we are replicating patriarchal dynamics.'[72] (Anda, *Subversiones*).

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[71] 'Machismo has been used by scholars and authors to describe male assertiveness and control over everything from nature to society. In its most succinct form, machismo is defined as a template for male behaviour that reifies aggression and domination as uniquely male attributes and re-projects them to every area of culture.' (Klein, 2000, p.68).

[72] As I will explain in **Ch8**, section 8.7, important changes occurred inside *Subversiones* after my fieldwork. A significant one was the departure of the member criticized by Anda in the quote above, due to a consensual process of decision-making.

According to other Mexican activists, the macho-centred character of the Mexican society is a structural phenomenon that should not be overlooked. On the contrary, this feature is key in explaining the difficulties that radical collectives face in the development of consistent anti-patriarchal agendas. As Flux points out: 'Mexico is a very *machista* country and *machismo* is transferred to all our activities. In social movements you can see it even more. Many times you see social movements reproducing much more patriarchal behaviours than other spaces…' (Flux, *Subversiones*).

But the reproduction of patriarchal patterns within the left is not exclusive to Mexican society and it has been observed elsewhere. In her analysis of transnational movements, Hewitt (2011) notices the persistent refusal of radical activists to recognize gender power and privilege, reproducing dynamics of marginalization and oppression in their everyday practices. Similar is the case in Latin America: if in the past the revolutionary culture dismissed gender oppression (Longa, 2012; Guglielmucci, 2008); in the present things have not changed much, as sexist attitudes are still present in leftist organizations (Restrepo, 2011). This view is supported by *El Rebrote* members, who feel that leftist and anti-capitalist militants continue ignoring or rejecting the feminist struggle. According to them, whilst one sector of the left still understands gender oppression as a secondary contradiction that will be resolved once class revolution is achieved, the other instrumentalize feminism for their own political purposes. For the members of *El Rebrote*, the refusal of patriarchy also involves challenging what García (2011) has called the new '*machismo-leninismo*'[73]. This is the name given to a tendency within the anti-capitalist left characterized by accepting feminism in the abstract, but dismissing and blocking any attempts to make visible gender domination patterns within their own organizations. In other words, refusing patriarchy involves the rejection of a Left that has not recognized the political character of the feminist struggle and its importance for the radical transformation of society (Restrepo, 2011).

Finally, and closely related to the next section of this chapter, the refusal of patriarchy also entails a refusal of the state. The linkage between these two elements is mostly developed by the members of *El Rebrote*, who see the state as a patriarchal institution: '…the state is a manifestation of patriarchy (…) patriarchy favours male hierarchies and

[73] This Spanish notion is a combination of the Spanish word *machismo* (already explained in footnote 71) and the word Leninism.

the reproduction of power relations, and the state is where these dynamics get materialized (…) that's why I don't think the state is a valid space to change the world…' (Nicole, *El Rebrote*). By asserting that the state has a 'systematic bias towards patriarchal interests in its policies and actions' (Walby, 1990, p.21), the Chilean feminists make a claim for a refusal of the state in theory and in practice. As the state is considered an inherently oppressive and patriarchal structure, they reject a state-centred approach to social change, stressing its multiple contradictions. The following section will look in detail at how, not only the feminists, but all the case studies develop a strong critique of the state and its state-centred politics.

4.4 Refusal of State-Centred Politics

A third component that defines 'autonomy as refusal' is the rejection of 'state-centred politics' (see section 3.4.3 for a definition of this notion). For the research participants, the refusal of state-centred politics is expressed in attempts to preserve their independence from States, Governments, political parties, trade unions and other formal institutions:

> You always wonder autonomy regarding what. In the Chilean context, in Santiago, it's mainly autonomy from the State, from its institutions of power (…) it's autonomy from the elections too, because we are not interested in that path (…) and all of this allows you to have some leeway… (Rocío, *ECP*)

Here, autonomy becomes a relational concept inasmuch as it is defined 'in relation to' state-centred politics. And the relationship between 'autonomous' and 'traditional' politics is one in which the former refuses, resists and tries to overcome the latter. This refusal is fuelled by the negative perception of conventional politics shared among the activists, who usually refer to it as 'rotten' or 'dirty'. As Camila points out: 'the traditional channels of political participation are so rotten that nothing can be done within them.' (Camila, *ECP*). By using such adjectives, the participants express a deep disenchantment with traditional politics along with a feeling of hopelessness regarding any possibilities of social change through state-oriented channels. Accordingly, some activists believe that these are only a few symptoms of a major legitimacy crisis of the political system:

> …the liberal representative democracy is in crisis, the state is in crisis (…) there is a global process happening in Mexico but also in other countries, in which a critical political culture is emerging, from the grassroots upwards, asserting the delegitimation of the governments… (Julia, *JRA*)

Julia's point of view is supported by diverse scholars (for example, De Sousa and Avritzer, 2005; Smith and Wiest, 2012; Zibechi, 2012, Stavrides, 2012) who recognize a 'legitimacy crisis' in representative systems, 'reflected in declining rates of confidence in major political institutions in countries around the world' (Smith and Wiest, 2012, p.6). This legitimacy crisis is also present in Chile and Mexico, as **Ch1** (section 1.3) showed**.** According to De Sousa and Avritzer (2005) this crisis has revealed two major pathologies: the pathology of representation, that is, when citizens do not feel represented by their representatives; and the pathology of participation, expressed when citizens stop participating in elections because they believe that their vote is absolutely irrelevant. These two elements can be clearly found in the critique of representative/liberal democracy and state-centred politics developed by the research participants. As discussed in **Ch1**, this critique should not surprise us, especially if we consider the perpetuation of non-democratic features both in the Chilean and Mexican societies.

For the purpose of this analysis, and following Held's (2006) categorization, we will use the notions of representative and liberal democracy as synonyms[74]. They will be understood as 'a system of rule embracing elected 'officers' who undertake to 'represent' the interests and/or views of citizens within the framework of 'the rule of law'' (Held, 2006, p.4). These concepts serve as a broad classificatory label helpful in the identification of the models of democracy refused by the research participants. As this critique is essential for understanding the meaning of autonomous politics, the next sections will deepen into this analysis.

[74] I am aware of the number of variants of democracy that can be grouped into these general notions or of the differences that could be drawn between representative and liberal democracy. In spite of that, I have chosen to follow the general tone in which the case studies articulate their critique, using them as interchangeable terms.

4.4.1 Our dreams don't fit in your ballot boxes

In interview with Perla, a Mexican activist, she stated: 'there is a popular phrase that says: our dreams don't fit in your ballot boxes, I believe this is true…' (Perla, *JRA*). This expression, widespread among autonomous movements[75] around the world, accurately represents the activists' disenchantment with the electoral system and the liberal model of democracy. The negation of the electoral path also shapes the participants' understanding of autonomy:

> …autonomy is not deciding your life for a ballot, it's not trusting that there is an established order of things that you have to follow because there is no choice, it's not about relying on the normative law, the justice system, the State… (Pablo, *JRA*)

Following Pablo, enacting autonomous politics implies questioning the hegemonic socio-political structures and demystifying the idea that formal mechanisms of participation are the only available channels for people's political engagement. According to the research participants, the rhetoric of the responsible citizen who exerts his/her right to vote is little more than a political strategy aimed at legitimizing the current state of inequality, exploitation and injustice in their countries. This is expressed by Camila:

> I don't vote, I've never done it, because I think that by voting you validate all the bad things that they are doing to us, such as AFP's[76], the health system (…) choosing a president that can't change anything (…) when people vote they deepen and naturalize this unequal system. (Camila, *ECP*)

The involvement in electoral processes is not considered useful for achieving social change; conversely, it is seen as a practice that validates, perpetuates and naturalizes the hegemonic system. As suggested by Camila, regardless of the political coalition in power, the possibilities to change the neoliberal policies are not promising; indeed, the

[75] This expression (*Nuestros sueños no caben en sus urnas*, Spanish version) has been used by many social movements in Latin America, such as Zapatistas, Argentinean piqueteros movement, the Chilean student movement, the Ayotzinapa movement in Mexico, etc. It has been also used by the Spanish Indignados and the Occupy movement in different European cities.

[76] AFP (In Spanish, *Administradoras de Fondo de Pensiones*) is the name given to the private system of pension fund in Chile, implemented during Pinochet dictatorship and still in force.

social security system continues to weaken, even with centre-left ruling coalitions. Nevertheless, despite the rejection of voting as a mechanism of political participation, the case studies do not define themselves as abstentionists neither do they prioritize their time in electoral boycott campaigns:

> We don't vote but we don't spend our time in campaigns asking people not to vote. If they want to vote, what can we do? That is not our political project, it's not only about negating the state, the political class, the liberal elections, but it's about building another politics that creates autonomy, that is the difference. (Enrique, *JRA*)

Enrique's words are key for understanding the deep connection between autonomy as refusal and autonomy as creation: rejecting, resisting and developing a strong critique of the hegemonic systems of domination are all crucial in the discourse and practice of autonomous movements. However, their political potential would be limited if they do not go beyond the dimension of refusal. That is why voting is a target of the critique but not a priority in their own political agendas. Instead, the creation of autonomous projects from below are the core feature of their politics (see **Ch5**).

It is interesting to note that with different biographies, most of the research participants arrive to the same conclusions about the uselessness of the electoral system. Some of them, like Camila (quoted above), have never voted. Different factors influenced their early disavowal with voting. According to the participants, the most important ones were family, friends and teachers, music and art, political texts and admiration of popular movements. On the other hand, there are some activists who voted in the past but became disappointed after realizing that no changes were achieved through this channel of participation. They decided to vote at some point of their lives because they were too scared of the consequences of a right wing Government in power. They agreed, then, with the principle of the 'useful vote' or 'the lesser evil': 'we were seeing that Peña Nieto[77] was going to win and that really freaked us out, so we started with this idea of the useful vote and we supported Obrador[78] again…' (Regina, *Subversiones*). While some of the activists had to experience the involvement in elections before they decided

[77] Current president of Mexico.
[78] Manuel Andres López Obrador was a candidate for the presidential election in 2012 and represented a coalition of the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), Citizens' Movement and the Labour Party.

to reject them as a path of social transformation, others have always distrusted this channel, even when the 'lesser evil' argument attempts to persuade them:

> I don't want to vote for this system; I don't buy this thing of the lesser evil because it's exactly the same if I vote for one or for the other, they are the same (…) even the ones who were socialists in the past now they are reproducing the same than the right wing… (Andrea, *El Rebrote*)

Drawing on Andrea's words, it can be argued that the main electoral choices available, from right to left wing, can differ in their ideological orientations but they seem to concur in the maintenance of the neoliberal project, adding more or less doses of subsidy policies. In this regard, the activists identify the inter-connectedness between the state and capitalism, and how the symbiosis between these modes of domination hinders the chances to change the world through the state. Coupled with this, the critique elaborated by the research participants goes far beyond the potential gains resulting from electoral outcomes as they are questioning the grounds of political representation. The next section will expand on this aspect.

4.4.2 State-centred politics as expropriation of self-governing capacity

The research participants also contest the modern idea of political representation that places the state at the top of the political system. They are suspicious of the grounds of state authority and the supposedly consensual transference of power from the people to the rulers[79]. Cony, for example, comments:

> Why do I have to vote? (…) Because democracy is to transfer the power to a political party (…) In my opinion democracy cannot be achieved through representation because in this way they always do what they want without considering the people; for years it has been the same.' (Cony, *ECP*)

For Cony and other autonomous activists, the cession of people's power to the state and its intermediary institutions, like political parties, remains very problematic as the

[79] The social contract tradition with Hobbes (1651/1994), Locke (1689/2003), and Rousseau (1762/2004) as its best exponents, tries to provide a rationale for the legitimacy of the state power and the importance of consent in the rulers-ruled relationship.

decisions made by the rulers do not necessarily consider people's opinions and needs. Here, the whole idea of representative democracy is put into question:

> When you vote, you are saying with a 'x' in a paper: this day I give up my capacity as an individual, neighbourhood, community and collective to inform myself, deliberate, decide and execute, and I transfer all my political capacities to a political elite that is going to decide everything about education, healthcare, economics, production, consumption, government, justice. I'm giving them a blank check (…) that's why I don't vote, the whole idea of the liberal democracy is disgusting (…) In a real democracy people govern themselves through organization, assemblies, participation structures in the factories, in the neighbourhood, in the communities, bottom up. (Enrique, *JRA*)

This statement is a very insightful example of the refusal of representative politics and the consensual transference of power claimed by contractualism[80]. Centuries ago, Hobbes (1651/1994) asserted that people ought to give up on their right to self-government and transfer that power to a single authority. The terms of this contract would say: 'I authorise and give up my right of governing myself to this man, or to this assembly of men, on this condition; that thou give up, thy right to him, and authorise all his actions in like manner.' (Hobbes, 1651/1994, p.109). No matter if we are speaking of the absolutist Leviathan or the liberal state imagined by Locke (1689/2003), the cession of power from the community to a single authority is interpreted by the research participants as people's alienation or expropriation of their own capacity of doing politics. According to them, this rationale would be preventing people from developing their potential for self-government. As Nicole expresses:

> The fact that the governments make decisions by themselves has caused big problems in our society, because this form of organization (…) takes power away from people, people's power to take charge of their own problems in the places where they live. All of this means that people conveniently remain at home and don't participate beyond voting… (Nicole, *Rebrote*)

Nicole brings out another important element of the critique of representative democracy: the transference of power to the rulers implies people's disengagement with society's

[80] Section 5.6 in **Ch5** summarises the main ideologies/political frameworks that have influenced the participants' critique of representative politics.

collective issues. In other words, occasional voting for representatives seems to be the least time consuming and easiest way to participate in the public affairs. As Ita mentions: '…of course it's more difficult to build autonomy so you better vote and let someone else decide for you, and you don't take any responsibility, you only work and spend your money and you are happy with that…' (Ita, *Subversiones*). Here, Ita also criticises the self-interested neoliberal subjectivities[81] predominant in consumer societies. This kind of individual easily fits with the liberal model of democracy that separates the rulers from the ruled. Consider, for example, Mill's (1861/1991) advocacy of representative democracy, in which people exercise their power through periodically elected deputies. However, even if Mill (1861/1991) claims that people must be masters of all government's operations, he emphasises the distinction between controlling the governments and ruling. In other words, the functions of the government should be carried out by a specific group of people who have enough expertise and experience in the political field. Likewise, Max Weber (2004) stresses the importance of competitive political leaders and a professional bureaucracy, giving little attention in his analysis to the power of regular citizens. According to Held (2006), this imbalance in Weber's thought is based on the belief that 'there are relatively few people who are both able and interested in politics: and only a competent leadership, coupled with a bureaucratic administration and parliamentary system, can manage the complexity, problems and decisions of modern politics' (Held, 2006, p.139). A more extreme example is Schumpeter's (1942/2003) work, who narrows people's participation to the mere act of voting and choosing leaders. Politics, then, is handed over to a select group of policy makers, who have more qualifications and experience than the average regular citizen. In Schumpeter's (1942/2003) theory of democracy, the ordinary citizen is portrayed as ignorant, infantile and lacking of judgement regarding political matters. For this reason, the division between rulers and ruled should be respected, as he makes clear:

> The voters outside of parliament must respect the division of labor between themselves and the politicians they elect. They must not withdraw confidence too easily between elections and they must understand that, once they have elected an individual, political action is his business and not theirs. (Schumpeter, 1942/2003, p.295)

[81] See **Ch1**, section 1.3, for a discussion on the emergence of these subjectivities in the context of Chile and Mexico.

From the perspective of the research participants, the idea of placing politics in the hands of a professional body of politicians and policy makers is highly problematic. According to them, the fact that people do not get involved in public affairs is closely related to the exhausting working hours and the individualist culture fostered by capitalism. The representative model of democracy is also responsible for this disengagement, as it depicts politics as a realm that can only be accessed by a highly skilled sector:

> People don't participate in politics because they have to be working all the time to satisfy their basic or luxury needs, and there are others who are especially dedicated to politics (…) these are shown as the professionals and we justify their political work, they know what they are doing, they are the only ones capable of making decisions (…) the professionalization of politics is an ideological justification that seeks to maintain this separation between the rulers and the ruled. (Julia, *JRA*)

Here, Julia develops a strong critique of the specialization and professionalization of politics and the subsequent separation between rulers and ruled. The bureaucratization of politics is seen as an ideological justification for the expropriation of people's self-governing capacities. Similarly, a Chilean activist agrees with Julia's viewpoint by suggesting that the political elites deliberately attempt to avoid people's empowerment: 'Why do only a few people think and implement the policies? I think that these powerful groups want to avoid that people educate themselves and get empowered so they can be the owners of their lives, of their own practice' (Rocío, *ECP*). According to the research participants, unlike representative democracy, that restricts people's self-determination; the path of autonomy aims to reclaim the political capacities of people from below, acknowledging their judgement regarding how to build a more just society.

4.4.3 The myth of participation under liberal democracies

The activists consider urgent to recuperate their own self-governing capacities. According to them, this is a resistance strategy against a political system that claims to represent and foster the participation of its citizens without really putting these statements into practice. Political participation under a liberal model of democracy is restricted to the exercise of voting, but being counted as one more vote in the electoral

turnout is not necessarily the kind of political involvement that the participants wish to attain:

> This type of traditional politics is only the politics of one second, your political involvement only lasts for the time in which you go, cross out, write down and put your vote into the ballot box, and after that you no longer exist, you are only perpetuating that system, I wouldn't vote because it's not inclusive, it's not participatory. (Erick, *JRA*)

Erick refers to electoral participation as the 'politics of one second'. This expression noticeably resumes the research participants' perceptions about the limited possibilities of participation within the current political system. Additionally, the so-called 'cession' of power through representation does not necessarily result in political decisions in favour of the people's welfare:

> Supposedly, we transferred our power to them, but they do what they wish with this, they have been there for years and they have never given us a reply, real participation, the possibility to intervene (…) it's not possible that voting is the only official way of participation (…) who assure me that this politician will do what I would like to? Will the decisions be collective? Have they ever asked us what do we want? (Cony, *ECP*)

In the excerpt above, Cony puts into question the terms of representation. Something seems to be wrong with the supposed social contract if the rulers take possession of power but do not proceed in accordance with people's needs and expectations. Hence, we might ask: how can politicians call themselves people's representatives if they follow their own agendas and neglect decision-making strategies that are inclusive and participatory? These contradictions lead the participants to distrust the democratic status of their political systems, a quality that seems to be automatically obtained as long as regular elections are run in the territories. As Pauli argues:

> In Chile there is no democracy as such, there is an electoral democracy in which you choose your representatives, but they don't really represent you, they represent the parties and the interests of the economic power, so the super democracy that we have only means that we can vote… (Pauli, *Rebrote*)

Following Pauli's words about Chilean democracy, the official political actors do play a role in regard to representation, the problem is that they do not represent the majorities but the political class and the economic elites. In this context, the notion of democracy as 'government by the people' is problematic because the rulers do not seem to be very interested in what people have to say or to suggest. Similarly, the Mexican activists from *Subversiones* understand liberal democracy as simulation:

> Democracy under capitalism is a simulation (…) we are not disowning democracy as a concept but we do reject this alleged democracy that doesn't exist in reality. (…) They don't represent us, there is no real work with people, with the communities… (Workshop with *Subversiones*)

It is interesting to notice the clarification made by some activists regarding the notion of democracy. They don't fully disregard the concept but they aim to go beyond its liberal understanding. Erick, from *JRA*, makes this clearer: 'the real democracy is below, it's in small groups, in movements, in Cherán, in EZLN (…) the institutional one; I wouldn't even call it democracy; that is a mockery…' (Erick, *JRA*). So, against the 'mockery' of liberal democracy, they place the idea of direct and participatory democracy in which representation exists, but it is based on different principles: 'I do believe in representation but in a context of participatory democracy, with revocable representatives…' (Richi, *ECP*). As expressed by Richi, revocable representatives are an essential feature of popular representation. In other words, when people undertaking representative roles are not following the collective mandate, they can be recalled at any moment. This correlates with the Zapatista principle 'leading by obeying', that fosters empowerment processes from below and asserts peoples' inalienable right 'to alter or modify their form of government' at any time (Stahler-Sholk, 2010, p.275).

Nevertheless, the current political structures at the national level function with a logic radically different from the one advocated by the research participants. According to them, the high levels of participation and people's political involvement that they would expect from a democratic system are totally inexistent today. Nicole, for example, questions the real participation of people with regards to the Chilean Government's decision making:

> In practice, democracy allows people to participate once every four years, then I don't know what kind of democracy is what we have, because when we have to

> discuss about abortion or gay marriage, for example, they don't allow us to decide. A small group who are supposedly our representatives decide for us without even consulting… (Nicole, *El Rebrote*)

According to Nicole, the Government's disregard about people's opinions, especially when it comes to address value-related matters that will affect the whole of society, calls into question the democratic character of the political system. Therefore, democracy seems to be nominal and the channels of participation opened by the Governments only attempt to validate the current political structure: 'my critique is that democracy (…) is so flawed that participation is a decorative thing. That is why I'm not going to demand participation laws to the state because this is only nominal' (Rocío, *ECP*). For the activists, real participation from above is considered a myth; or in Rocío's words, it is not more than a 'decorative thing'. Therefore, drawing on this analysis, any state-oriented claims for more participation are pointless as people remain tied to the boundaries set by the governments themselves.

4.4.4 Representative politics and deplorable strategies to maintain power

According to the research participants, the official political parties seem to be more interested in keeping their power positions within the state rather than engaging genuinely with the needs and issues of the communities. As Flux points out:

> The political parties have a very clear agenda that only seeks to sustain the system and the state structure just in the way they are now. Occasionally they pass the sceptre from one hand to another, but in reality they are always the same, the same power groups that are not interested in us or in the rest of the population. (Flux, *Subversiones*)

In their role as intermediary agents of representative politics, the official parties do not question the status quo. Conversely, they validate it by adopting unethical strategies solely for the purpose of maintaining their power inside the political structure. Clientelism, vote buying, co-optation and criminalization of social protest, among others, are some of the practices that have led the participants to refuse state-centred politics. The following two sections will detail this critique.

4.4.4.1 Political clientelism: Vote buying and co-optation.

The research participants, both in Chile and Mexico, report that several clientelistic strategies have been undertaken by formal political actors with the purpose of maintaining their power or getting access to the state apparatus. However, it is important to clarify that the activists' opinions about clientelistic traits are significantly higher in Mexico than in Chile. Vote buying, understood as a 'particularized form of clientelism involving the exchange of goods for votes at the individual level' (Gonzalez-Ocantos et al., 2011, p.202), is a strategy that can be found both in the Chilean and Mexican activists' discourses, although Mexican clientelistic practices seem to be much more explicit, extensive and diversified than the ones reported by Chilean activists. In the case of Chile, Nicole refers to a recurring practice in pre-electoral times in which food baskets are delivered to poor neighbourhoods on behalf of certain candidates: 'they are our representatives based on the idea that people choose them, the problem is that they are chosen because they give food baskets to the families before elections.' (Nicole, *Rebrote*). Through the delivery of goods, the political actors competing in elections try to persuade the voters and get their support. Therefore, if gifts are given before the elections on behalf of certain candidates, the very basis of representative democracy can be called into question. An even more severe situation is observed in Mexico, in which clientelism and corruption (see section 1.3.2) seem to dominate the political system:

> The rulers get the votes through vote buying. Corruption has been the principal feature of Mexican politics. Without it there would be no peoples' participation (…) they show them the symbol of the party, of PRI, and then the people go and vote for them. Many people vote them only because they give them food and money. (Centli, *JRA*)

Along with food baskets, Mexican parties diversify their clientelist and vote buying techniques, offering money, all sorts of tokens, such as vouchers to be redeemed in retail chains and healthcare attention. In spite of the illegal character of vote buying both in Mexico and Chile, these practices seem to be naturalized and they are usually justified under the label of promotional gifts. As Centli suggests, some sectors are more vulnerable to these strategies, as the conditions of extreme poverty in which they live force them to accept any deal that helps them to meet their immediate basic needs. A

similar case is raised by Pablo, who remembers how the Mexican conservative party PAN[82] set up a community kitchen in a poor neighbourhood:

> This party, PAN, they set up a community kitchen not because they wanted to feed the people in need, they wanted to build a clientelistic social base so they could sell them as votes, and then reach positions at the public administration. This is the most miserable form of doing politics. (Pablo, *JRA*)

These strategies are spread among many low-income neighbourhoods, jeopardizing the inherited practices of solidarity within popular communities, which now get divided into different bands according to their relationships with certain parties: '…imagine the power of Tepito organized without this thing of… 'We are with PRD because they are giving us this support' or 'we are with PAN because they give us that thing (…) this whole dynamic divides them…' (Brenda, *Subversiones*). Here, Brenda mentions Tepito, an emblematic neighbourhood from Mexico City characterized by a rich popular culture but also by high levels of poverty. By raising this example, she invites us to think in the potential of that community without the intervention of the political parties and their clientelistic agendas[83].

Co-optation is another clientelistic practice strongly criticised by the research participants. It can be understood as a state and party mechanism that attempts to gain loyalty from popular groups, usually through their leaders, thereby keeping them in a subordinate position in relation to their mentor and main resource provider (Veredas, 2003) and limiting their ability to organize horizontally (Cross, 1998). In the Chilean case, co-optation strategies are usually undertaken at the local government level, creating a close relationship with certain community leaders first, and then favouring their communities with benefits, gifts, subsidies and temporary jobs (Barozet, 2005). In this context, the activists' claim for autonomy is also a reaction to this political culture that instrumentalizes people, allegedly for their own benefit. In the words of Rocío: 'we are autonomous from the political parties and their old practices, we reject how they co-

[82] Partido de Acción Nacional. In English: 'National Action Party'

[83] Although these strategies manage to co-opt vast sectors of Chilean and Mexican societies, it is important to clarify that many other popular sectors are critical of these practices. The processes of autonomy enacted by Zapatistas and indigenous from Cherán in México, and by some currents within the Mapuche movement in Chile are great examples of this refusal.

opt the work of community organizations for their own electoral purposes.' (Rocío, *ECP*)

In the case of Mexico, Brachet-Marquez (1992) argues that the political regime has failed in opening up the structures of power to the masses, opting, instead, for the co-optation of popular leaders that deprive the capacity of the grassroots to raise their own grievances. The Mexican activists concur with this idea and go further, establishing a direct connection between co-optation and corruption. As Enrique points out: 'the Mexican political system is gravely corrupt (…) The PRI has known how to tame, to co-opt, to repress in the perfect doses in order to remain in power, and this is a long tradition of co-optation, of subordinate inclusion, of demagogy.' (Enrique, *JRA*). Interestingly, the activists do not only target the ruling party but the whole spectrum of mainstream parties, from the ruling PRI and conservative PAN to the social democratic PRD and the left wing MORENA. Regarding the two latter, Jero reveals:

> If you see what the PRD is today, it's very sad, it's a party that reproduces corruption, clientelistic forms, manipulation, lies, cheating propaganda, there is no party that escapes from this, even MORENA is reproducing the same. That is why we are not interested in this type of participation, we say to them: 'go away!' (Jero, *Subversiones*)

Enrique and Jero are seeing the same unethical practices in different political parties. Co-optation, along with techniques such as manipulation, propaganda, demagogy, lying, and criminalization of social movements; all of them are part of the toolkit of traditional politicians, who use these strategies both to recruit compliant supporters and to silence their adversaries in order to remain in power.

4.4.4.2 Criminalization of popular protest and social movements.

Political repression and the subsequent criminalization of popular protest and social movements are state strategies that deeply affect the research participants, essentially because these tactics target activists and community organizers. In view of that, they themselves as activists have been or may be potential targets of repression and criminalization by their respective governments. In the case of Chile, and despite the

more than 26 years of democracy after Pinochet's dictatorship, several operations of repression and criminalization are still reported. Undoubtedly, the struggle of indigenous Mapuche communities to recover their lands, territory, culture and collective rights (Haughney, 2007) has been the resistance process most systematically targeted by the repressive state forces and the justice system during the whole post-Pinochet period. Similarly, the student movement has been subjected to harsh episodes of state violence and criminalization during the past two decades, reaching its peak during the massive mobilizations of 2006 and 2011 respectively (Mc Sherry and Mejia, 2011; Pousadela, 2013; Kahan, 2008). However, it would be inaccurate to point out that the incidents of state violence and criminalization only affect well recognized social movements such as the ones mentioned above. In fact, experiences of autonomous organizing at local level and micro projects/acts of protest and resistance are just as significant and represent threats to the rule of law.

The militant ethnography I developed with the two Chilean *colectivos* gave me access to previous stories of repression lived by the activists themselves and it allowed me to observe *in situ* one concrete episode of repression and criminalization. During the time spent with the members of *ECP*, I was told about *'Recuperacción Comunitaria'* (in English: Community Recupera(c)tion). This was a squatting project launched in December 2013 with the purpose of reclaiming a school unoccupied since 2010 and convert it into an autonomous and self-managed community space with several artistic and cultural activities. The members of *ECP*, along with other popular organizations, got actively involved in the design and implementation of this initiative. However, the project quickly fell apart due to an eviction by police forces that left 4 people under arrest. Regarding this experience, Nico comments:

> The criminalization by the state targets several processes, the student movement, for example, but also other ones. In summer, for example, we had the experience of *Recuperacción* (…) community construction is much more dangerous than the upheaval inside the university spaces because in the neighbourhood you can also question liberalism and capitalist accumulation… (Nico, *ECP*)

If with *ECP* I had the opportunity to listen the story of repression of *Recuperacción Comunitaria*, with the feminist group *El Rebrote* I had the chance to observe *in situ* a harsh episode of violence and criminalization. The group, as a member of a broader

women's network (see **Ch6**, section 6.6), got involved in the planning of a protest action to be performed on the 11th of September, 2013[84], commemorating thousands of tortured and murdered women during Pinochet's dictatorship. The nonviolent action planned by the activists consisted in an artistic presentation to be performed outside three women's centres of torture and murder. Despite that the performance planning was kept in secret by the organizers in order to avoid police intervention, when the first group of twelve activists arrived at the chosen location[85], there were already twenty Special Forces policemen waiting for them, who finally arrested 8 women. The communique released by the women's network detailed part of the violence experienced by the activists:

> The police attacked us without justification, we couldn't say anything when they were already dragging us by the hair, they hit us in the legs, arms and heads, they kicked us, they shouted at us, using insults with marked sexual connotations, some of us were thrown to the floor and the policemen stepped on us with their boots (…) We were not informed about the reasons of our arrest neither about the place where they were taking us. We were kidnaped for about one hour (…) at the Hospital, when they were taken to the X-Ray room, five activists were sexually assaulted by the policemen. (Communique *Red de Mujeres por la Memoria*[86])

After the detention, the women who were not arrested, including me, remained for hours outside the Hospital and the Police Station, trying to find out information about the health conditions of our friends and whether they were going to be prosecuted or not. Although I personally took part in the planning of what was supposed to be an artistic performance, the prosecutor tried to raise charges for possession of explosives and bombs, which according to the activists is a new police set-up orchestrated by the Government and its institutions[87].

If the previous examples taken from the Chilean context are shocking, Mexico shows an even worse situation with regard to state violence and criminalization of popular movements. Episodes of serious repression have occurred in this country during the last

[84] 11th of September is an important date for Chile because it marks the anniversary of the coup d'etat in 1973 which ushered in Pinochet's dictatorship until 1990.
[85] I was supposed to arrive later at the demonstration due to personal problems. Luckily, this delay saved me from being arrested.
[86] In English: Women's Network for Memory
[87] The charges were finally drop for lack of evidence.

decade. But definitely, the murder and disappearance of 43 students from the Ayotzinapa Rural Teacher Training College in 2014, symbolize the escalation of general violence in the country, but also the sophistication of state violence tactics directed specifically towards activists, community leaders and social justice seekers. According to the National Centre for Human Rights[88] and other human rights organizations at the local level, about 120 attacks on activists and their families were perpetrated between 2005 and 2011, 'including threats, physical harassment, injury and assault' (CNDH, 2011, p.47 in Cerda, 2015, p.3). Additionally, 249 forced disappearances of political dissidents were reported by the *Centro Nacional de Derechos Humanos* between December 2006 and December 2012, with the participation of state agents in 149 cases (Cerda, 2015). The use of criminal law to prosecute activists has been also a common strategy undertaken by the federal government. They have been accused of crimes against the nation's security such as spying, sedition, rebellion, sabotage and conspiracy; crimes against authority, such as disobedience and resistance, offenses against public officials; and crimes for attacking means of communication, such as obstructing public roads or pedestrian's paths (Rabago, 2010). The facts mentioned above resonate with the words of Abraham, a young Mexican activist who notes with concern how there seems to be an increase in the criminalization of social movements in his country:

> …the processes of criminalization, of attack to social movements have increased, and the situation is even more complicated because the social movement in Mexico is under a reflux condition (…) and sometimes the State hits and we feel powerless, we don't know how to react to these intimidations (…) even us, we have been persecuted, threatened, the work of the group and the activities of some fellows have been monitored by the state organs… (Abraham, *JRA*)

Abraham reveals the threatening and worrying environment in which activists have to operate. The fact that *JRA* faced direct episodes of intimidation, in which anonymous individuals tried to frighten them and make them stop doing their political activities; is the clearest example of the presence of systematic state violence that is no longer a potential danger, but an actual threat for Mexican popular movements. This threat has been also experienced by activists working in the *colectivo Subversiones*. During the past three years, three of its members have been arbitrarily arrested in two massive

[88] In English: National Human Rights Program

demonstrations while they were reporting the protests or peacefully participating in them. Regina, for example, was detained during the protests against Mexico's new president, Enrique Pena Nieto, on the 1st of December, 2012. She describes her experience as follows:

> I was not taking part of the demo yet when I was arrested. The police came and they surrounded me and a bunch of other people. They held us there for a while and then took us to the detention centre. They charged us with crazy stuff, it's so ridiculous, according to them we destroyed two places in different locations at the same time, as if we were superheroes or we could teleport to another place… (Regina, *Subversiones*)

Just as with Regina, two other activists from *Subversiones* experienced similar detentions and charges for criminal offenses that they did not commit. They were imprisoned for 6 and 9 days with charges of disturbances of the public peace, resistance of detention, fighting against the legitimate exercise of authority and carrying and manufacturing objects suitable for attack. After months of trial proceedings, the alleged charges were dropped for lack of evidence and the activists were able to come back to their regular lives.

As the previous paragraphs show, the refusal of the state is not only based on theoretical assumptions or critical analysis of the political system. It is also a response to the direct violence perpetrated by the state towards activists and community organizers. Mass demonstrations are the preferred, although not exclusive space in which this violence is exerted. Well aware of the partial and unbalanced coverage provided by the mainstream media, the members of *Subversiones* are committed to provide alternative coverage of social protests. Because of the very nature of their work, these activists are under constant threat of being injured, arrested, charged with protest-related offenses or even killed. They are also first-hand witnesses of police abuse towards other protesters:

> I was traumatized, I have only 5 good pictures out of 300, I could not keep the pulse, it was very dramatic for me, I didn't understand where I was, suddenly there was someone dead near me, he was killed! The police pointed their tear guns directly towards our bodies, not to the sky as the protocol dictates… (Xilo, *Subversiones*)

Xilo's testimony illustrates the risks of being in the field with those who defy the hegemonic order. When these activist-journalists refuse the state, they are also refusing the violence that targets their friends, comrades and themselves. In a way, the refusal of the state becomes a deeply embodied act, an exercise of resistance against the institutional violence that reaches right into the activists' bodies.

4.4.5 Changing the world by taking power? No thanks!

In the previous sections I explored in detail the problems that the research participants have with the state-centred political approach. Most of the critique focused on the role of current liberal democracies and the state as instruments for the reproduction of neoliberal capitalism and the status quo. Nevertheless, little was said about the political paradigm that places the state as the core of revolutionary action. As this section will show, the groups elaborate a deeper refusal of the state, no matter if it serves conservative or socialist purposes. According to them, the state-form is functional to capitalism, thus the idea of seizing state power for changing society entails a deep contradiction : 'we disagree with these approaches claiming that by taking over the state they are going to transform society. We believe that the figure of the state is the problem too, because the state has played a functional role to capital' (Abraham, *JRA*). By stressing the linkage between state and capitalism[89], the research participants reject the political channels proposed both by the institutional left and revolutionary movements seeking to conquer the state. They are extremely suspicious of the real chances of achieving radical change by using a structure that is fully embedded into the capitalist logic. Their viewpoints are very much in line with the Open Marxism tradition (Bonefeld, 2002; Tischler, 2002, 2008), and particularly with Holloway's (2010a) thesis developed in *Change the world without taking power*. Following Holloway, there is a big problem in trying to transform the society through the state:

> This view fetishizes the state: it abstracts it from the web of power relations in which it is embedded. The difficulty which revolutionary governments have experienced in wielding the state in the interests of the working class suggests that the embedding of the state in the web of capitalist social relations is far

[89] See section 4.3 for an analysis of the linkage between the state and patriarchy.

> stronger and more subtle than the notion of instrumentality would suggest. The mistake of Marxist revolutionary movements has been, not to deny the capitalist nature of the state, but to underestimate the degree of integration of the state into the network of capitalist social relations (Holloway, 2010a, pp.13, 14)

When asked about the emancipatory potential of the Pink Tide governments in Latin America, the activists seem to concur with Holloway regarding the strong embedding of the state in the totality of capitalist social relations, and how this integration hinders the possibilities of radical change. Lucero, for example, argues:

> I was in Ecuador last year and I could see all the problems with the megaprojects. In Uruguay is happening the same yet we love Mujica. The monster is bigger than the governments, we have the business men, the corporations, they are ruling and they only care about capital… (Lucero, *Subversiones*)

Agreeing with Lucero, most of the research participants believe that the progressive governments in Latin America have failed in using the state as an instrument for radical transformation. The activists acknowledge the improvement of social policies and the good will of a few rulers (such as the Uruguayan president Jose Mujica), but they do not see serious attempts to stop capitalism in any of these countries[90]. Erick illustrates this idea as follows: 'they're still being functional to the International Monetary Fund, to the World Bank, to the OECD and their neoliberal policies (…) finally they have very little room to act…' (Erick, *ECP*). By highlighting how the so called progressive governments are still subjected to the rules and institutions of capital, the research participants do not posit any hope on the institutional left. Similarly, they refuse to engage with revolutionary movements seeking to conquer the state. Drawing on the experiences of past revolutionary movements and governments, they suggest to learn from those failures and try alternatives routes to emancipation:

[90] Similar is the critique made by some scholars. Dinerstein (2015), for example, stresses the contradictions between some Pink Tide's economic policies and the anti-neoliberal, pro-autonomy and bottom-up political discourse. Likewise, Goodale and Postero (2013) question the development strategy embraced by Bolivia and Venezuela, where despite their anti-neoliberal stance and commitment to redistribution, they have remained tied to a model 'based on aggressive exploitation and global trade in natural resources' (p.23). Svampa (2013) also analyses this tension, suggesting that both conservative and progressive governments have embraced the '*Commodities Consensus*' or return to primary extractive activities based on the extreme exploitation of natural resources.

> …we are not interested in defeating those in power so we can take over the state. We don't want to repeat the past experiences of Latin American guerrillas or national liberation movements. And I'm not dismissing these movements, because if they had not existed before us, we would not have known that their strategy didn't work and that we need to try something different… (Gizze, *JRA*)

If Gizze highlights Latin American guerrillas and movements of national liberation as examples of revolutionary projects that did not fully succeed, Erick reminds us of the dark side of the Soviet Union and how we can learn from history in order to not repeat the same mistakes: '…the Soviet Union resulted in tragic forms, in bureaucratization, verticality, in all the power to the state and no power to the community' (Erick, *ECP*). Different is the meaning that Chilean activists give to the '*Unidad Popular*'[91] and the socialist government of Salvador Allende that preceded Pinochet's dictatorship. They criticise the party politics dominating that period and do not seek to replicate that formula. However, many of the Chilean participants acknowledge the pivotal role played by the *Unidad Popular* in the process of radical transformation of society: 'the *Unidad Popular* is important because it articulated hope and radical social change. This mostly came from the popular sectors, many who surpassed the party-based practices and built significant degrees of autonomy' (*Cuadernillo 3*, Document *El Rebrote*). According to the members from *El Rebrote*, the socialist experience of the seventies went beyond Allende's government and it fostered the flourishing of several grassroots projects that defended the agenda of the *Unidad Popular* whilst raising important critiques to the process[92].

Many past experiences used Leninism as a reference for their revolutionary practice, and several contemporary groups still find this approach applicable for today's struggles. Nevertheless, autonomous activists express a strong rejection of the Leninist paradigm, which is seen as authoritarian, hierarchical and centralized. In fact, the research participants notice several similarities between some of the political outcomes of liberal democracies and those emerging from Leninist organizations. According to them, these

[91] *Unidad Popular* was a political alliance founded in 1969 and composed by a variety of Chilean left-wing parties and factions. This was the coalition that supported the candidacy of Salvador Allende and his socialist government between 1970 and 1973.

[92] In this document, the members from *El Rebrote* acknowledge the importance of *Unidad Popular* for social transformation, but also develop a strong critique of the patriarchal discourse and practices dominating the left-wing scene in that period.

two political routes, apparently very different from each other, concur in separating the rulers from the ruled, hindering people's self-determination and collective autonomy.

Drawing on Lenin's thesis that the masses are incapable of developing a revolutionary consciousness by their own efforts, Leninist-inspired organizations believe that the revolutionary party[93] has the mission of 'leading the whole people to socialism, of directing and organizing the new system, of being the teacher, the guide, the leader of all the working and exploited people in organizing their social life without the bourgeoisie and against the bourgeoisie' (Lenin, 1967 p.285). This thesis is contested by autonomous activists, who perceive this approach as profoundly authoritarian. According to them, when Leninist-inspired organizations expect to become a vanguard and to be followed by the people, they are reproducing the same prescriptive methods used by the dominant elites. This issue was already noticed by Freire in the late sixties, when he pointed out the inconsistencies of leaders trying to carry out the revolution *'for'* the people: '…this is equivalent to carrying out a revolution *'without'* the people, because the people are drawn into the process by the same methods and procedures used to oppress them' (Freire, 2005, p.127, 128). This dichotomy between rulers and ruled, organization and masses, those who lead the revolution and those who follow the revolutionary leaders, is seen by autonomous activists as the core dimension of a state-centred politics that neglects peoples' own power for emancipation. As Paula argues:

> …these organizations are now seeking the state, they want to change things from within because they say that people are not ready yet, people will never be, who the hell do they think they are? They think they are some sort of messiah that are coming to save us?' (Paula, *El Rebrote*).

In this quote, Paula shows her indignation with the political strategies and discourses undertaken by some leftist revolutionary movements in Chile. By reproducing the Leninist supposition of immaturity of the working class (Bonefeld, 2002), they arbitrarily decide the strategy and the channel that will lead to revolution. Social change, then, is only attainable through the state path, overlooking a number of alternative routes towards emancipation. Contrarily, for the research participants there is no 'one way' path leading to revolution but multiple creative routes:

[93] That nowadays can take the form of a movement or organization, but maintaining a party-type structure.

> We reject the vanguards (…) we don't think that there is this 'one' sector that is going to bring us the change. We believe that it's possible to achieve this change in many ways (…) we prefer to think in a multiplicity of alternatives coming together in the struggle… (Centli, *JRA*)

The rejection of Leninist and vanguard-oriented approaches is one of the components of the broader refusal of state-centred politics developed by *colectivo*s. They refuse to quietly comply with the laws of emancipation decreed by a revolutionary party (Bonefeld, 2002). Alternatively, they create their own political experiments and envision new routes towards emancipation. But, what do these new routes look like? What are the features of this alternative politics? The next chapters will address these questions by focusing on the creative side of autonomous politics and in how the *colectivos* make these political experiments possible.

4.5 Concluding Remarks

This chapter has presented the three dimensions in which autonomy as refusal is expressed. The refusal of capitalism, patriarchy and state-centred politics is seen by the research participants as one side of autonomy, a side that needs to be developed so the seeds of its creative force can be planted.

Unlike the traditional left wing or some radical political currents that usually stand against one or two systems of domination, this chapter has showed that Latin American *colectivos* are making important efforts to identify and challenge these three oppressive structures at the same time. Autonomy is understood as the refusal to be ruled by the market, the state and a patriarchal society. The case studies reject a society consumed by the logic of capital and grounded in deeply internalized patriarchal structures. They also disbelieve models of representative democracy embraced by both conservative and progressive sectors, as the system itself expropriates peoples' capacity of self-government. Their critique is also extended to state-centred revolutionary approaches such as Leninism, as they are seen as centralized, hierarchical and authoritarian. Concurring with Holloway (2010a), these *colectivos* start with opposition, with negativity, with a scream of refusal: '…that is our starting point: rejection of a world

that we feel to be wrong, negation of a world we feel to be negative.' (Holloway, 2010a, p.2)

This exercise, however, is not free from tensions, difficulties and contradictions. The findings discussed in this chapter suggest that the refusal of the systems of domination is not only the product of an intellectual engagement but it is fired by the activists own experiences. Being exploited at work, becoming a target of state violence, feeling neglected or mistreated because of their gender or feminist beliefs; these are just some examples of experiences shaping this refusal. In a way, autonomous activists reject domination whilst acknowledging that they are part of these oppressive structures. This embeddedness into the hegemonic system leads them to deal with a number of contradictions and inconsistencies in their everyday lives. For example, the groups' anti-patriarchal definition in many cases clashes with macho-centred behaviours reproduced both inside and outside their collectives[94].

The politics of autonomy does not understand domination as an external terrain from which they are totally liberated. Without negating their contradictions, the activists understand autonomy as a commitment with individual and collective reflexivity, so they can recognize their embeddedness into the hegemonic system and identify the dominant patterns that they are reproducing in order to challenge them. From their perspective, this reflexivity is lacking in many progressive and left-leaning spaces, which reproduce the same hegemonic structures that they so strongly criticize. Therefore, being autonomous entails the necessity to refuse not only the abstract systems of domination, but their practical manifestations everywhere, including in left-wing and radical milieus.

But, as stated in **Ch2** and early in this section, autonomy does not only refer to negativity, opposing or refusal. It is also understood as a creative force, as an affirmation of other possible worlds and as the development of alternatives to the oppressive structures that we reject. The next chapter will explore this other side of autonomy, focusing on its affirmative and prefigurative character.

[94] An exception would be the feminist group *El Rebrote*, conceived as an only-women space in order to prevent the reproduction of these practices.

CHAPTER FIVE:

AUTONOMY AS PREFIGURATIVE CREATION

5.1 Introduction

This chapter continues with the endeavour of conceptualizing autonomy, but now the focus will be on its affirmative and prefigurative character. In other words, this chapter attempts to explore how the research participants, drawing on their own collective experiences, complement their own negative conceptualization of autonomy with a positive aspect, defining it also in creative terms. Autonomy is not only defined through acts of refusal, as a critique of the existing social order, it is also defined through the creation of alternative political frameworks and practices that anticipate the participants' desired society.

Firstly, I will begin by contextualising and examining the relationship between refusal and creation. Secondly, I will introduce the idea of 'politics from below' and 'prefigurative politics'. In these two sections I will show how these dimensions question the conventional paradigm of revolution and understandings of power as well as proposing an alternative approach to social change. Thirdly, I will expand on the notions of collective and personal self-determination as manifestations of a politics of autonomy. Finally, I will outline the *colectivos*' political definitions, exploring the traditions revealed as most relevant for the case studies: anarchism, Marxism, feminism and Zapatismo.

5.2 From refusal to creation

> On the one side, autonomy is about not to alienate ourselves from our capacity of political decision-making, but on the other side it has an affirmative character, it's about affirming a form of freedom built from below, built from our own capacities (…) we are autonomous because we are neither with the State nor with political parties, but we are autonomous too because we exert a common form of

> freedom, we seek to build in a collective way that space in which all may be free. (Julia, *JRA*)

As Julia points out, the refusal to state-centred politics (see **Ch4**, section 4.4) is combined with affirmative practices that challenge the separation of the community from its common affairs and reclaim the peoples' capacities to build their own processes of self-determination. Therefore, autonomy is refusal but it is also the collective and individual creation of alternative political frameworks and practices in the present aimed at seeking freedom. Unlike state-centred politics, mainly concerned with claiming concessions or demanding recognition (Gutiérrez, 2011), a politics of autonomy aims to create new forms of social intervention, production and organization, anticipating anti-capitalist alternatives in the present time (Dinerstein, 2013). An activist from the Mexican collective *Subversiones* exemplifies this difference by contrasting the demands-oriented movement *Yo soy 132* with his own collective:

> Many activists who have joined the group see in *Subversiones* the possibility of going beyond *Yo soy 132*, beyond the protest. The main claim of *Yo Soy 132* was the democratization of media. We don't want that *Televisa*[95] open the door for us, what we want is to create something new; that is autonomy for *Subversiones*. We are not going to wait until the doors of the media corporations are opened; we are going to create our own ways of doing media. (Jero, *Subversiones*)

This example mentioned by Jero gives some clues to the specificity of an autonomous politics: while demands-oriented movements remain expectant about the offers made by formal institutions, autonomous movements choose to focus on the possibilities and potentials of their own political creations. Regarding this aspect, Erick emphasizes the challenges of autonomous politics, especially in countries like Chile, where neoliberalism has reached the greatest levels of maturity:

> …we need to be highly creative, this is key in a context of mature neoliberalism (…) our challenge is how to build something new, because in other neoliberal societies the challenge is to stop reforms. Here the system is so embedded that it cannot be stopped, we need to build something different, find creative paths… (Erick, *ECP*)

[95] Televisa is a Mexican giant mass media business and the largest in Hispanic America.

Drawing on Erick's words, it can be argued that thinking and bringing autonomous projects into practice become a survival strategy in a neoliberal society (see **Ch1**, section 1.3) in which individual economic resources and market-based incentives 'determine the extent and nature of political and social inclusion, and shape access to education, health, housing' (Grugel and Nem, 2015, p.355). The refusal to accept the neoliberal formula is expressed in the urgency of creating alternative paths to be built by the people themselves and not by the experts of the neoliberal governments. Here, Erick and the rest of the activists, both from Chile and Mexico, call for a 'politics from below', which is a useful expression when it comes to understanding their affirmative conceptualization of autonomy.

5.3 Politics from Below

According to the research participants, the political practice of autonomy is built in opposition to what they call an elitist politics of the parties and political classes. The expression "politics from below" is useful precisely because it helps to make the distinction between the politics bounded to the parties, the state and other formal institutions; and a broader understanding of politics that does not restrict it to institutional settings. The notion of 'politics from below' connects with this last definition, as it refers to processes of self-regulation and self-determination built from local spaces of resistance and creation rather than from the national institutional system. This expression was widespread through the Zapatista discourse, especially since the launch of *La Otra Campaña* (in English, The Other Campaign) in 2005, aimed at bringing together non-partisan and anti-capitalist struggles from Mexico and the world (Mora, 2007). In the famous Sixth Declaration of the *Selva Lacandona* (2005), Zapatistas made clear their commitment with a politics from below:

> …the EZLN will establish a policy of alliances with non-electoral organizations and movements which define themselves, in theory and practice, as being of the left, in accordance with the following conditions: Not to make agreements from above to be imposed below, but to make accords to go together to listen and to organize outrage. Not to raise movements which are later negotiated behind the backs of those who made them, but to always take into account the opinions of those participating. Not to seek gifts, positions, advantages, public positions,

> from the Power or those who aspire to it, but to go beyond the election calendar. Not to try to resolve from above the problems of our Nation, but to build FROM BELOW AND FOR BELOW an alternative to neoliberal destruction, an alternative of the left for Mexico. (Sixth Declaration of the *Selva Lacandona*, EZLN, 2005)

Zapatistas propagated a political culture based on non-institutional politics from below, showing the possibilities of building non-bureaucratic forms of power which go beyond traditional state practices (Zibechi, 2012). To some extent, the idea of 'politics from below' disputes the traditional top-down model of social change, by instead giving priority to the changes at the local level. This approach goes beyond the Mexican territory and inspires movements and groups worldwide[96]. A politics from below emphasizes the power of the communities, focusing on people's capacities to solve their problems through their own local organizing and without the mediation of formal institutions such as 'governments, parties and NGO's. As Julia points out, 'it's a political alternative that works from the local, from the small things, from the concrete, it's about cracking here and there, and articulating these cracks with others…' (Julia, *JRA*). By engaging with Holloway's theory of cracks (see **Ch2**, section 2.4), Julia asserts the importance of building political alternatives from the grassroots. This clearly resonates with Holloway's idea of radical change in which revolution is about cracking capitalism in as many ways and places as we can through the 'multiplicity of interstitial movements running from the particular' (Holloway, 2010b, p.11). But as the following chapter will show (**Ch6**, section 6.6), the fact that movements, groups and communities engage with a politics from below does not mean that they are meant to remain isolated from each other or without caring about what is happening outside their territories. On the contrary, the challenge is trying to 'expand and multiply the cracks and promote their confluence' (Holloway, 2010b, p.11). By taking the words of Julia, the 'articula[tion] [of] these cracks' is essential for bringing up more powerful resistance strategies that face the current economic and political system. Accordingly, the statement of the Mexican collective *JRA* is a good example of the union of different struggles working from below:

> We struggle next to the people who fight, organize themselves and resist. We struggle together with the communities that defend their rivers, forests, lands and

[96] Such as the Italian social centres, the workers-controlled factories in Argentina, indigenous movements in different Latin American countries, among others.

> towns. We stand with those who organize from below to create communitarian polices and alternative justice systems. We stand with those who create self-governments, free media, and communication from below. We stand with those who scream for their disappeared sons and relatives. We stand with those who work every day for a new world (Document *JRA*: *Elecciones 2015: Entre el Ridículo y el Desastre*[97]).

So, how is the concept of autonomy connected to this idea of politics from below? In a sense, engaging with a 'politics from below' is a 'must' when the groups claim to be autonomous, because only through local exercises of organizing, people are able to put aside state-centred institutions and creating autonomous solutions to their particular needs. In other words, autonomous politics does not wait for change to be structured from above. Alternatively, it develops new anti-hierarchical and participatory dynamics from below (Stahler-Sholk et al., 2014) that question the centrality of the state and envision and enact projects of autonomy in areas such as production, education, health and culture, among others. (Sandoval, 2012).

5.4 Prefigurative Politics and the Redefinition of Power

Along with the idea of 'politics from below', the notion of 'prefigurative politics' (see **Ch3**) gives to the concept of autonomy an even more specific meaning as it clarifies how an autonomous politics approach understands revolution and state power. My research revealed that the notion of prefiguration has been incorporated into the vocabulary of activists, inasmuch as it allows them to explain their understanding of revolution in the present:

> I do believe in this beautiful idea of prefiguration, where we need to contribute in the present to the construction of this counter power, of this popular power (…) we need to prefigure experiences of communitarian control, of the construction of autonomies (…) in our everyday lives, that's why it's important to reflect in our political practices, in the value of consensus and so on… (Toti, *ECP*)

[97] In English: 'Elections 2015: Between the Ridiculous and the Disaster'

When talking about autonomous politics, the participants do not restrict its meaning to an imagined future; conversely, they see it both as an emancipatory horizon and a concrete challenge for the present. Prefigurative politics is precisely based on the idea that today's collective experiences are the foundations for the construction of the hoped new society (Gordon, 2007). That is why Toti emphasizes the importance of building right now experiences of communitarian control and being constantly mindful about the political practices undertaken. These practices developed at the level of grassroots organizations are actually seen as the seeds of a future society 'within the shell of the old'. In other words, rather than waiting for a revolutionary vanguard that implements changes from above, a prefigurative strategy seeks to work in the present for those desired changes (Leach, 2013). This perspective is very much in line with the political standpoint of *JRA*, which explicitly advocates for a prefigurative politics, as can be observed in the following excerpt:

> …a prefiguration that glimpses and practices today the forms that will substitute the relationships of dominance and exploitation tomorrow; as a critique to the social change strategy postponed to the future, based on the fact that it is possible, and actually you can see in the present alternative human relationships developed outside the state and the capital logic. (Document '*Otra Forma de Hacer Política*'[98], *JRA*)

Through the notion of prefiguration, the activists shape an alternative notion of power that challenges the state-centred paradigm. Under the traditional approach, power is associated with the state and its institutions of domination. Here, the state holds power 'as a 'thing', something to wield over others…' (Sitrin, 2012, p.102). This view is contested by autonomous activists, who conceive power as people's capacity to shape their own social and political projects: 'I do believe in prefiguration as the power of the grassroots, building conditions of autonomy, of popular power which is an alternative power, completely parallel to the state power' (Erick, *ECP*). Power here is rooted in the 'doing' or capacity 'to do', which is always social as it brings together different doings (Holloway, 2010a). 'Popular power', 'power from below' and 'power-to do' are some of the names given by activists to explain this creative side of power that emphasizes the potential of the movements and communities to build alternative social and political

[98] In English: 'Another form of doing politics'

dynamics from outside the institutional forms of political organization. As suggested by Ita:

> I believe in this idea of power as a capacity, as a potential of the doing (…) I'm not into the idea of seizing state power but I do see power as the construction of relationships in which people from below can be protagonists and decide by taking the destiny in their own hands… (Ita, *Subversiones*)

This affirmative notion of power leads to an understanding that power is not a thing that is outside and far away from the activists' lives but is actually part of themselves and can be produced collectively in their own popular organizations. However, this collective 'power-to do' can coexist or being subsumed by power-over, a relation of power over others where people's activity is transformed 'into passivity [and] their subjectivity into objectivity.' (Holloway, 2010a, p.29). Recognizing that power is immanent in all social relations and it flows in the form of a network rather than being condensed in a particular place (such as in the state) (Foucault, 1979; 2000) brings along an important challenge to the *colectivos*. As power-over is a constant threat to their own collective practice, high levels of collective awareness and reflexivity are expected from the activists. In this way, they can try to control and disarticulate authoritarian and oppressive practices that may be reproduced in their own political spaces. Abraham addresses this issue in his interview:

> …unlike these hard versions of anarchism that deny the existence of power relations in their groups, we think that we don't have to deny them. Power exists, the problem is how do we control it, how do we limit that power and we make it work for the good of the collective, developing popular power (…) we are not radically against structures and institutions but we have to build our own structures and institutions. (Abraham, *JRA*)

The distinction made by Abraham between denying and acknowledging power is essential for understanding the particular features of some Latin American autonomous movements, such as the ones analysed in this research project. Unlike some anarchist groups, the *colectivos* in this research project do recognize the importance of organizational structures (or 'our own institutions' in words of Abraham) able to deploy concrete collective mechanisms oriented towards the dispersion of power (see **Ch7**). Following Adamovsky (2011), the exercise of autonomous politics requires negotiating

bodies for managing differences between the members of the collectives. These entities do not arise spontaneously from each group or individual; rather, they are usually the result of a set of agreements and practices that crystallize into specific institutions. Avoiding concentration of power is precisely one of the goals of these institutions, practices and agreements:

> …we knew that there were power relationships between us, so we constantly try to capture these processes in organizational techniques, processes, tools that tend to neutralize those relationships of specialization, leadership… (Enrique, *JRA*)

In the quote above, Enrique explains the emphasis that his collective puts on organizational structures aimed at reaching horizontality. This approach takes a distance from other political views that reject any organic structure, no matter its type or how bounded it is, seeing them as an alienating bureaucratization of the political (Ouviña, 2011). Unlike these approaches, the research case studies engage with horizontality and non-hierarchical principles, but through the development of participatory organizational structures that allow the *colectivos* to be sustainable over time and strengthen their diverse projects and spaces of struggle. **Ch7** and **Ch8** will detail the functioning and challenges of these structures.

5.5 Self-Determination

In clear connection with the ideas of "politics from below" and "prefigurative politics", the notion of self-determination also becomes fundamental for the conceptualization of autonomy. Samadhi, for example, defines autonomy as:

> …the capacity of self-determination, of self-rule ourselves, and what is this? Is to have the clarity to do, say, think , feel and act coherently, it's being able to decide who we want to be and what we want to do in the life we have. (Samadhi, *Subversiones*).

In general terms, the research participants understand autonomy as the personal and collective capacity to self-rule themselves, to decide what to think, what to say and what to do without any external constraints. In what follows, I will expand on the collective and personal dimensions of self-determination.

5.5.1 Collective Self-Determination

At the collective level, autonomy as self-determination is seen as the groups' freedom to decide the course of their projects with complete independence from external institutions, groups or movements. The political perspectives, organizational structures, strategies and actions undertaken by the *colectivos* are discussed and agreed collectively among the members, with no guidance or pressures from external bodies. This principle attempts to prevent practices commonly found in formal institutions, in which the groups' capacity of decision and action are subject to the command of the party, the ruling Government, the project's funders, etc.

Autonomy as self-determination is seen by the *colectivos* as the capacity to decide for themselves, both politically and materially. As the following chapter will detail (**Ch6**, section 6.4), *autogestión* as the groups' capacity to self-manage their own resources, is pivotal to achieving self-determination. As the *colectivos* do not rely primarily on external funding, they find it easier to pursue their own political agendas. For example, the media collective *Subversiones* has developed a critical political approach to journalism and communication, by openly rejecting the so called "objectivity" in mainstream media and by consciously choosing to tell the stories from the perspective of the communities and peoples in resistance. Similarly, the School of Popular Communication - *ECP* has been able to create a unique training system in popular communication that refuses to follow the mainstream academic curriculums and engages instead with the radical tradition of Freirean *pedagogy of the oppressed*. In the case of *JRA*, their capacity for self-determination is clearly seen in all their autonomous projects: popular education training with social movements, massive popular concerts and also their publishing project that provides a series of books about radical political theory, autonomy, social change and social movements, among others. Finally, for the feminist collective *El Rebrote*, taking self-determination as a guiding principle has been useful for establishing a radical feminist agenda in the context of a conservative city and within an activist milieu that minimalize the feminist struggle.

Unlike conventional politics and its development of prescriptive programs for social change, self-determination encourages the movements to create and suggest their own paths. This is done by involving all the participants in the definition of a common emancipatory horizon (see **Ch7**, section 7.5). Furthermore, when the research

participants define autonomy as self-determination they go beyond the individualistic approach of liberal rights. For them, the richness of autonomy lies in the capacity to develop all creative potentials in a collective way, so all the members deliberate and decide the aspirations, projects and tactics of the group. In this context, the development of horizontal structures of organization becomes central to the practice of autonomous politics. Following Fabiola's words:

> Autonomy and horizontality come together, they are connected and they are always present in our group, they don't remain only in the definition of principles, we try hard to apply horizontality into the collective… (Fabiola, *El Rebrote*)

Here it can be seen the linkage made between the concepts of autonomy and horizontality (see **Ch6**, **Ch7** and **Ch8**). The Mexican activists make the terms of the connection between horizontality and autonomy even more explicit, by conceptualizing the former as a specific expression of the latter at the organizational level:

> …within the group, autonomy is about discussing everything; it's about having a horizontal structure, with tasks rotation (…) we are not the best organized group but there is this idea of always listening to each other, sharing things, consulting the decisions… (Beto, *Subversiones*)

Drawing on a prefigurative understanding of autonomy, horizontality and self-determination are not distant horizons to be reached through a revolutionary triumph, but concrete practices that shape the action of the collectives in the present. In this attempt to prefigure the future society, the collectives foster spaces of collective discussion and democratic decision-making aimed at enhancing both collective and personal self-determination.

5.5.2 The Personal is Political: Communion of Collective and Personal Self-Determination

As mentioned above, the views of the *colectivos* about autonomy are not based on an individualistic advocacy for liberal rights. Instead, they acknowledge the importance of reaching collective self-determination, with a focus on the communal challenges that the

groups must face when dealing with organizational, political and subjective issues. Nevertheless, the emphasis placed on the collective does not mean a total disregard for the fulfilment of personal autonomy. The research participants understand that autonomy has to be reached at the social and collective level, but also at the level of the individual. In this regard, it is important to clarify that the distinction made between collective and personal self-determination mainly serves analytical purposes. Indeed, when it comes to looking at the concrete practices, these categories are deeply intertwined and tend to overlap on many occasions.

In the previous section, autonomy as collective self-determination was understood as the *colectivos*' freedom to decide the course of their projects with independence from external institutions, groups or movements. This section, by contrast, aims to explore the concept of autonomy as the intersection between collective and personal self-determination, looking specifically at the ways in which the research participants incorporate anti-patriarchal and anti-capitalist values into their everyday life, both inside and outside their political milieus.

The discourses of the research participants seem to be influenced by the feminist assumption that politics also takes place in the personal sphere, questioning the division between the private/personal world and the public/political arena. As described by Lore:

> I think that all action in life is political, it's personal and political, and all our actions have consequences, therefore I will do my best to act accordingly in order to obtain the expected consequences. That is why starting from little things is so important… (Lore, *El Rebrote*)

With the expression 'the personal is political', the radical feminist movement of the sixties and seventies asserted the highly political dimension of what both mainstream society and left wing movements considered only 'women's personal problems' (Hanisch, 1969). Through the development of consciousness-raising groups, women articulated a new gendered politics, re-interpreting private experiences of violence and exploitation from a socio-political perspective (Cahill, 2007). Some contemporary autonomous movements have incorporated this expression into their political principles, keeping the essence of the original feminist call but also broadening it, so it is not confined exclusively to the feminist movement. Accordingly, autonomous activism re-signifies the slogan 'the personal is political', prioritizing the development of anti-

patriarchal and anti-capitalist subjectivities and personal relationships based on love and trust (Sitrin, 2012). By embracing the idea that the 'personal is political', the research participants are aware that battling against capitalism and patriarchy in the public arena is not enough. They must challenge their personal lives too, choosing alternative life styles that are coherent with their political beliefs and critical of neoliberal and patriarchal subjectivities:

> Autonomy means that you decide over your life, you must be able to discern, to make your own decisions, but this permeates all our life spheres, from the personal to the social (…) Our political activities in the group are not separated from our personal life, it's not that you are a militant now and in the evening you are a totally different person (…) For example, I can't call myself autonomist if I'm unable to go to work because my partner didn't iron my shirt.(Gustavo, *JRA*)

Closely related to the idea of prefigurative politics (section 5.4), the research participants understand that they need to make changes right now, from the personal to the collective, prefiguring in the present what they desire for the future society. Thus, the efforts at the personal level are also part of this collective political project that refuses the violent system in which we currently live. As Sari explains:

> Autonomy as the freedom of being what you want to be, and this is not liberalism, it's not about: 'I do what I want by hurting whoever I want'. It's a much more responsible freedom, with respect to the cultural identities, to the regional history, to the micro-histories… (Sari, *Subversiones*)

Following Sari's words, it can be argued that the claim for personal self-determination entails an ethical behaviour that is respectful and compatible with the principles guiding the collective projects. For instance, if discursively the groups reject the dependency of people towards the capitalist structures for the reproduction of life; e.g., when they criticise the role of the global food industry in the perpetuation of scarcity and inequality, the ethical imperative here calls for personal decisions that support experiments of food sovereignty. According to Zibechi (2012), this is already happening in Latin America, even in the cities, where people are gaining autonomy through the production of their own food and other products for exchange or sale. Interestingly, this step has been the result of people's own initiative and not a 'consequence of advanced planning by leaders' (p.38), as Zibechi argues.

Even though the case studies themselves do not develop concrete food sovereignty projects, my militant ethnography showed that many activists are involved in fair trade food networks or try to support local shops rather than supermarket chains. According to the research participants, there have been efforts made in this dimension but when it comes to thinking about food alternatives in the cities the situation gets even more complicated, revealing that food autonomy is a component of self-determination that definitely requires further development:

> …we need to move towards the autonomy of our bodies, of our food, of our health (…) I wish we get a more macro, integral autonomy. I see in *'las chiquillas'* (referring to another group's members), what they are doing in the countryside with their families, that is an example that you can take steps forward like producing your own food and in that way we are less dependent on the industry and the institutions… (Andrea, *El Rebrote*)

Apart from food autonomy, Andrea also mentions two other important dimensions essential for self-determination: autonomy of our bodies and autonomy of our health. These issues are occasionally addressed by the non-feminist *colectivos* and when they come out they are usually discursive and referred to utopian features of the desired society. However, the feminist group is the one that has developed a much more elaborated discourse and practice about body and health autonomy. By asserting women's right to control their own bodies and sexuality, the feminist activists focus on different issues oriented towards this goal, such as safe abortion, birth control, general women's health, self-defence, among others. One regular project in which these activists are actively involved is an Abortion Support Line[99] that gives help and advice on termination of pregnancy by following the World Health Organization's Safe Abortion Guidance. They also advocate for experiments of women's autonomy that contest the medicalization of women's bodies and the marketization of their natural processes. As Lore points out:

> If we want autonomy, we need to take action in our everyday life (…) we need to learn how to make our own body products; we need to know the use of herbal medicine (…) we need to stop relying on the system (…) For example, if I want to be autonomous in my sexuality I need to know my body, I don't rely only on

[99] It is important to keep in mind that under Chilean law abortion is considered illegal.

> the contraceptive pill, I need to learn more about my menstrual cycle; I know I'm part of this system, of this giant monster but I try to fight against it anyway… (Lore, *El Rebrote*)

From the critique against the patriarchal and capitalist medicalization and marketization of women's bodies, the feminists from El Rebrote move towards the development of concrete activities aimed at recuperating women's traditional knowledge. They suggest, for example, herbal medicine and natural products as alternatives to the capitalist pharmaceutical and health industry. Through these practices, women from *El Rebrote* are performing small acts of conscious rebellion against the hegemonic order (Gargallo, 2007).

Finally, autonomy as personal self-determination is also seen as the breaking down of patriarchal interpersonal dynamics with partners and friends. The goal here is to cultivate personal relationships that are democratic, fruitful and with awareness of gender privilege. When Gustavo says: 'I can't call myself autonomist if I'm unable to go to work because my partner didn't iron my shirt' (Gustavo, *JRA*), he is bringing attention to an important challenge in the praxis of autonomous politics. He is aware of the socially accepted, exploitative men-women relationships dominating his country and he rejects it. But this rejection needs to be expressed in alternative dynamics with his partner that avoid the reproduction of patriarchal behaviours. The Chilean feminists radicalize this aspect even further, when they explicitly claim autonomy from men's control:

> Autonomy is about how we are able to take our life in our hands, it's also autonomy from men, in the sense that we stand for creating this only-women space but also autonomy in personal terms, in our relationships… (Esperanza, *El Rebrote*)

The creation of a women-only *colectivo* is seen by these activists as a step forward in their quest for autonomy. Here, autonomy refers to women's capacity to reject relations of dependency with men and achieve a sense of empowerment and independence by themselves. This view encourages deep self-reflection and self-criticism, leading to an inevitable change in the relationships dynamics embraced by the feminists:

> Feminism changed everything in my life, it shook my relationship (…) I still question my consistency here, in terms of what I want, of course having a partner is convenient and he makes me happy in a certain way, but I will not compromise basic things such as remaining silent about an issue like abortion because his family is catholic… (Paula, *El Rebrote*)

Paula's experience exemplifies a shared concern among all the feminist activists: seeking personal self-determination as women can be a very challenging task, especially when they are in heterosexual romantic relationships that make visible some deeply rooted patriarchal patterns of behaviours and thoughts that need to be resisted and changed.

5.6 Political Definitions

The previous sections of this chapter have attempted to unfold the essential political principles that give shape to the creative understanding of autonomous politics in the context of Latin American social struggles. But while paying attention to the definitions of autonomy made by the research participants, another important question arises: what is the ideological standpoint underpinning the discourses and practices of the *colectivos* under study? Interestingly, the way in which the participants respond to this query becomes another innovative feature of the autonomous politics approach.

Apart from the case of *El Rebrote* that clearly takes autonomous feminism as its main, but not exclusive[100], guiding approach, the other three *colectivos* do not consider themselves as followers of an exclusive ideology and they reject the use of 'ist' or 'isms' when it comes to explain their group's political definition. As Wilkinson (2009) suggests, in the field of autonomous politics there have been conscious efforts to abandon specific activist labels as they 'may be a site of exclusion' (p.37). This can be observed in the words of Richi:

> We define ourselves as a grassroots revolutionary organization with horizontal processes, with collectivization of knowledge and of new ways of doing, but I wouldn't know how to name this. I believe it's annoying this idea of trying to

[100] As it also draws on anarchist and Marxist traditions.

> categorize everything in ideologies (…) This in many cases separate us, that is why I'm happy that in the School [*ECP*] there is not an 'ism'… (Richi, *ECP*)

As Richi points out, *colectivos* such as *ECP* do have a political positioning; the first two lines of his quote are a clear example of this affirmation. Nonetheless, this set of values, principles and practices aimed at seeking radical social change cannot be restricted to the boundaries of a particular political ideology. Accordingly, the activists find very hard to recognize themselves in traditional political categorizations and the use of ideological labels doesn't seem to fit with their political identity. The words of Julia, from the other side of the continent, reinforce this idea:

> I find it very hard even to use the label autonomist, so I am autonomist, you are Trotskyist, you are *Obradorista*[101]. Ideologies normally take labels and they easily become familiar because of them. In *JRA* I can't find that mechanism of easy identification through a label; it is super weird to use an 'ism' because we are always creating our perspective and the 'ism' closes the door to other possibilities (…) We do have principles, regulatory horizons, but they are always open to discussion, there is no such a thing of a finished ideology… (Julia, *JRA*)

Apart from stressing the nuisance of political tags, Julia brings up another important issue: the refusal of identifying themselves with a single ideology is based on the assumption that the collectives are constantly recreating their practices and discourses. This flexibility allows them to choose the political and theoretical tools that are suitable for the new contexts and challenges that they face. As Ita points out: '…if we think of autonomy as an ideology, then we have problems because supposedly autonomy is always in construction, you are asking while you walk, you don't have the recipe…' (Ita, *Subversiones*). Against a fixed normative vision of politics and social change, the research participants engage in a much more flexible approach in which politics is always an ongoing process, both in theory and in practice. Likewise, Sitrin's research about autonomous movements in Argentina reaches similar conclusions: the Argentinean activists believe in a fluid, ever-changing politics that is necessities-oriented and informed by practice (Sitrin, 2012).

[101] Obradorista refers to the political current that follows the ideas of the politician Manuel Andres Lopez Obrador.

As in Sitrin's (2012) findings, the experiential learning is essential for the political definition of the research's case studies. All of them concur that during the groups' creation the practice preceded the ideology because the actions, framed in some general principles, were enough to give the boost they needed for setting up their organizations. Enrique, a founding member of *JRA*, explains this as follows:

> …we didn't start by defining, categorizing ourselves. We didn't start with an identity principle, saying: 'we are going to create an autonomous group'; on the contrary, our identity was built through our political practice (…) we took some general orientations from Zapatistas, indigenous peoples, etc. but the ideology didn't and doesn't unite us, The political practice unites us more than a definition. (Enrique, *JRA*)

When the practice is taken as a guide, the groups' political definitions remain open to revisions and changes, an approach that gives to the members a sense of freedom, respect and consideration for their own contributions and reflections. Conversely, traditional ideology-driven organizations are seen as spaces that restrict the free thinking of their members: 'I know people who have entered into organizations with fixed political ideologies and then they lose their freedom to think for and about themselves…' (Rocio, *ECP*). Precisely as a response to the practices of organizations such as the ones criticized by Rocio, all the case studies strongly reject the indoctrination of their members. Hence, rather than attempting to imbue them with a specific ideological point of view, they engage in collective processes of reflection and knowledge-sharing that allows them to produce theoretical/political syntheses that respect the diverse voices of the groups. As Centli comments:

> I never felt indoctrinated by the group. I didn't get into the group and someone told me: we are communists, or Marxists, or whatever (…) we do have clear political principles, but we value the differences that we all have, respecting the diversity of the group. (Centli, *JRA*)

The development of articulate political standpoints without adopting a single conventional ideology does not mean that the *colectivos* neglect the theoretical/political bodies already established. Conversely, the emphasis placed on practice and diversity challenges them to study these approaches even more. In this way, they can elaborate

their own synthesis but in a knowledgeable manner and drawing on previous political and theoretical contributions:

> We don't think we need a label but we also disagree with the expression 'we are nothing politically' because obviously we have built our own viewpoint. However, everything that we have thought so far has been drawing on the thoughts of others (…) we don't claim for an ode to ignorance, it's essential that we read different existing currents… (Paula, Rebrote)

Specifically, four main traditions are the most influential for the case studies of this research: Anarchism; Marxism; Feminism; and *Zapatismo*[102]. When bringing together these different political traditions, the *colectivos* build interesting theoretical-political amalgams that are unique and flexible. These currents have been influential not only at the collective level but also at the personal one. On the one hand, the groups have taken some features of these political bodies as a result of a collective process of study and reflection. On the other hand, the activists came across some of these traditions at some point of their lives and these encounters have shaped their personal political definitions. These two levels are not completely separate, conversely, they intersect and speak to each other. While each activist brings their own political perspective into the group, the group takes these individual inclinations, processes them, integrates them with other traditions and, consequently, it influences its members' political beliefs. The words of Berna reflect this intersection:

> …I think that our political perspective is nourished by the personal knowledge of several of us and from there we take the theoretical approaches that can be helpful in our political orientations and actions. They are not seen as finished truths and we decide, as a collective, whether we take them or not… (Berna, *JRA*)

Regarding this aspect, it should be noticed that the meaning and scope that the research participants give to these traditions is diverse. In some cases they see them as theoretical

[102] At the time of my fieldwork (2013/2014), I could see the *colectivos* being more influenced by the following traditions: *ECP* (Marxism, Anarchism, Zapatismo); *El Rebrote* (Feminism, Anarchism and Marxism), *Subversiones* (Zapatismo and Anarchism), *JRA* (Marxism, Anarchism, Zapatismo). During my feedback meetings held between December 2016 and February 2017, members from JRA, Subversiones and the former ECP recognized that Feminism has also become influential for their groups and personal lives.

bodies or systems of thought. In other cases they associate them mainly with the movements enacting the ideologies or political approaches. Sometimes they are talking about both theory and practice. The manifold understanding of these currents can be slightly confusing in analytical terms but it is a good representation of the blurry boundaries existing between radical political theory and radical political practice, since most of the radical theorizing is grounded in the experience of movements and communities in struggle.

In the following sections, the four political traditions revealed as most influential for the case studies will be explained in more detail.

5.6.1 Anarchism

As my fieldwork experience confirmed, all the *colectivos* I worked with acknowledge a strong connection to anarchist ideas and practices, agreeing with this tradition on a number of points. First, they envision a society free from authoritarian, coercive and hierarchical relations (Shantz, 2011). Second, they develop a shared political language that stresses resistance to capitalism, patriarchy, the state and all other forms of domination (Gordon, 2008). Third, they create horizontal, consensus-seeking and decentralised organising structures (Gordon, 2008). Fourth, they emphasize prefigurative politics: 'they are not content to wait either for elite-initiated reforms or for future "post-revolutionary" utopias. If social and individual freedom are to be expanded the time to start is today' (Shantz, 2011, p.14). Nonetheless, the proximity to these anarchist viewpoints and organizational principles does not entails a sense of belonging to the anarchist movement. On the contrary, the case studies are overtly critical of the way in which the anarchist movement has evolved in Latin America. They criticise, for example, the tendency in anarchist milieus to exclude people who do not follow the same aesthetics, lifestyles, clothing and musical taste. Likewise, they find problematic the short life of most anarchist collectives and their tendency to be sectarian and not engage in other networks beyond anarchist circles. Enrique puts it in this way: 'in the anarchism there is a tendency to speak exclusively with those who share the same ideology, and we don't feel comfortable with that approach' (Enrique, *JRA*). Enrique's words mirror the other activists' views. They all acknowledge the influence of anarchism on their own political practices, but are suspicious of the individualist strands present in

the movement and its potential sectarianism. Therefore, more than seeing anarchism as a full ideological package to be taken or left aside, the case studies only pick up the ideas and tools that they find useful for their original political projects. As Nico points out: 'to me, anarchism is a toolbox, it's not an ideology, a doctrine, I take many things from it that are useful for my everyday life, for my political ethics, but there are other things that I dismiss because they are not appropriate…' (Nico, *ECP*).

5.6.2 Marxism

The relationship of the *colectivos* with Marxism is similar. Unlike other anti-capitalist strands that fully dismiss Marxism, criticizing it for its allegedly authoritarian strategies and economic reductionism (Choat, 2016), the case studies in this research take a different stance. First of all, they acknowledge the powerful analysis and critique of capitalism developed by Marx and subsequent Marxist theorists and their applicability to the contemporary world. Accordingly, they are committed to study and understand the political economy of capitalism from a Marxist perspective. The members from *El Rebrote*, for example, collectively studied the Marxist theory of surplus value, in order to understand the work of Marxists feminists. If anarchism nourishes the *colectivos* with interesting organizational strategies and a strong critique of the State and representative politics, Marxism is pivotal in the understanding of class struggle and in the development of a radical critique of capitalism. As Cox and Nilsen (2014) point out, Marxism enables social movements to understand 'how the current phase of neoliberal capitalism is structured and how this structuring in turn plays into the hands of economic and political elites across the world' (p.15). Moreover, Marxism can also help in the identification of 'materially grounded opportunities for counter-hegemonic action' (Bieler and Morton, 2004, p.103).

Nonetheless, the engagement with Marxist tools of analysis is not mandatory in any of the *colectivos* studied. In *El Rebrote* and *JRA*, for example, the activists have studied Marxism and applied it to the analysis of their reality, whereas *Subversiones* and *ECP* have not discussed Marxism in their collective trainings. What is common in all groups, though, is the coexistence of activists who are more influenced by heterodox Marxism[103]

[103] Some Mexican activists, for example, claimed to be closer to the ideas of Open Marxism, especially to the work of John Holloway.

with others who find more inspiration in anarchism. Interestingly, this coexistence is not a source of conflict, on the contrary, both approaches seem to complement each other. Toti explains this symbiosis as follows: 'Richi, Pato, Gaby, they are closer to a social, community-based anarchism (…) Erick, Nico, myself, we are more Marxists, but not Leninists! And we bring our categories of analysis and methods to the politics of the group (…) we all learn from each other.' (Toti, *ECP*).

In the quote above, Toti separates Marxism from Leninism. This represents another important feature of the relationship between *colectivos* and Marxism. For the research participants, Marxism cannot be reduced to Leninism. Conversely, Marxism is seen as a broad theoretical corpus and political approach that has several trends, ranging from Leninism to more libertarian and autonomist traditions. Based on this understanding, they strongly reject Leninism and other types of orthodox Marxism, criticising their proposals regarding strategy and revolutionary organization. Accordingly, the groups reject the 'old anti-capitalist struggle of trade unions and of reformist and revolutionary parties' (Holloway, 2010c, p.912) promoted by Leninism, its vanguard-based understanding of politics and the emphasis placed on the dictatorship of the proletariat (see **Ch4**, section 4.4.5).

5.6.3 Feminism

As explained in the previous two sections, anarchism and Marxism are traditions that clearly influence the discourse and practice of the four *colectivos* analysed in this research. The case of feminism is slightly different because it is not explicitly embraced by all the collectives, although feminist concerns and values could be observed in many members from all the groups. For instance, section 4.3 in the preceding chapter (**Ch4**) explored how all the groups engage in the refusal of patriarchy, a standpoint that is deeply rooted in feminist thought. Likewise, section 5.5.2 of this chapter exemplified how the activists try to incorporate anti-patriarchal values in their everyday lives in order to achieve self-determination.

But, which aspects of feminism are being explored by the case studies? And which type(s) of feminism(s) are influencing them? Similar to the Marxist tradition, feminism cannot be understood as a single theory as it encompasses a number of approaches that are fundamentally different from each other. Nonetheless, various feminist trends share

some key features, providing a framework that is generally accepted (at least discursively) by the autonomous activists. Firstly, the research participants acknowledge and seek to challenge gender hierarchies. Secondly, they agree with the feminist challenge to what is taken for granted as normal, natural and desirable (Ramazanoglu, 1989). In this regard, they understand that these gender hierarchies are socially constructed and 'historically shaped by human social usage rather than simply predestined by God or nature' (Cott, 1987, p.4). Thirdly, they see feminism not only as a set of ideas but a political practice aimed at changing the world. This involves 'an acknowledgment and analysis of injustice; a vision of an alternative, even if inchoate; and a range of collective and individual actions to resist this injustice' (Maiguashca et al., 2016, p.39). Fourthly, the research participants are aware that the experiences of Latin American women are qualitatively different than of white women from the Global North. In light of these differences, they understand the importance of analysing the interactions between gender, race and class[104], so a more situated analysis of oppression and potential for emancipation can be achieved.

As described in the previous paragraph, many research participants embrace a number of general viewpoints that are shared amongst a diverse range of feminist strands. They are also able to distinguish between the different branches of feminism, feeling closer to radical, postcolonial, autonomous, Marxist and anarchist strands whilst rejecting the liberal and more institutionalized forms of feminism. However, the collective knowledge about feminism produced by the non-feminist *colectivos* is marginal in comparison to the feminists from *El Rebrote*[105]. As a feminist collective, *El Rebrote* develops a much stronger political proposal regarding women's liberation from patriarchy and it clearly takes a stance within the array of feminist traditions. More concretely, the activists from el *El Rebrote* take 'Latin American autonomous feminism' as their main political positioning.

As Falquet (2014) points out, to explain the autonomous feminism of Latin America and the Caribbean is an extremely difficult task: 'its elaboration is disperse, barely visible and poorly documented. In numerical terms, this current is a minority. It is integrated by

[104] Both intersectional (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins, 1990) and postcolonial feminism (Talpade Mohanti, 1984, 2003) have made significant contributions to these integral analyses.
[105] Although in the feedback meetings, members from both *JRA* and *Subversiones* indicated that due to their own internal processes in the last two years, they have embraced feminism in a much stronger way than what they did during my fieldwork period.

often informal and ephemeral groups, as well as by individual activists' (p.41). Even though *El Rebrote* develops a unique definition of autonomous feminism, the roots of this strand can be traced back in the nineties, when radical feminists from different Latin American countries articulated a strong critique of the direction that the feminist movement had taken in the region. They questioned the expropriation of feminism by patriarchal and capitalist institutions, such as NGOs and development organizations, attempting to co-opt, control and institutionalize women's movements (Bedregal, 2013). Alternatively, they shaped a radical feminism, whose main features were: a) autonomy from the funding and command of institutions (Aldunate, 2009); b) analysis intersecting the dimensions of sex, class and race; c) strong critique of neoliberal capitalism and neo-colonialism (Falquet, 2014); d) commitment with a politics from below (for a definition of politics from below, go to section 3 of this chapter).

The feminists from *El Rebrote* draw on these dimensions to develop their own definition of feminism. As part of my militant ethnography, I ran a participatory workshop with the activists, seeking to frame the understanding of autonomous feminism. From this collective reflection, they developed their own characterization. For them, being an autonomous feminist means to refuse patriarchy, neo-colonialism and capitalism and to create processes of autonomy, both at the personal and collective level. Autonomous feminism strives towards the transformation of the existing world and the creation of a horizontal society. It is an ethical proposal that does not only seek the liberation of women, it starts from women but it aims to be extended to the whole of humankind. It emphasises the creation of women-only spaces as a way to recuperate their autonomy and political strength. It opposes the State and its state-centred institutions and it refuses to be co-opted by NGOs and funding agencies. It is a feminism from below, community-based and committed to the popular classes: 'Unlike other feminists who don't develop this aspect, we take very seriously the class consciousness (…) that's something that we always keep in mind, as feminists we are organized against patriarchy, but also against the economic regime and the class system' (Fabiola, *El Rebrote*). Autonomous feminism understands the importance of political alliances and it is open to engagement with leftist and anti-capitalist networks as long as the political actors involved show respect for their feminist agenda. Finally, autonomous feminists are committed to the socio-political struggles taking place in their territory. This includes the resistances in Latin America,

and more importantly, the local struggles happening in their own cities and neighbourhoods.

5.6.4 Zapatismo

Finally, the Mexican *Zapatismo* is the fourth tradition influencing the political definitions adopted by the case studies. **Ch3** (section 3.4.2) already explained the origins and main features of EZLN and its relevance to Latin American autonomous politics. In line with the account presented in **Ch3**, the empirical findings of this research confirm the influential role of *Zapatismo* in movements and groups seeking autonomy and emancipation. As expected, the Mexican *colectivos* are much closer to *Zapatismo* than the Chilean ones. Nonetheless, it is important to mention that many Chilean activists see in the Zapatista struggle an important source of inspiration for their own political discourse and praxis.

But what is *Zapatismo*? As Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos has expressed, 'the EZLN (…) has been overtaken by Zapatismo' (García Márquez and Pombo, 2004, p.5). Zapatismo does not only refer to the revolutionary army defending the Zapatista communities in Chiapas. It is an ethos, a political strategy and an approach to politics striving towards dignity, justice, democracy and liberty for all (Khasnabish, 2008). Continuing with Khasnabish (2008), *Zapatismo* can be understood as:

> …a project driven by a desire to create a 'word where many worlds fit', a project that by necessity has as its pillars a fundamental rejection of neoliberal capitalism, an equally fundamental commitment to a radically democratic practice, and a foundational belief in the importance of dignity, creativity and hope. (p.125)

By breaking down the connection between revolution and state control (Holloway, 2002b) and by rejecting vanguard-oriented political strategies (Esteva, 2005), Zapatismo challenges the tradition of revolutionary thought, calling instead for new ways of doing politics (Holloway, 2002b). What is interesting from this alternative political approach is that it does not operate as an ideology. On the contrary, Zapatistas are reluctant to 'commit themselves to a 'vision' or blueprint of how the world should be transformed' (Tormey, 2006, p.150). As Subcomandante Marcos (n.d.) has said: 'Zapatismo is not an

ideology or a finished doctrine. It's an intuition, something so open and flexible that it really occurs in all places'[106]. Despite the fact that Zapatistas have never claimed any special role within social movements, their influence in local and global struggles is indisputable. Additionally, Zapatismo has made an important contribution to 'theory regarding autonomous political practices and revolutionary struggle' (Callahan, 2005, p.8), dimension that is particularly relevant for this research. These aspects have been acknowledged by many research participants, who see in Zapatismo much more than a simple movement:

> In our generation, Zapatismo has been essential, both in political and personal terms (…) Zapatistas have had an impressive capacity to theorise not only about their struggle but about the struggle against capital. All the theoretical and analytical work developed by them has helped other experiences to reflect about themselves and their own political practice, and to feel more confident in embracing their new political languages… (Mina, *JRA*)

In this quote, Mina stresses the influence of *Zapatismo* at a political and personal level. She also remarks on the importance of Zapatista analysis and how it has contributed to the growth of other autonomous projects. Chilean movements are not an exception, and they have closely observed the Zapatista journey, finding inspiration in this process. Although in the interviews and workshops the Chilean activists don't often talk explicitly about Zapatismo, many informal conversations captured their interest and admiration for the Mexican struggle. They feel especially attracted to the Zapatista critique of state-centred politics, its understanding and enactment of autonomy and the commitment to a politics from below. In the case of *El Rebrote*, they acknowledge the Zapatistas' efforts to question the patriarchal culture predominant in the indigenous communities of Chiapas, although they still find traces of male dominance in Zapatista everyday politics. Although Chilean autonomous activists do not believe in the reproduction of revolutionary models from outside, they see *Zapatismo* as a practical example of autonomy from which they can learn: 'I like *Zapatismo* because it is a concrete experience, the theory they have built is based on practice and it has considered their own local context. I feel we need more *Zapatismo* here, not copying it, but learning from it, taking some elements from it…' (Rocio, *ECP*). In line with their critique of

[106] Video Interview with Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos [online]. Accessed on the 4th of January, 2016. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PDLssf72C3Y&list=PLE8F91BA575051060

fixed ideologies discussed early in this section, the research participants find in *Zapatismo* an inspiration because rather than imposing ideological dogmas, it forges a politics developed from the experiences of the communities themselves.

If for the Chilean activists *Zapatismo* has been a source of inspiration, for the Mexicans it is a tradition that has changed their lives. *Zapatismo* appears in all the biographies of the Mexican activists interviewed for this research. It's in their hearts because it restored their hope in humankind and it awakened their dreams for justice and dignity: 'my heart is Zapatista and *JRA* is the space in which I can honour some principles learnt from *Zapatismo*: autonomy, horizontality, the (commitment) 'to lead by obeying', to fight for a world where many worlds fit.' (Gaby, *JRA*). As Gaby points out, *Zapatismo* has inspired several political values and practices undertaken by her collective. The same applies to *Subversiones*, which has been very close to *Zapatismo* and has tried to learn from this tradition as much as possible. The active participation of activists from *Subversiones* in the *Escuelita Zapatista* (The Little Zapatista School) is an example of this commitment to Zapatismo. Held in 2013 and 2014, the *Escuelita Zapatista* was a one week event in which Zapatista communities opened their doors to activists and community organizers from around the world with the aim of sharing their experiences of autonomy and their struggle for freedom. Most of the members from *Subversiones* attended this event and described their participation as life-changing and pivotal for redefining the structure of their own collective:

> …the *Escuelita Zapatista* was very important for us. We realized that we were not even close to the idea of autonomy (…) when we saw how they are resisting, all the political, social, economic costs of being in resistance, we decided to learn from that experience and reorganize the structure of the group… (Ita, *Subversiones*)

Not taken as a framework to imitate but as a valuable and unique experience to learn from, *Zapatismo* has been essential for the political praxis of the two Mexican *colectivos* analysed in this research. Their recent involvement in the *Escuelita Zapatista* is just one example of the importance given to Zapatismo and of the groups' desire to learn from this tradition.

5.7 Concluding Remarks

This chapter has presented four interconnected dimensions that together shape the understanding of autonomy not only as refusal but also as a creative force. By engaging with: a) a politics from below; b) an alternative understanding of power; c) prefiguration and d) the goal of self-determination, the research participants have built alternative political frameworks which creatively channel their rejection of capitalism, patriarchy and state-centred politics. Drawing on different theoretical and political traditions, but mostly on their own political experience, the *colectivos* transform autonomy into an affirmative and living category. Here, their anger and rejection of domination moves towards the creation of a set of political orientations and practices seeking to change the world.

But what is unique from their approach to social change? Or coming back to the main question of this research, what can we learn about the politics of autonomy from the study of Latin American *colectivos*? First of all, the politics of autonomy believes in the transformation of the world from below. Rather than handing over their power to the State and its institutions and placing all their expectations in top-down solutions, autonomous activists choose a different path. They decide to take this power into their own hands and put their efforts into the creation of their own political experiments at a local scale. Autonomy, then, emphasizes the power of the communities and it defends a politics built from the grassroots and for the grassroots. Secondly, the quest for autonomy rejects the notion of power as a thing that is outside and far away from the activists' lives. On the one hand, the research participants acknowledge that power is present in their organizations and are aware of the many challenges that they face in their struggle against dynamics based on 'power-over' (Holloway, 2010a). On the other hand, by claiming for a 'power from below' or a 'popular power', they emphasize the potential of the communities to develop their own social and political dynamics in the here and now. This leads us to the third pivotal feature of autonomy: autonomy is prefigurative. By embracing the idea of prefiguration, the *colectivos* are not waiting for a revolutionary vanguard which will eventually implement the desired changes 'from above'. Instead, they try to build in the present the practices and projects that they would like to see in the imagined new society.

Autonomy is also understood as collective and personal self-determination. At the collective level, it refers to the groups' capacity to decide the course of their projects with independence from external institutions. At the personal level, it entails the challenging of patriarchal and neoliberal subjectivities by committing to everyday practices that are consistent with their political values.

All these viewpoints are partly informed by an amalgam of political traditions, being Marxism, anarchism, feminism and Zapatismo the most influential ones to the *colectivos*. Although the groups acknowledge the relevance and influence of previous bodies of political thought and action, they also emphasize the need for flexible and ever changing political approaches, based on the needs of their territories and on their own political praxis.

By stressing the dual character of autonomy (as refusal and as creation), this chapter (**Ch5**) and the previous one (**Ch4**) have examined how the politics of autonomy is understood and defined by Latin American *colectivos*. As these chapters focused mostly on the principles and political definitions guiding the groups, the details on how this approach is put into practice has not been fully captured here. The next section takes on this challenge by exploring in detail how autonomous politics is enacted by the case studies.

SECTION TWO: ENACTING AUTONOMY

In Section One of my empirical findings I examined the hallmarks of the politics of autonomy and how it is understood and defined by Latin American *colectivos*. I suggested the dual character of autonomy: on the one hand, it is expressed as refusal of the main systems of domination (see **Ch4**). On the other hand, it seeks to create an alternative politics able to challenge those hegemonic systems (see **Ch5**). Section Two continues with the endeavour of analysing autonomous politics but the focus is slightly different this time.

In this section I attempt to explore how the creative understanding of autonomy detailed in **Ch5** is put into practice by Latin American *colectivos*. More specifically, I analyse the main principles, strategies and practices that are distinctive of autonomous groups, providing a detailed account of their organizational dynamics and structures. Moreover, I examine the main problems and difficulties encountered in the practice of autonomous politics, in order to draw some lessons about the potential and challenges of this political approach.

Developing an exhaustive analysis of the praxis of autonomous politics was not an easy task. With the vast amount of information gathered during a full year of militant ethnography, I was able to identify several dimensions shaping the practice of autonomy. Five of them stand out: horizontality, affective politics, *autogestión,* popular education and political networks. These dimensions usually intertwine with each other and they are all pivotal features in the 'doing' of autonomous politics. Nonetheless, it is my thesis that horizontality is the fuel of autonomy and the umbrella under which the other dimensions operate. I argue that horizontality provides the ethical framework needed by the groups so they can enact a deeply antiauthoritarian and radically democratic politics. It is also the backbone of autonomy as it provides the collectives with an organizational and strategic framework that makes autonomous politics a possible and tangible alternative.

In light of the above arguments, I have given special attention to the analysis of horizontality in Section Two. This emphasis is observed in the three chapters comprising this section: 'Enacting Autonomy' (**Ch6**), 'Horizontality: The Fuel of Autonomous Politics' (**Ch7**) and 'Challenges of Horizontality' (**Ch8**). It is important to clarify,

though, that the other key dimensions mentioned in the previous paragraph are also examined in these chapters. **Ch6**, for example, provides a detailed account of affective politics, *autogestión*, popular education and political networks. It also introduces the notion of horizontality, setting the grounds for the following two chapters. **Ch7** explores the principles, structures, strategies and methods embraced by the groups in their attempts to enact horizontality. Finally, **Ch8** focuses on the main problems, difficulties and challenges of horizontality.

CHAPTER SIX:

THE 'DOING' OF AUTONOMY

6.1 Introduction

In the previous two chapters (**Ch4** and **Ch5**) I explored the definitions and viewpoints of autonomy by Latin American *colectivos* and identified the hallmarks of this type of politics. This chapter opens a new section (**Section Two**) focused on the political praxis of autonomy. Here, I continue to acknowledge the importance of 'understandings' discussed in the previous part (**Section One**) but I will now focus my attention on the 'doing' of autonomous politics. In this chapter, therefore, I map out the main features of the praxis of autonomous politics: horizontality; affective politics; *autogestión*; popular education; and political networks.

Firstly, I begin by introducing the notion of horizontality and how it frames the political practice of *colectivos*. Secondly, I expand on the dimension of affective politics, analysing how 'affects' play an important role in the emerging social relations forged by these groups. Thirdly, I present the dimension of *autogestión* and how the case studies have reinterpreted it according to their own political projects. I then analyse the research participants' engagement with traditions of popular education and collective processes of knowledge production. Finally, I explore the alliance-building approach followed by *colectivos* and I will then close the chapter by drawing some concluding remarks about the overall practise of autonomous politics. .

6.2 Horizontality

The Spanish word *horizontalidad*, translated into English as horizontality or horizontalism, is essential to the understanding of autonomous politics. This notion articulates a number of organizational principles and social relations developed by many autonomous social movements and collectives across the globe. The innovative political

experiments taking place in Latin America, Rojava, Spain, Greece[107] or the Occupy movements scattered throughout the world, are just a few examples of this political tendency (Sitrin, 2012). Likewise, this concept plays an important role in the definitions and practices of my research case studies both in Mexico and Chile. According to the research participants, horizontality refers to the process of collective thinking and doing that stimulates the agency and participation of all the group members as part of a non-hierarchical and non-authoritarian approach:

> I see *horizontalidad* as a collective thinking and doing in which we all have the same importance, the same involvement in the decision making, because at the end we decide how much we want to contribute to the collective (…) we are all at the same level because neither hierarchical positions nor verticality exist in here. (Erick, *JRA*)

As explained by Erick, horizontality implies striving for the development of flat planes of communication in which decentralized, non-hierarchical and consensual decision making processes and projects could take place. Accordingly, and in line with the participants' refusal of state-centred politics (already discussed in **Ch4**), horizontality explicitly challenges the top-down structures of states, parties and formal organizations and their vertical and hierarchical ways of relating and organizing (Sitrin, 2006; 2012; Graeber, 2002). Andrea, for instance, refers to her group's rejection of the vertical structures of Chilean political parties:

> …the parties' pyramidal structure is something that we all reject in our group, all these hierarchies of president, of having only some roles, some people deciding. That is why we want to be horizontal, being able to make our own decisions, not allowing anybody to come and *'que nos pasen máquina'*[108], telling us what to do (…) we don't want to be part of that politics, we want to create something different… (Andrea, Rebrote)

[107] Just to mention some examples: Zapatistas in Mexico, the workers-run factories and popular secondary schools projects in Argentina, the *Democracia Real Ya*! movements in Spain, the Greek urban movements gathered around the Athens neighbourhood of Exarchia or the autonomous project in Rojava, northern Syria.

[108] '*Pasar máquina'* is a popular Chilean expression literally meaning 'a machine passing over something'. In political terms it refers to a political practice, usually undertaken by traditional political actors, in which attempts to set their own agenda and decisions are made through subtle and unscrupulous strategies of manipulation, boycotting and persuasion.

Andrea's words are a clear example of the rejection of any chains of command trying to 'tell us what to do, mak[ing] us the object of the decision making of others, whoever those others may be.' (Holloway, 2010b, p.43). By contrast, the case studies stand against centralized decision making. In doing so they commit to collective and consensual alternatives that acknowledge the relevance of all the members during decision making processes: 'All the decisions made in the group require from the consent of all of us, nobody '*pasa máquina'*[109] to other members (…) or has more power than others when we need to decide something…' (Cony, *ECP*).

Consequently, horizontality strives to create new relationships in which all the participants are heard and have an active role in the group's decisions. The importance given to the development of horizontal spaces of decision making is based on the conviction that people should not be divided between rulers and ruled or between thinkers and doers. In an attempt to recuperate their own self-governing capacities (see **Ch4**, section 4.4.2), autonomous activists refuse to follow traditional party structures, even from the left; opting, instead, for less specialized bodies in which thinking and doing can be developed equally by all the group's members. This view is found in the comprehensive definition of horizontality developed by JRA:

> Horizontality is the permanent struggle among us to achieve the null division between rulers and ruled; the rotative and revocable character of roles and tasks; the socialization of knowledge, resources and information; the struggle against hierarchies (age, gender, experience, knowledge); the possibility that anyone can perform any task or assume any role without more condition than her/his will and the possibility that everyone can bring their words into the group… (Document *'Otra Forma de Hacer Política', JRA*)

As pointed out by *JRA*, horizontality is seen more as a struggle than a fully achieved goal. This approach resembles the conclusions of different scholars (Sitrin, 2006, 2012, Zibechi, 2012; Gutiérrez, 2011; Ouviña, 2011; Holloway, 2010b) working in the field of Latin American autonomous social movements, who understand horizontality 'not as an absolute rule but as a constant struggle against verticality.' (Holloway, 2010b, p.44). Ouviña (2011) notably summarises this idea in the following paragraph:

> …there is no horizontality in pure form, but several and fluctuating attempts to approach to it. It is a horizon towards which you never fully arrive (…) autonomous collectives and movements develop acts of horizontality, specially relationships and forms-processes that prefigure it without ever reaching it integrally. Horizontality for the struggle is like the oxygen for human beings and nature: something that we cannot live without. But the air we breathe is also contaminated (…) horizontality, even though it is essential as an ethical value, under no circumstances has to become fetishized, a remedy for all evils. (Ouviña, 2011, p.277)

In this regard, there seems to be agreement amongst the *colectivos* that horizontality cannot be decreed and it does not work in absolute terms. This view is consistent with the groups' critique of fixed ideologies and dogmatic programs (see section 5.6, **Ch5**). More than a dogma, horizontality is always a flexible and dynamic process in continuous creation. As Enrique argues:

> Horizontality is a process, we can't guarantee it, it goes up, it goes down, it changes, we are never fully in horizontality, we are not a horizontal group because we wrote that in a document and we decreed it, it's a process, we are inclined towards horizontality but sometimes it doesn't work and we go back again… (Enrique, *JRA*)

Deciding to walk the path towards horizontality implies not only taking this notion as a discursive stance but also embracing it through the deployment of a series of political principles and organizational strategies. These will be designed to prevent situations where individuals or groups are placed above others in a hierarchical structure (Day, 2005) or in which formalised leadership structures could emerge (Newman, 2010; Holloway, 2010b). Thus, horizontality is not a distant horizon which we could access after a macro revolution, but concrete practices in the present. These practices aim to shape the actions of the groups in resistance (Ouviña, 2011), anticipating in the here and now a better and different world. Drawing on a prefigurative standpoint (see section 5.4, **Ch5** and **Ch3**), the *colectivos* explore different methods and strategies aimed at bringing horizontality into their current projects and lives:

> If we think in a prefigurative way, about how these new organizational experiments are anticipating the hoped new society, we can't just wait for the

> revolution and only then to start thinking of methods from zero, right? There are concrete practices from everyday life and more specific ones developed by collectives, for example, which will become key tools for building expansively an alternative society. (Mina, *JRA*)

When asked about the meaning of horizontality, most of the research participants link it with internal organizational process. Nevertheless, the heart of horizontality goes beyond the practices within the *colectivos* and it spreads over other social dimensions. Manu, for example, believes that horizontality entails to challenge the hierarchical relationships between movements and the popular sectors. In this way, they prevent the reproduction of dynamics commonly found in revolutionary avant-gardes: '…we want to create in the popular world, but by considering ourselves part of it, you know? Practicing horizontality with the people we work with…' (Manu, *ECP*). Likewise, Nico stresses the importance of not replicating formal educational settings if the goal is enacting horizontality in their learning projects:

> Horizontality is not only an organizational principle but a political horizon too. We criticise the hierarchical role played by the teachers in all the educational levels, so we are not going to replicate that. That is why we aim to be horizontal when we develop our workshops (…) and at the personal level I want horizontality to be pivotal in my life, avoiding hierarchical relationships, this is very important… (Nico, *ECP*)

As expressed by Nico, embracing horizontality demands high levels of personal consistency. Horizontality requests from the activists to be constantly self-critical about their practices, which results in important changes in their ways of relating and acting. Horizontality thus becomes a profound way of being.

In the case of the internal groups' dynamics, there seem to be an explicit set of strategies aimed at enacting horizontality. Nonetheless, 'declaring something horizontal does not make it so.' (Sitrin, 2012, p.75). Striving for horizontality does not mean that all power issues, subtle hierarchies and inequalities will be gone. On the contrary, engaging with a horizontal approach implies the need to deal with important challenges and problems at the political, organizational and interpersonal level. As already indicated at the beginning of this section (Section 2), I consider horizontality the fuel of autonomous politics. Given the importance of this dimension in the enactment of autonomy, **Ch7** and

Ch8 will detail how horizontality is put into practice and what are the main difficulties and challenges experienced during the process. But before that, in the following subsections I will present another four elements shaping the practice of autonomy in Latin America.

6.3 Affective Politics

If horizontality can be considered crucial in the enactment of autonomy and the creation of new emancipatory relationships, the practice of what has been called '*política afectiva'* or 'affective politics' is an essential prerequisite (Sitrin, 2012). The notion of '*política afectiva'* became popular amongst several Argentinean autonomous movements during the popular uprising in 2001/2002, spreading quickly towards other Latin American political experiments as an attempt to explain the role of 'affects' or feelings in the emerging social relations forged by these collectives (Zibechi, 2012; Motta, 2013b; Sitrin, 2006, 2012; Dinerstein, 2015). Drawing on her militant ethnography with autonomous movements in Argentina, Sitrin translated '*política afectiva'* as 'affective politics', meaning a politics based on 'affection and love, a relational emotion based on one's own feelings but not separated from the group or collective.' (Sitrin, 2012, p.89). Likewise, my own militant ethnography concurs with Sitrin's findings inasmuch as creating affective, loving and supportive relationships are crucial for the horizontal praxis performed by the *colectivos*. As Mina comments:

> …the collective fulfils this need of belonging to a community that not only cares about political stuff but about growing affects too (…) here the political acquires other connotations in which the affects, the emotions are really important, especially now when there are less social mediations softening the impacts of capitalism (…) the *colectivo* has had the capacity to adapt to these new conditions through a *política afectiva* seeking everybody's wellbeing, although with many contradictions (…) and problems… (Mina, *JRA*)

Mina's words are a well-articulated synthesis of the positioning of the research participants both in Mexico and Chile. They see their militancy as an affective and embodied experience and the *colectivos* they belong to, as privileged spaces for the flourishing of affective ties. In line with their refusal of capitalism (see section 4.2, **Ch4**),

this understanding of militancy and political organization challenges the neoliberal subjectivities dominant in the present. Furthermore, this approach clearly differs with the patriarchal tenor of traditional party-type structures (see section 4.3, **Ch4**), in which love and affection play no leading role-or not role at all- in their political practices. Based on their own experiences, some activists with backgrounds in partisan groups confirm this view by contrasting the pragmatic and formal character of their former organizations with the friendlier and caring environment found in their current collectives. Fabiola, for example, compares her experience in *El Rebrote* with her involvement in a revolutionary political party in which she had previously taken part

> …there are huge differences (…) in the party everything was super serious, the meetings were formal and commanded by some people, every action had to contribute to a certain political goal (…) [but] here we are friends, it's a beautiful space in which we can laugh, talk, learn, and it's not only a theoretical learning, about feminism or other stuff, it's learning at a personal level too… (Fabiola, *El Rebrote*)

Similarly, an activist from Mexico stresses the differences between his current group and the party in which he used to participate several years ago: '…it's a despicable way of doing politics in which you have to carry a knife between your teeth and watch your back; in *JRA*, instead, there is no competition, I've never felt unsafe, if you make a mistake, the hardest thing that can happen is to be challenged frankly and directly by your peers…' (Pablo, *JRA*, Mexico). Likewise, Centli sees in his group a place in which the members are able to listen and to understand each other in spite of the differences: '…in other spaces they destroy each other politically, discursively, you're in your position and you can't get out of it (…) whereas here there are discussions but we listen and try to understand, despite the differences we try to create a dialogue…' (Centli, *JRA*)

Therefore, while traditional politics, including left-wing sectors, '…see the organization solely as an instrument to achieve goals' that will bring about social change (Zibechi, 2012, p.25); autonomous politics tries to go beyond this instrumental approach. Drawing on their prefigurative understanding of social change (see section 5.4, **Ch5**), autonomous movements see the organization itself as a place in which new social relationships based on love and trust can be created in the present (Sitrin, 2012). In this context, the case studies are distinguished by developing interpersonal dynamics based on friendship,

comradeship and affection. They see their peers as friends and '*compañeros'* or *'compañeras'*, which means much more than being only political associates. Although they acknowledge that it is unlikely to build deep friendship relationships with all the members of their groups, they insist in developing caring and affective bonds, refusing to reproduce instrumental and impersonal job-type relations. As Flux points out:

> There are strong friendships in the group. When you are not close friend with someone at least there is companionship, we are not only work-buddies, we share a life vision and at the same time we decided to participate in a project, that makes us '*compañeros'* more than colleagues. (Flux, *Subversiones*)

According to the participants, the decision to work in an autonomous political project is based on the genuine intention to change the world and live differently. This desire is shared with the rest of the activist community, creating a common ground that strengthens their affective ties. Gizze, for example, puts it in this way: 'I don't know if it's because we've been together for so many years or because of the affinity, but many of them are like my brothers, they are family, I love them so much and they are so important for me, they are part of my life.' (Gizze, *JRA*). Although initially the relationships are based upon political affinity, with time they usually become much deeper. As Gizze's quote shows, it is common to see the activists developing strong bonds of sisterhood/brotherhood and emulating family-style links (Zibechi, 2012). Developing this affective dynamics is pivotal to the praxis of autonomy inasmuch as it contributes to the enactment of horizontality (see this chapter, section 6.2, **Ch7** and **Ch8**) and to the performance of a prefigurative politics from below (see **Ch5**).

In the particular case of *El Rebrote*, the feminist activists drew upon their past collective experience and decided to incorporate friendship and affection as core aspects of their political practice. They were clear that friendship could not be forced, but when they set up the new group, they agreed to remain as a small group in order to create the conditions for the emergence of friendship and *sororidad* (sisterhood in English):

> …we wanted to be a group of friends this time. When the group is too big, you forget the person who is behind the militant; that happened in La Ruptura, people experienced very hard situations and we didn't provide any support. That is why we decided to have a small group this time (…) although friendship is something

> spontaneous, some girls get closer to others, not because we said we wanted to be friends, it's going to be mandatory. (Andrea, *Rebrote*)

The importance given by these activists to affection, friendship and *sororidad* are in line with the feminist standpoint of understanding politics both as a personal and structural matter. *Sororidad*[110] refers to the creation of friendship between feminist women who intend to create new realities in order to free themselves from the oppressive societal structures. As Lagarde points out '…*sororidad* is subversive: it implies friendship between those who have been created as enemies by the patriarchal world (…) with sorority we can disarticulate both the woman-woman historical enmity and the patriarchal oppression between genders (man-woman).' (Lagarde, 2012, p.486)[111]. Accordingly, the creation of affective and caring relationships within this feminist group does not only provide sustainability to the organizational project but it becomes an important element in the goal of achieving social change from the micro to the macro levels.

However, it is important to clarify that embracing this approach does not mean that the *colectivos* are free from interpersonal problems and difficulties. It is common, for example, to see some conflicts arising from the clash between the activists' personalities, especially between members with dominating traits. For example, one thing that commonly triggers interpersonal tensions is the harsh criticism incurred by some members who emphasise the weaknesses more than the strengths of their peers: '…sometimes we start criticising each other instead of acknowledging the good things (…) we start with the 'but'. Obviously it's much harder in this way for those receiving the comments…' (Toti, *ECP*). In other situations, even if the activists criticise the role of the whole group without targeting specific people, this usually activates the reaction of other members, who feel offended by these comments, interpreting them as personal attacks or as a lack of recognition of their work.

The deterioration of interpersonal relations, especially in the older groups, is another challenge in the enactment of affective politics. With more than a decade of life, *JRA* provides the best example for this issue. In order to survive as a collective, they have

[110] A similar idea is found in black feminism's works advocating for a 'love-politics'. This 'love-politics' seeks to transcend the self and producing affective political communities that advance a radical conception of the public sphere (Nash, 2013).
[111] Author's translation from Spanish

been forced to find creative solutions to several interpersonal problems that have emerged throughout the group's existence. As Abraham reveals:

> …lately there has been a process of deterioration of the interpersonal relations. These differences are not political at all; they are the product of so many years of working together, there are things in which we keep clicking but there are also other things that are more difficult to deal with… (Abraham, *JRA*)

In practice, all these sources of conflict jeopardise the sustainability of the *colectivos* and their consistency with the principles of affective politics. Well aware of this danger, the groups have created a number of strategies aimed at resolving these disputes and learning from their experiences. In the case of *ECP*, for instance, in addition to the commitment to hold regular meetings and assemblies, the members get together in what they call 'sessions of self-education'. They are carried out every two or three months, providing a powerful learning space in which the participants can also share their subjective worlds and address different interpersonal issues:

> We address serious topics in the self-education sessions (…) it's possible to challenge others face to face (…) but we also discuss how should we relate to each other; we say openly the things that bother us, people being late, for example, and thanks to these practices we achieve the goal of looking after the space and the fraternity of the group… (Nico, *ECP*)

Likewise, *JRA* includes in its annual evaluation and in its intermediate projects' evaluations a whole section about the subjective dimensions of the work already done. By using participatory methods, they reflect about their emotional well-being and how they felt in the activities performed throughout the year. As a consequence, it is not unusual for some unresolved interpersonal issues to come to the surface, giving the activists the opportunity to confront these problems, listening at the other part and learning from the experience in order to prevent future misunderstandings. Additionally, both *ECP* and *JRA* deploy similar strategies when they need to find prompt solutions to interpersonal conflicts or when it is perceived that a member is emotionally unwell or has been distant from the group. They have temporary commissions, usually integrated by two activists, who approach the member(s) who is / are in conflict with others or feeling unwell. The aim is to help the people in the conflict resolution or channelling the information with the rest of the group, so they can collectively assess what can be done

in order to support the member(s) in question. Based on her own experience in a previous European collective, an activist from *JRA* highlights the importance of these procedures, warning us about the risks of neglecting the personal and interpersonal dimensions of the political practice:

> I like the tools implemented by *JRA*, if there is conflict then a commission goes and speaks with the person, discussing personal issues too. I remember when I participated in this organization in Berlin, a *compañero* committed suicide and nobody of the group knew why he did that and what he was going through… (María, *JRA*)

Seeking support through a co-counselling session was another strategy employed by *JRA* as a way to overcome a serious interpersonal conflict within the group: '…we met with this psychologist who had experience in political groups and we externalized everything we were living in personal terms, reflecting how to support each other in order to overcome our problems…' (Gizze, *JRA*).The co-counselling, understood as a non-hierarchical space in which activists are able 'to work through their emotions' (Brown and Pickerill, 2009, p.32), proved to be very useful in helping *JRA*'s activists to assertively verbalize their emotions, learn from the crisis and sustain their political activism.

Subversiones also takes on the challenge of nourishing the interpersonal relations within the group. In 2015, they ran an internal workshop called: 'Listening: How is our heart?' The aim of this session was to open a space of dialogue and listening in which the members could express their feelings, needs and suggestions for building a loving political space. Finally, with a different format and approach, *El Rebrote* stresses the prevention of interpersonal problems by incorporating a series of activities aimed at strengthening the bonds of friendship and sisterhood, such as recreational walks in natural landscapes and practising physical activities together at least once a week.

Overall, these strategies seek to develop safer spaces in which every activist can freely express her/his opinions and feelings, knowing that the group actually cares about them. By engaging in a more affectionate approach to politics, the case studies have learnt the importance of developing 'supportive spaces for emotional reflexivity' (Brown and Pickerill, 2009, p.33) as a way to boost the quality of the collective work. But beyond that, affective politics invites us to truly love the world we live in, along with the

compañeros-as who fight for building a better one: 'our work is based on love, in the quest for a better world, in wishing to live well and help to improve people's lives, there is so much heart in our politics…' (Samadhi, *Subversiones*) Or as Dinerstein argues:

> *Política afectiva* is a way of transforming the world by connecting with our emotions about what is wrong, and fight against the rationalisation of political action that distance ourselves from our humanity and dignity. Affective politics is informed by a particular form of love that (…) is based on the power in each other (…) this love for the other is not an externally compulsory moral imperative of solidarity with the neighbour. It is internally compelling (…) an empowering ethics of commitment. (Dinerstein, 2015, p.139)

6.4 Reshaping the notion of *autogestión*

Autogestión is another key concept embedded in the practice of autonomous politics. This Spanish and French word comes from the Greek *'autós',* meaning self or same and the Latin *'gestio',* meaning managing. It has been usually translated into English as self-management, although more evocative translations would be self-gestation, self-creation or self-provision, that is to say, 'to be *self-reliant* and *self-determining*' (Vieta, 2014, p.783, [italics in original]).

In the context of a collective of people living in a capitalist society, *autogestión* embodies the desire for building something different than the waged labour system, in which people can free themselves from the cage of the capital-labour relation and can stop spending their lives producing value for others (Vieta, 2014). Drawing on anarchist and heterodox Marxist traditions, one well-accepted understanding of *autogestión* refers to the exploration of collective forms of organization based on non-exploitative social relations, in which the division between manual and intellectual work is abolished because all the associated workers, without a boss, lead the production process (Rodríguez and Ciolli, 2011).The Argentinean case of workers' occupation and recuperation of factories which began in the late nineties and expanded during and after the 2001 crisis, is a powerful contemporary example of the revitalization of productive *autogestión* that puts 'working-class autonomy onto the agenda of urban rebellion' (Dinerstein, 2015, p.130). Workers' and rural cooperatives, community enterprises,

neighbourhood assemblies, barter networks, media groups and art collectives (Sitrin, 2012), are other Latin American experiences embracing *autogestión* in their attempts to democratise the 'economic realm at the micro-level of the productive enterprise' (Vieta, 2014, p.796).

But the notion of *autogestión* does not only refer to the economic realm. Broader definitions understand it as attempts to achieve radical transformation, both economic and political, that refuse elitist political management. As an alternative, these projects prioritise people's self-management of their own matters and without intermediaries (Hudson, 2010). Or as Rofinelli et al. (2011) suggest, *autogestión* refers to the experience of the popular sectors applying the principles of autonomous and democratic participation to their own economic, cultural and political praxis. In this regard, *autogestión* contains the productivity component but it is not limited to this as it implies self-management at a social, political and technical level too (Peixoto, 2004). The aim, then, is to build non-exploitative, equal and supportive relationships on the grounds of direct democracy (Rofinelly et al., 2011).

As discussed in **Ch5** (section 5.5.2), the *colectivos* I worked with have not prioritised the development of productive initiatives yet. However, they do engage with the idea of *autogestión*, reshaping and reinterpreting it according to their own political projects. Closer to the broader understanding of *autogestión* already sketched in the previous paragraph, the research participants elaborate a threefold understanding of *autogestión*: *autogestión* as a principle, as a strategy and as a horizon. As a guiding principle, it refers to the *colectivos*' capacity to create and manage their own resources, following a horizontal approach and trying to prefigure concrete practices of self-determination in the present. *JRA* puts it in this way:

> *Autogestión* is our collective action, without separation between intellectual and manual work, it's the action of a collective that thinks and performs. It's the horizontal division of work wherein many equally commit and collectively work on the activities, from their design and planning to the implementation and evaluation. *Autogestión* is not only economic independence but the self-management of all our resources and needs in a collective way. (Document '*Otra Forma de Hacer Política'*)

Even if the research participants have not tried yet to develop collective economic production, they agree with co-operatives and workers-run factories regarding: a) the non-division of labour between intellectual and manual work; b) the commitment to horizontal structures and, c) the implementation of consensus-based decision making. As Sitrin (2012, p.10) states, '*autogestión* is a practice based not only in 'the what', but in 'the how''. It is not only concerned of the outcomes of the groups, but of the entire process of managing independent spaces and striving for economic and political autonomy. That is why *autogestión* cannot be analysed separately from horizontality and consensus decision-making, neither from anti-capitalist values. They are all interweaved components shaping an alternative political path. Nico summarises the interrelation between these elements as follows:

> People think that *autogestión* is merely about self-funding your projects, but it goes further than that, it's about the ways in which you design the project, the capacities and tools that you do and don't have, how you implement it. At Uni you hear people talking about *autogestión*, they do raffles but without any political aim. To me, *autogestión* is about questioning the capitalist system and building alternatives. A small enterprise can claim to be *autogestionada* because they don't ask for Government's support, but they can run their business in a very hierarchical way and treat their workers very badly. (Nico, *ECP*)

As Nico points out, the practice of *autogestión* in the autonomous milieus implies an adherence to strong anti-capitalist and anti-hierarchical values and to collectively managing not only the financial, but the political, cultural, organizational and emotional dimensions of their groups. But regardless of the broad understanding of *autogestión* adopted by the case studies, there is no doubt that attaining financial autonomy is considered a very important feature for them. Accordingly, practices based on *autogestión* emphasise the self-management of material resources and independence from external funding bodies as a way to protect the agenda and political stance of *colectivos*. Beto makes this point clear when he explains the financial policy of *Subversiones*:

> Everyone from the group contributes with time or money (…) some people in solidarity gave donations in the past, sometimes the same communities or movements we work with offer some help. We don't take money from any

> government (…) the information we disseminate is very radical. If we would get funding we would have to ease up our standpoints and we are not going to do that. We won't give up our criticism, not even for money… (Beto, *Subversiones*)

Just as with *Subversiones*, the rest of the *colectivos* in this research reject all sources of external funding coming from governments, political parties, corporations and supranational development organizations. This decision is consistent with their non-state-centred and anti-capitalist stance (see **Ch4**) that leads them to refuse any prescriptive and institutionalised form of participation commanded by the logics of the state and capital. If the rejection of corporate funding is common sense among many grassroots organizations, the acceptance of public funding is not so clear, especially when the local or central governments define themselves as social democrats or moderate leftists. However, this is not the case for the groups analysed in this study. In line with their refusal of representative politics, they are extremely critical and suspicious about the purposes and outcomes of projects funded by public bodies. Toti, for example, believes that engaging in these institutional projects does not strengthen grassroots organisations. On the contrary, they can put conditions on their work and threaten their autonomy:

> In Chile there is little chance of doing something within the current political system (…) if we get funding from them we immediately lose autonomy. There is also a long history of intervention and stagnation in popular organizations, many of them lost all criticism and became NGO's, look at the example of the feminists… (Toti, *ECP*)

By looking at the Chilean case, authors such as Espinoza (2004), León (2015) and Simon and Valenzuela-Fuentes (2016), among others, concur on the side effects of external funding for grassroots organizations. The development of public funding programs encourages the groups to compete amongst each other and 'to adapt their projects to government-defined goals' (Simon and Valenzuela-Fuentes, 2016, p.6), thus fragmenting the communities and reducing their autonomy. Richi explains the same in the following way: 'applying for this funding provokes competitiveness; they limit your area of action, defining in many cases the direction that your project is taking, that's why we distrust them…' (Richi, *ECP*).

Similar findings have been discovered in Mexico, wherein the co-optation of organizations by the Government is a common strategy (Martínez and Campillo, 2009) and public funding opportunities usually adopt a paternalist approach, trying to institutionalize the organizations and to narrow their practice to controlled and low impact projects (Villarreal, 2012). Accordingly, Julia observes that, unlike *colectivos* engaging with *autogestión,* many other Mexican organizations get trapped in this logic of asking the Government for funding or for a solution to their problems, without really seeing their own resources and capacities:

> Several organizations wait for what the Government has to give them (…) unlike them, those who commit to *autogestión* are not waiting for external solutions (…) they use their own resources, knowledge, collective efforts for developing their own projects… (Julia, *JRA*)

Considering the foregoing, the case studies remain wary of most sources of external funding, embracing *autogestión* as an alternative approach that allows them to self-manage their own material resources. Therefore, *autogestión* is not only seen as a principle but as a broad strategy undertaken by *colectivos* in their attempts to raise money and sustain their projects and activities. This strategy encompasses several tactics, such as individual fees, raffles, donations, books and fanzine sales[112], organizing parties, concerts, cultural and social events and so forth. To a greater or lesser extent, all these projects have provided an income to the groups by disseminating ideas and subjects that are consistent with their political standpoints. In other words, *autogestión* as a strategy does not only entail solving the financial deficit of the groups. Rather, it aims to provide financial sustainability to the *colectivos*, but through meaningful processes and activities based on the political principles that they embrace.

[112] A distinguishing self-managed project is *Bajo Tierra Ediciones*, the independent publishing run by *JRA*.



Figure 5: Above, left side: *Subversiones*' Fanzine; above, right side: *El Rebrote*'s fanzines; below: John Holloway's book *Agrietar el Capitalismo* (in English: Cracking Capitalism) published by *Bajo Tierra Ediciones* (*JRA*)

Another important feature of autonomous politics and its approach based on *autogestión* is the strong conviction that meaningful political endeavours are perfectly doable with the resources of the people and communities and without requiring large sums of money to make them possible. Unlike other groups seeing external funding as a requirement for the beginning of a new project or activity, the case studies follow a reverse approach: firstly, they embark on a new project; then, they assess what they need to make it possible and do their best to get those resources; and lastly, they implement the project with the assets they have been able to gather. As Fabiola points out: '…we are not waiting for external funding, we find the ways to do our stuff with our own resources or we do fundraising (…) we see other feminist groups waiting all the time for the NGO's money, but we don't need that money…' (Fabiola, *Rebrote*). The rejection of resource dependence from NGO's and other institutions is consistent with the standpoint of autonomous feminism (see **Ch5** section 5.6.3 for more details), which considers *autogestión* as a strong tool that is useful in the struggle for collective self-determination. In the words of Paula:

> …of course external funding solves half of the problems, but when you get trapped into the projects' logic you tend to get isolated from the communities. Instead, if you don't have funding you need to be more proactive, go outside, meeting people in the neighbourhoods and trying to get donations, do networking… (Paula, *El Rebrote*)

Although effortful in comparison with the projects externally funded, the experiences based on *autogestión* seek to achieve financial sustainability while fostering important values such as creativity, solidarity, autonomy and proactivity. This is clearly summarised in Paula's quote, especially when she refers to a series of meaningful activities that the group have to do in order to make a project possible, such as connecting with grassroots organizations, with their neighbours, being proactive and creative and so on. She also stresses the need to be wary regarding the project's logic, or what Jalali (2013) has called 'projectitis disease', in which the groups focus mainly on funding applications and areas likely to be funded, leaving insufficient space for their autonomous organizing.

It is important to mention, though, that the *colectivos* do not assume a dogmatic stance regarding external funding and funding applications. As explained earlier in this section, the case studies strongly refuse funding from governments, political parties, corporations and supranational development organizations. Nonetheless, they are willing to consider external funding coming from progressive organizations or donors as long as they respect their autonomy, do not ask for excessive bureaucratic processes and do not violate the groups' organizational principles. In order to fund a larger project of popular education, *JRA* accepted external funding coming from Appleton. This is a Canadian ecologist charity that supports radical projects in Latin America and respects the autonomy and principles of the group. *El Rebrote* accepted in 2014 a small donation coming from a senior Chilean feminist[113] who wanted to give part of her inheritance to support feminist struggles. *ECP* has twice received a small amount of funding from a public university. In this case, there are some members who are not fully convinced about this scheme. However, they have not blocked the applications for this funding because they respect the group's viewpoint of seeing it as one of the victories achieved by the student movement in the past years. Finally, *Subversiones* has not applied for

[113] Lili Rivas is a well-known feminist from the city of Concepción.

external funding although they do not discard the possibility of doing so in the future as long as it comes from a progressive organization and it complies with all the conditions stated above.

Finally, *autogestión* is also seen as a horizon in which new forms of social production and solidarity economies are envisioned within, against and beyond capitalism. In general, the research participants acknowledge the narrow scope of the self-managed practices implemented in their *colectivos* and the necessity to gradually broaden *autogestión* to all the other spheres of their lives. Accordingly, *autogestión* as a horizon implies the need to fully embrace an autonomous life by developing collective solutions to subsistence and social reproduction without following the conventional capitalist path. As Erick points out:

> …we need to go beyond the processes of self-education and start living differently by providing productive alternatives to our lives. For example, if we need to buy trousers, let's buy them from the grassroots organization manufacturing trousers; the same with beer, with our food, let's build a parallel economy (…) we have to question our everyday reality, get out of this capitalist life circuit (…) I feel that we have the discourse but we don't have the experience of living differently… (Erick, *ECP*)

As discussed in **Ch4** (section 4.2), most of the research participants are aware of their participation in the capitalist system and of the personal ambiguities stemming from this position. They also understand that their efforts to challenge capitalism are not enough; hence developing more sustainable counter-hegemonic alternatives to capitalist exploitation becomes essential. In this context, cooperativism has gained more popularity amongst grassroots organizations, as it is seen as a bottom-up strategy that does not promote self-interest and profit but 'the democratic control of the labour process, sharing of surpluses, inter-cooperative networks of solidarity and the deepening of concern for the needs and desires of people and surrounding communities…' (Vieta, 2014, p.798). For many autonomous activists, the creation of co-operatives in different productive areas is the best way to strive towards the '*autogestión de la vida'*, that is to say, to the integral self-management of their own lives. For instance, the idea of building a co-operative project has been present in many discussions amongst *Subversiones's* activists, who consider it urgent to address the lack of self-sustainability both in the

group and in its members. Likewise, before *ECP*'s dissolution, its members were engaging in similar debates as many of them were about to finish their graduate degrees and were trying to assess options to make a living without compromising their ethics and political values. Almost as a prediction of what would happen later, Erick warned us of the risks of not having, or at least planning, a productive project in common. Without a more integral autonomous project to look forward, the *colectivo* could easily remain tied to the short temporality of the student life:

> …one of the main problems of ECP is that we are still too imbued in the student experience. This is a problem because if you do not think forward, your political life begins when you enter Uni and finishes when you finish your degree… (Erick, *ECP*)

Recent conversations with *ECP* members confirm this analysis inasmuch as the lack of a productive project beyond the student experience, or at least, a strategic planning oriented towards this goal, was considered one of the main reasons for the termination of the group. Different has been the case of the other three *colectivos,* which have been able to remain active without substantial productive projects yet. However, they still envision the cooperativization of life as a horizon and a very achievable goal for their next endeavours, although acknowledging that this is not a short term but a middle and long term quest. A former *ECP* member agrees with this view, believing that this *colectivo* could come to life again but under a new cooperative format able to guarantee the social reproduction of life of its members.

6.5 Popular Education and Collective Knowledge Production

In **Ch3** I presented the work of Raúl Zibechi (2008, 2012, 2016) and the four main political/cultural currents that according to him shape the politics of the larger movements in Latin America. The *Freirian* tradition of popular education is one of them. The findings of my research add to Zibechi's work, claiming that the engagement with popular education and collective processes of knowledge production is also a feature of smaller grassroots initiatives in Latin America. As my militant ethnography revealed, the four *colectivos* from Chile and Mexico devote a significant part of their time to both planning and running activities based on methods of popular education. Whether they

are doing this for their own internal procedures or for projects targeted at external communities; it is clear that the *colectivos* have integrated the educational dimension into their everyday activities. Concurring with Zibechi's (2012) description of Latin American social movements as 'educational subjects', the *colectivos* participating in this research certainly follow this trend as most of their spaces, actions and reflections serve a pedagogical purpose, contributing to the creation of a counter-hegemonic politics of knowledge (Motta and Esteves, 2014).

Inspired by the work of Paulo Freire, popular education refers to a heterogeneous set of educational practices that link the acquisition of knowledge with a transformative social project (ECO, 2012). The focus on social transformation is also stressed by the members of *ECP*, who have collectively outlined their own definition of popular education:

> We believe that popular education is a political-pedagogical tool useful to resist the capitalist system and one of its favourite instruments of domination: the formal system of education. (…) Popular education is rebellious because it challenges this reality in order to transform it, decolonizing and unlearning the structures of the capitalist system and bringing new values such as solidarity, horizontality, and cooperativism… (Internal Document, *ECP*)

As this definition demonstrates, popular education follows a clear political purpose: it attempts to challenge the structures of domination and building new realities in favour of the excluded, marginalized and oppressed. In this regard, popular education is inherently political because it encourages people to identify their own conditions of oppression and to develop concrete proposals for social change. It is also epistemologically revolutionary inasmuch as it brings the lived experiences of the oppressed to the forefront of knowledge production. Liam Kane (2010) expands on this aspect in a precise statement that is worth quoting at length:

> Popular education is based on the belief that all people possess important knowledge arising from their own particular experiences and that education should consist of a dialogue between these different sets of knowledge. Rather than an exercise in experts telling people what to think, popular educators stimulate dialogue, debate and analysis, through the use of a participatory educational methodology, as well as introduc(ing) groups to new knowledge (…)

> popular education aims to promote critical thinking, enabl(ing) people to become 'subjects' of change themselves, not followers of leaders... (Kane, 2010, p.277)

In line with the anti-vanguard spirit of autonomous movements, the processes of popular education carried out by the research participants reject the top-down imposition of theories, viewpoints, analysis and intellectuals (see **Ch5**, section 5.6). Conversely, they engage with a collective construction of knowledge and mass intellectuality (Motta, 2013a), as the *JRA* members convincingly assert:

> Unlike other forms of political education aimed at training intellectuals who will make the 'correct' interpretation of reality and will define the strategy to be followed by the masses, the union members or the party, we try to maximise the collective intelligence, summarised in the phrase: 'among all we know everything', we are interested in flattening knowledge and learning, we are against indoctrination. (Document *'Otra forma de Hacer Política', JRA*)

By emphasising the 'collective intelligence' or what Motta (2013a) has called 'mass intellectuality', the case studies question the role of enlightened intellectuals or revolutionaries who will lead the movements' agendas and will rescue people from a 'brainwashing by [the] ruling ideology' (Kane, 2013, p.39). On the contrary, participants rely on their own experiences and knowledge, which are regularly shared in collective spaces of discussion and learning. This does not mean neglecting the value of theoretical contributions. As both the interviews and my ethnographic practice corroborate, most of the activists acknowledge the importance of reading and discussing the ideas developed by several authors committed with emancipatory knowledge (see **Ch5**, section 6). Nonetheless, they strongly disagree with a patronizing approach in which the theory or a particular analysis of reality is used to indoctrinate the movements, without leaving any space for critical and creative interpretations from below. As Enrique points out:

> Our political training is not indoctrination, we don't have key theoretical books, we don't discuss authors, we discuss problems (…) some people accuse us of following Negri or Holloway, but that's not true! Not even all of us have read them! Our approach is neither anti-intellectual nor anti-theoretical, we respect many authors and ideologies but the emancipatory practice of the peoples goes first for us. (Enrique, *JRA*)

Similarly, Cony emphasises the importance of learning from key authors, such as Freire and in particular his masterpiece *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, but as long as the readings are used to support the political praxis and not to prescribe it: '…my own experience motivated me to read things, such as *the Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, because I felt they were necessary for my self-training (…) but in some organizations they have this pre-militancy in which you have to read many books before you're even accepted into the group…' (Cony, *ECP*, Chile). Unlike the pre-militancy schemes carried out by more traditional left-wing groups, the *colectivos* analysed in this research accept new members no matter their formal studies or how many books they have read in the past. This approach is consistent with their principles of horizontality and inclusiveness and it is well illustrated in a quote from the *ECP*'s members: '…popular education is not a theory developed from academia but a process in which we learn from the history and the experiences. With popular education we all fit because it is built with all of us' (Internal Document, *ECP*).

In their attempts to foster horizontality, the *colectivos* draw upon popular education methods for developing their internal sessions of political, organizational and technical training (see **Ch7**). By sharing their knowledge in these collective sessions, the research participants are able to learn from each other and to engage with a dialogical pedagogical practice, as the case of *El Rebrote* illustrates. The process of political training developed inside this feminist collective began with the former group *La Ruptura in* 2011. From the very beginning, most of the sessions were facilitated by the members, who worked in teams and prepared participatory and innovative workshops addressing different topics such as types of feminism, Marxism, anarchism, gender, romantic love, the role of the State, natural gynaecology, and so forth. All the workshops were experiential, which meant that the activities carried out prioritised the sharing of women's experiences and viewpoints before introducing any theoretical and analytical framework. In many of the sessions, the members reflected about their own personal experiences, how they have felt oppressed in terms of gender, class and race and what they can do as a collective to challenge patriarchal, capitalist and colonial structures of domination. Through these pedagogical exercises, the activists acknowledge both their privileges and conditions of subjugation. This enables a critical analysis of their experiences and a sense of responsibility for fighting against deeply embodied oppressions.

As discussed earlier in this chapter (section 6.3), the challenge of sharing personal experiences of oppression strengthened the bonds between the *compañeras* and the group's commitment to an affective politics, providing a safe, caring and joyful space for its members. Andrea, for example, stresses the importance of playing and laughing during the internal training sessions: '…we worked with very fun techniques of popular education, the principle was learning by playing; we laughed so much at the beginning! And I think we all began to understand feminism at the same time, it was relatively new for all of us…' (Andrea, *El Rebrote*). To some extent, the incorporation of a series of plays and fun practical tools into the political trainings of *El Rebrote* has allowed the development of learning processes that are both enlightening and joyful. As Pañuelos en Rebeldía (2007) argues, we need a playful dimension to change the world and the ways to be in it: 'by playing we try to take off our masks, we relearn the laughing; we transform a tear in a source of encounters'[114] (p.20).

By rejecting indoctrination and situating the experience and contextual political practice as the most relevant sources of knowledge production, the research participants develop a prefigurative epistemological approach[115] (see **Ch2**, section 2.3.2) that transcends the conceptual dualism between theoretical and practical knowledge and the division of labour that comes with it (Motta, 2011). This shift can be observed in the *colectivos*' commitment with collective processes of reflection. Usually these processes are transformed into documents of analysis for internal use but also for the dissemination of the groups' political standpoints to a broader audience. This epistemological and pedagogical orientation also guides the external educational projects developed by the case studies. The groups criticise what Freire refers to as the banking model of education that sees the students as passive entities and mere receptacles to be filled by the teachers (Freire, 2005). Alternatively, they have created open schools and workshops in which a diverse range of socio-political issues are discussed using the principles and methods of popular education. Nonetheless, democratizing the relationship between learners and educators has not been an easy task for the *colectivos*. They have had to unlearn the internalized vertical logics of formal education and replace them with a dialogic and horizontal approach. This shift was only possible through the collective study of

[114] Authors' translation from Spanish
[115] Note the correlation between my own epistemologies and those developed by *colectivos*. As stated in **Ch2**, the epistemological approach adopted in this research has not only been informed by critical scholarship but by the praxis itself of autonomous movements.

alternative pedagogies and learning through trial-and-error. A good example of this shift can be observed in the history of *ECP*. During its first stage (2010-2011), the group implemented the first two versions of the *Escuela de Comunicación Popular* (In English: School of Popular Communication) for grassroots organizations. The aim of the school was to critically discuss the role of mainstream media in society and promoting the creation of alternative media for social change. As the members did not have that much knowledge about popular education and participatory methods at that time, they primarily relied on traditional teaching methods. After this first stage, the group entered a second moment (2012-2013) in which they strengthened their relationship with popular sectors and grassroots organizations, a shift that is illustrated in the change of location for running the sessions from the University classrooms to local headquarters in popular neighbourhoods. They also began to study popular education and to apply more participatory methods in their sessions. Finally, in 2014, big methodological changes were made in the school project and the members began to fully engage with popular education and participatory techniques. In the last three years, *ECP* has developed its methods of popular education and has substantially democratized the 'relationships between teacher and taught' (Pearce, Howard and Bronstein, 2010, p.268). This has been expressed in the launching of innovative modules of popular communication, written press, popular television and radio stations, audio-visual productions and social media, among others. All these modules have used dialogical methods in which 'the students -no longer docile listeners- are now critical investigators in dialogue with the teacher' (Freire, 2005, p.81). Additionally, they have been actively involved in the creation of popular education networks in Santiago, in which different grassroots organizations are getting together to exchange knowledge and experiences of popular education.



Figure 6: Poster advertising 'Training Workshops for Popular Educators'. Organized by ECP, among others.

A similar journey has been travelled by *JRA*, *El Rebrote* and *Subversiones*. With different experiences, they all seem to embrace the Freirian idea of education as a practice of freedom, in which the educative process is a collective responsibility oriented towards everyone's growth. Through different educative projects (some of them focused on gender and feminism, others on alternative media, understanding of capitalism, environmentalism, including popular education and social change), *colectivos* refuse banking education and its hierarchical framework that silences students and communities (Motta, 2011). Conversely, they believe that these actors are 'subjects of their own process of enlightenment and emancipation' (Pearce, Howard and Bronstein, 2010, p.268). In view of that, they adopt a flexible approach where collective enquiry is mediated by facilitators, role that constantly rotates in-between the members.

Interestingly, the commitment to popular education is not only observed in the methods undertaken by the *colectivos* for their internal and external meetings and trainings. They are also interested in disseminating the history, epistemology, methodologies and techniques of popular education to a wider range of activists and communities. The purpose here is to reflect on the usefulness of this tradition for their own struggles and learning how to apply these methods in their own activities. This was precisely the intention of the workshop in Popular Education organized by *JRA* and held in 2014 during my fieldwork stay. This workshop brought together different activists from movements, groups and communities with the aim of discussing the role of popular

education as an emancipatory tool. Through participatory methods, the facilitators encouraged the participants to analyse critically the role of traditional education and to reflect about the importance of creating knowledge from below. Experiences such as these ones are only a few examples of the commitment of Latin American autonomous movements to the principles and methods of popular education, in which Freire's legacy is embraced both at a theoretical and practical level.



Figure 7: Pictures of *Popular Education Workshop organized by JRA, Mexico City, 2014. Source: Personal Photos.*

The photos above illustrate the importance given by *JRA* to the use of games and experiential sessions in order to foster the production of collective knowledge. This is also found in the educational projects developed by the other groups, in which participative techniques acquire great relevance inasmuch as they allow innovative and contextual ways of learning. As the members of *ECP* point out: 'popular education stimulates the emergence of critical and participatory subjects (…) who question their everyday oppressions through methods that are more natural and flexible in comparison to the rigid ones used in formal education' (*ECP*, Internal Document). Unlike traditional pedagogies, the methods drawing on popular education stress the importance of the subjects' own narratives and experiences in the learning process, voices that together articulate a collective and critical reading of the world. Thereby, these methods do not purely engaged with 'intellectual and theoretical production as if these were disembodied and objective processes' (Motta, 2013b, p.64). Contrarily, they attempt to overcome the hegemonic dichotomies between thought and action, mind and body, and

intellect and emotions (Motta, 2013b), articulating their pedagogical praxis with their affective (6.3) and horizontal (6.2) politics.

A vivid example of the link between popular education and affective politics is the 'Feminist Circle of Studies' run by the feminists from *El Rebrote*. These workshops aim to provide caring and safe spaces in which women from different backgrounds can discuss women's oppressions and the contributions of feminism to their emancipation. When carrying out these workshops, *El Rebrote* commits with 'feminist popular education'. This is an approach specifically oriented towards the transformation of gendered power relations but that shares with Freire the methodological principle of building 'analytically and practically upon the experiential knowledge of learners themselves' (Walters and Manicom, 1996, p.2). An exemplar workshop that followed the aforementioned principle and put the embodied and affective experiences of the participants at the forefront of the pedagogical process was a session called: 'Structural violence in the body, the biography, the memory and the territory'. Facilitated by Victoria Aldunate, a guest feminist coming from Santiago, this workshop invited the participants to reflect about the everyday violence experienced by women through the practice of *biodanza.* This Chilean-born method works by combining free movements and music in a group setting, seeking to foster the 'humanisation of the person through positive interactions with others that works on self-connection (experiencing of emotion), self-expression, communication, feedback and group interaction' (McManus, 2007, para. 2).



Figure 8: Pictures of Workshops organized by El Rebrote, Chile, 2014. Source: Personal Photos.

As the pictures above show, the exercises of *biodanza* allowed the participants to connect with their affects and emotions and to bring awareness of their own and others' experiences of oppression. Likewise, it invited them to celebrate together the power of women's solidarity, stimulating a strong sense of community between the participants. Interestingly, these powerful pedagogical exercises observed in the workshops run by *El Rebrote* resemble the work of the Colombian women's group *Escuela Política de Mujeres Pazíficas* analysed by both Bermúdez (2013) and Motta (2013). Both in these authors' work (Bermúdez, 2013; Motta, 2013b) and in my research, the ritual, senses, dancing and singing practices merge with more traditional forms of knowledge; giving the participants the chance to challenge and potentially transform their conditions of oppression. Besides this, these affective and embodied pedagogies open up the possibility to build knowledge from below that can be equally or even more fertile than traditional knowledge production approaches. The caresses and the hugs so beautifully present in *El Rebrote* activities are part of what Pañuelos en Rebeldía (2007) calls a feminist ethics of *acompañamiento*[116], in which women walk side by side, support each other and share their sorrows and desires.

6.6 Political networks and relation with other struggles

Finally, the specific understanding of alliance-building and collaboration with other struggles is another key feature characterizing the practice of autonomous Latin American movements. In previous studies about autonomous politics in Latin America, authors such as Thwaites (2011) and Adamosvski (2003, 2011) stress that the lack of broader spaces of coordination constitutes a great barrier for the rising of autonomous politics as an emancipatory alternative. By looking at the experience of autonomous movements, they warn us about the risks of merely focusing on partial struggles and dismissing the importance of articulation. In line with Thwaites (2011) and Adamovsky's (2003, 2011) analysis, the case studies of this research draw attention to the importance of building political networks and engaging in solidarity with other struggles. In this way they can collectively increase their chances to crack capitalism, patriarchy and state domination. The small size of these groups and their focus on specific actions and territories does not mean that they have given up on broader social

[116]Action of being with others, of joining them and spending meaningful time together.

change. On the contrary, they strongly believe that the enactment of autonomous politics at the local level must not remain in isolation and it should always seek to build connections with other local, national and even international experiences of resistance[117]. As Julia asserts:

> Building alliances is not only possible but necessary because we are not islands, we are part of this capitalist system and political articulation makes us stronger. If you are only a little island, the system eats you, consumes you; you can't survive alone and isolated (…) it's not about going to our local space and turn our backs to the entire world, we are the cool ones and fuck the rest. Contrarily, we need to get together to fight against the state, against capital and we can't do that alone, nor as a single group, we need alliances… (Julia, *JRA*)

In line with Julia's words, both the Chilean and Mexican case studies believe that the creation of a *colectivo* is not an end in itself but a means of seeking to join together the multiple struggles for a better world. Autonomous politics does not aim to build a separate, parallel world or an 'island', while the rest of the planet is dying under the reign of capitalism. However, unlike more traditional approaches, their prefigurative stance leads them to focus on current experiments of emancipation from below, rather than waiting for a top-down change achieved through seizing state power. In a way, they emphasise their commitment with prefigurative politics and everyday revolutions while affirming the importance of building broader fronts opposing current structures of domination. This point is stressed by the research participants, especially when they attempt to draw the differences between themselves and other political actors:

> …when I see the *insus*[118]' politics it bothers me that they believe that their approach is the true one and they hate sharing with someone different, if we dress differently, for example! None of us are radical enough for them, and even if they believe, like us, in the everyday revolution, they only enact it with their friends, in this closed core… (Rocío, *ECP*)

[117] As the Zapatista experience successfully shows.

[118] Colloquial name given to 'insurrectionary anarchism'. This trend focuses on insurrection, rioting and attack, and it has been characterized by a 'rejection of any type of organisation with some projection in time (Gutiérrez, 2006, para. 4). For insurrectionary anarchists building a social movement or joining community projects is a futile task as 'either reinstitutes already troublesome patterns of power or condemns activists to patient, eternal waiting' (Williams and Thomson, 2010, p.6)

Rocío's critique of insurrectionary anarchism is also shared by other autonomous activists who allude to this strand as an example of a politics of isolation and encapsulation. According to some research participants, the sectarianism of these groups prevents them from learning and connecting with other political approaches and struggles. In consonance with Adamovsky's analysis (2011), the research participants criticize the narcissism present in certain strands within the radical milieu, where their exaggerated attempts to keep a pure image of radicalism become more important than achieving effective social change.

Contrarily, the case studies analysed in this research see in movements' alliances the possibility to build a stronger resistance and to crack deeper into the hegemonic system: 'we can't do much as a single group (…) we need to articulate with others if we want to expand our struggle (…) and to crack deeply this system that doesn't represent us…' (Xilo, *Subversiones*, Mexico). Nevertheless, it is important to clarify that the terms of these exercises of articulation demand strong consistency with the groups' principles and values. Concurring with Freire's approach (2005), the *colectivos* envision networks in which the goal for liberation is pursued in communion with others, and not under the exclusive direction of some revolutionary leaders who will try to 'win the people over to their side' (p.95). In line with their rejection of vanguard-based approaches (see **Ch4**, section 4.4.5) and normative visions of politics and social change (see **Ch5**, section 5.6), they question the politics of party-type organizations and traditional trade-unions that tend to subsume other actors to their own ideologies and agendas. Instead, they call for a respectful, egalitarian and humble approach to alliance-building, as Nico remarks:

> It's ridiculous to think that we are going to 'lead' the revolutionary process, the revolution is not going to be achieved by some type of party and its national plan, but by the organized people. As militants we need to be humble, respectful, we need to engage in solidarity with other organizations and don't want to dominate them, we don't have any right to hasten the processes, if we want to build strong networks we need to be humble… (Nico, *ECP*)

As opposed to the vanguard approach followed by revolutionary parties, *colectivos* aim to build horizontal relations with their allies, which implies a commitment neither to subsume other organizations nor to be subsumed by them. As explained in **Ch4**, the commitment to a horizontal and dialogic approach to networking implies a refusal to

work politically with parties and party-type organizations. This decision is based on the assumption that parties or traditional groups follow a vertical political logic, hence they establish or join alliances with the clear purpose of taking directing roles and instrumentally mobilize their allies for the sake of their own political agendas. They usually call for the creation of a single 'strategic network' that requires hierarchies and centralization in order to organize the diverse political actors (MTD Solano and Colectivo Situaciones, 2002).

From a different perspective, *colectivos* aim to engage in broader political networks based on horizontality, reciprocity, affinity, respect, dialogic learning, solidarity, trust and affection. Altogether, these elements are not easy to find in current socio-political platforms. Because of their high standards in relation to alliance-building and their efforts to reach political consistency, on many occasions the groups refrain from participating in broader networks or simply withdraw after identifying hierarchical and vanguard-based political practices within them.

> We tried to get involved in the network of solidarity with the SME[119]; this was a very traditional left wing struggle, led by this important Union. It was very difficult to work with them because of their dynamics, their structures, their hierarchies, and the fact that someone is the leader. Even if the struggle was very important for the country we didn't fit in there… (David, *JRA*)

This extremely selective approach also brings difficulties to the groups. In particular, there is a risk of (self) exclusion from experiences with political potential and national relevance, as David's words suggest. Moreover, they could be easily blamed for reproducing the same isolation that they so strongly criticize in other political strands. Following Adamovsky's critique (2003, 2011), we could enquire: how do *colectivos* avoid creating bubbles of radical activism and getting locked inside them? Which new ways of political organization would allow the articulation of broader sectors fighting for emancipation? In an honest fashion, the case studies acknowledge that they do not have the answers to these questions. Nonetheless, they are aware of the dilemma between being highly consistent with their political stance and not withdrawing from networks that could potentially increase the possibilities of emancipation.

[119] *Sindicato Mexicano de Electricistas*. In English: Mexican Electrical Workers Union

Following some sort of middle path in this dilemma, the case studies have defined different types of engagement in external spaces. This means that their levels of participation and commitment vary depending on the networks, political projects or movements they are relating to. In cases of extreme repression, criminalization and political imprisonment, the research participants do not refuse to collaborate with more traditional leftist actors. However, their relationship is bound to the specific emergency they are dealing with, without developing further political relations. On occasions, they also participate in broader spaces of protest and solidarity with social movements, but they do not get deeply involved unless the space has the conditions for enacting an antiauthoritarian, democratic and horizontal politics. For this reason, they have chosen to participate organically in very specific networks that seek to put in practice, in more or less degree and with more or less success, the aforementioned principles.

The network of popular educators '*Piño contra Pupitre*' is an example of strong collaboration and cohesion between *ECP* and other *colectivos* in the capital city of Chile. In this space, the activists develop collective spaces of learning in which they problematize the role of popular education and share different methods to put it into practice. They have also been actively involved in alternative educational projects taking place in Santiago. Their participation in the community school *República Dominicana* is one example. In 2013, due to the unilateral decision made by the city council to shut down the local school, hundreds of parents decided to occupy it and call for solidarity from organizations and universities in order to create an alternative and community-based education project. For eleven months, the network of popular educators got fully involved in this powerful experience of autonomy and *autogestión*, until a police eviction destroyed the initiative and the authorities took control again over the school. Despite the predictable outcomes of this occupation, the network remained strong and has continued bringing together different *colectivos* interested in popular education.

According to the members of *ECP*, political affinity has been a key element that has allowed the sustainability of this alliance. As Manu asserts: '…we have affinity, we share the principles of horizontality, *autogestión*, autonomy, our rejection of parties and the Government and we all use popular education in our groups…' (Manu, *ECP*). Likewise, the activists from *El Rebrote*, *JRA* and *Subversiones* agree on the importance of affinity when it comes to engaging in political networks, albeit they acknowledge that shared ideas and principles do not guarantee the development of fruitful cooperation.

Indeed, affinity should also be expressed in the practices and work dynamics undertaken by the movements and organizations. A Mexican activist puts it in this way: '…political affinity is important but sometimes there is affinity with some groups and we just can't coordinate actions together (…) the 'how we work together', the 'how we act in collaboration is essential too…' (Abraham, *JRA*). This point draws attention to important dissonances that can be found in the discourses and practices of autonomous groups. For instance, a group could claim to be autonomous while it relies on Government funding. Contrarily, a group could not define itself as autonomous but it finds it much easier to engage ethically and practically with the principles of autonomous politics. Likewise, and as the Chilean feminists assert, a group can claim to be supportive of anti-patriarchal politics while it rejects feminist groups which challenge its internalized patriarchal dynamics. According to the members from *El Rebrote*, their engagement in broader anti-capitalist networks has become more difficult since they decided to radicalize their political stance and to openly question patriarchal behaviours coming from non-feminist radical collectives:

> …since we radicalized our standpoint and got clearer about what is acceptable and what is unacceptable, many groups closed their doors to us, they gossip about us, and of course, it's all our fault. That's why we have decided to prioritise networks with feminists and women's groups instead…' (Espe, *El Rebrote*)

The disappointment with movements and activists dismissing the anti-patriarchal struggle or insisting that patriarchy is not a priority issue, has led these feminists to be cautious about getting too involved in left wing/radical networks. As an alternative, they have decided to concentrate in the consolidation of feminist and/or women's networks, such as the '*Red de Mujeres por la Memoria'*, in English, 'Network of Women for Memory'. This is a feminist space seeking to create an intergenerational dialogue between women in order to rebuild the memory of women's struggles in the city of Concepcion. As the previous example shows, the case studies believe that the compatibility in the 'doing' is pivotal for alliance–building processes. The activists from *Subversiones* have also been cautious about their involvement in broader networks, as they reject alliances that are built with the solely purpose of co-opting or instrumentalize its members. Alternatively, they have favoured the creation of small networks with close groups such as the artists cooperative *El Cráter Invertido*, the journalists protection group *Artículo 19*, and the women empowerment project *Voces de Mujeres*.

Furthermore, in line with their critique of political vanguards and alienating intellectualism (Freire, 2005), the research participants refuse to choose their allies based on the level of theoretical knowledge they hold. Conversely, they are open to learning from the different forms in which knowledge is expressed by movements, communities and groups, avoiding establishing hierarchies between experiential and academic knowledge (see also **Ch2**).

In addition with political affinity (both in the thinking and in the doing), the case studies believe that solidarity and mutual support are the glue that brings together different movements and groups. The purpose of developing political networks is to strive collectively towards an emancipated world, but most importantly, to jointly build the alternatives that can make that world possible. This requires the creation of supportive and trustworthy relations between the movements, so they can navigate together the challenges and obstacles that may arise from the struggle. As Erick argues: '…building meaningful networks is important for us because in that way we can support each other, we can help each other, we really engage in solidarity…' (Erick, *ECP*).

Early in this section, we mentioned emergency networks in which radical and traditional left wing actors gather with the sole purpose of releasing political prisoners and denouncing extreme repression. Undoubtedly, these efforts are extremely necessary; but the constant abuse perpetrated by governments and corporations urge autonomous movements to strengthen their own political networks. By mobilizing all their resources, these autonomous alliances can defend the actors and struggles that are being criminalized and threatened by the political and economic elites. They become a collective voice standing against repression and injustice, and through actions of denounce and dissemination, they do their best to stop or reverse the harmful measures targeting the movements and communities in resistance.

The Mexican network '*RRAA - Red de Resistencias Autónomas Anticapitalistas*', in English, 'Network of Anti-capitalist Autonomous Resistances', in operation from 2010 until 2015, is a good example of the defensive role that radical networks need to play in order to protect experiences of resistance from being wiped out. Initially proposed by *JRA* and the housing movement *Frente Popular Francisco Villa Independiente*, the *RRAA* had the purpose of bringing together several autonomous struggles at a national

level and developing strategies of mutual support for a more efficient response against repression and dispossession:

> This network is an attempt to articulate autonomous and independent experiences so we can defend ourselves in a context of repression and decline of the popular movement in Mexico; secondly, we can become stronger by working together, and thirdly, we create a collective voice in the middle of this political vacuum… (Enrique)

In a similar attempt, *JRA* got actively involved in the launching of a new, much bigger network aligned around the crusade '*Campaña Nacional en Defensa de la Madre Tierra y el Territorio*' , in English, 'National Campaign in Defence of Mother Earth and Territory'. Launched in 2016, this campaign gathers more than 180 organizations from 17 states across Mexico, seeking 'to coordinate struggles, denounce extractivism and offer a space for mutual aid among those who are being attacked by capital and the State' (Zibechi, 2016b, para. 1).

Nevertheless, it is important to mention that these coordination processes encounter many challenges and obstacles in their way and they are far from being perfect. In the case of the national networks launched in Mexico, the distance between the organizations and the lack of money and time are considered key elements threatening the effectiveness and horizontality of these alliances. As Julia explains:

> …a big difficulty is the distance; we have organizations from different states of the country and most of them live in precariousness and don't receive funding from the Government, which means that they can't afford transportation from their villages to the centre of the country. Another aspect is time; each organization has much to do with their own activities that sometimes is hard to engage in additional tasks from the network itself… (Julia, *JRA*)

On the one hand, the isolation and precariousness of communities and movements living in the countryside creates imbalances in the participation, as they cannot engage in the networks in the same way as the groups working in central cities. On the other hand, the magnitude and severity of the problems that the movements are facing defines their time availability for the network's tasks. That is to say, if a community is defending its land and fighting against state repression and paramilitary forces, then it is unlikely to be

actively involved in the everyday tasks of the network. Even if these disparities are totally understandable, they contravene the attempts to develop horizontal alliances. The urban *colectivos*, usually with more time and resources, end up undertaking more responsibilities, and as a consequence, they play a more influential role within the network.

6.7 Concluding Remarks

In the previous two chapters I explored the twofold understanding of autonomy and discussed how the refusal of domination gives rise to a creative force that shapes an alternative approach to social change. This chapter has furthered on this analysis, focusing on how that creative force is being enacted by Latin American *colectivos.* If the previous chapter (**Ch5**) looked at the principles and ideas defining 'autonomy as creation', this chapter has focused on the 'doing', exploring the five main dimensions that put this creativity into practice. Through a detailed account of horizontality, affective politics, *autogestión*, popular education and political networks, I have shown how *colectivos* are enacting self-determination and a prefigurative politics from below (**Ch5**) in their everyday praxis.

Conceived as the fuel of autonomous politics, horizontality is a pivotal dimension in the praxis of Latin American *colectivos*. It is both a horizon and a concrete strategy that seek to put the groups' anti-authoritarian principles into practice. Defined as a constant struggle against vertical structures and relations, horizontality is the best representation of the *colectivos*' commitment to a prefigurative politics from below. This is observed in their attempts to bring together a number of principles, structures and strategies in order to pursue a horizontal agenda, and therefore, prefiguring the envisioned society in the here and now. With this same goal in mind, *colectivos* have forged an 'affective' approach to politics that refuses to see people as mere numbers or instruments of a cause. From a prefigurative perspective, they reject instrumental political views, emphasising the creation of affective, loving and supportive relationships in the present. Here, their peers are more than political associates. They are *compañeros* and *compañeras* who share a political goal but also similar hopes, dreams and horizons that begin to be experienced now and not in a delayed future. The groups also challenge this instrumental

political approach with *autogestión.* The self-management of material resources and independence from external funding bodies represent the *colectivos*' attempts to prefigure concrete practices of self-determination in the present. Likewise, they are expressions of the groups' refusal to engage in any form of participation commanded by the logics of the state and capital.

Popular education and collective knowledge production are other important features in the praxis of autonomous politics. Here, the research participants reject the vanguard-type of politics with its top down imposition of theories, viewpoints, analysis and intellectuals. On the contrary, they engage with collective learning and mass intellectuality, bringing their lived experiences to the forefront of knowledge production. Finally, the praxis of autonomous politics has a strong component of networking. Autonomous activists are constantly seeking to build connections with other local, national and even international experiences of resistance. Nevertheless, unlike more traditional approaches, they do not develop political networks only for the sake of a future revolution. They acknowledge the importance of building broader fronts of resistance as long as they are useful to tackle domination right now. Likewise, they call for a respectful, egalitarian and humble approach to alliance-building, in which they neither subsume other organizations nor are subsumed by them.

In light of the findings discussed in this chapter, I argue that these five dimensions are interconnected elements that support and strengthen each other, and altogether shape the praxis of autonomous politics. Horizontality should be highlighted though, as it plays a pivotal role in bringing together the other four dimensions. Affective politics provides the grounds for the development of more horizontal relationships. *Autogestión,* as conceived by the case studies, implies an adherence to the principles of horizontality. Popular education is a method and a strategy that foster horizontality. Lastly, autonomous political networks seek to develop horizontal dynamics between the movements and organizations.

The analysis of these five dimensions has also revealed their unfinished character. They do not work in absolute terms and they cannot be decreed. On the contrary, they are all processes that face several obstacles and difficulties along the way. That is why there is no such a thing as pure horizontality or pure *autogestión.* The research participants engage with these principles and practices but that does not prevent them from

acknowledging issues, problem and challenges that arise from their experience. Considering the prominent role of horizontality in the praxis of autonomous politics, the following chapter (**Ch7**) will unfold its 'doing'. More specifically, I will look at the organizational structures and strategies implemented by the case studies in their attempts to enact horizontality.

CHAPTER SEVEN:
HORIZONTALITY: THE FUEL OF AUTONOMOUS POLITICS

7.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter (**Ch6**) I examined the main features of the praxis of autonomous politics: horizontality, affective politics, *autogestión*, popular education and political networks. I also argued that horizontality is the fuel of autonomous politics as it provides the ethical and organizational framework that makes autonomy a possible and tangible alternative. In view of the important role played by this dimension in the enactment of autonomous politics, this chapter is devoted to the analysis of the principles, strategies and methods embraced by *colectivos* in their quest for horizontality.

In this research, I contend that Latin American *colectivos* have developed an organic and feasible approach to social change. Unfortunately, the study of autonomous politics is still in the margins of social movements' studies and it has become a target of multiple criticism both at a political and theoretical level[120]. In response to the arguments that dismiss autonomy as an effective approach to social change, this chapter offers a detailed account of the political practices and structures that work effectively to make horizontality, and consequently, autonomous politics possible. In response to the views equating autonomous politics to naivety and ineffectiveness, I argue that this approach is not a romantic utopia but a real alternative brought to life thanks to the articulation of a number of principles, structures, methods and practices thoughtfully designed by autonomous activists.

If Chapter Six introduced the five main features shaping the 'doing' of autonomous politics, this chapter moves on to examine in greater detail what I call the 'backbone' of autonomy: horizontality. In the following sections I will present a rich description of the structures and everyday strategies carried out by the case studies in their quest for horizontality. Particularly, six main dimensions will be addressed in this chapter:

[120] Some critiques of autonomous politics can be found in the works of Boron (2003); Sader (2001) and Robinson (2007) (see footnote 61). Also in Urra (2012) and Núñez, (2012) regarding the autonomous strand within the Chilean student movement.

organizational structures, rotation and team working, spokespersons, consensus decision making, assemblies and, sharing of information, knowledge and experience. The details here matter because it is only through this thorough analysis that it is possible to identify the ways in which autonomous collectives are challenging the existing systems of domination and traditional approaches to social change. Moreover, a comprehensive analysis allows us to assess how much autonomous activists are transferring their political standpoints (explored in **Ch4** and **Ch5**) into their collective practice. A detailed knowledge of the local structures and everyday strategies also invites us to analyse critically the multiple challenges and difficulties experienced by autonomous activists in their attempts to build horizontal organizations. As a detailed analysis of the challenges of horizontality is essential for providing a critical insight, the next chapter (**Ch8**) will unfold this issue and will examine the main problems in the practice of horizontality.

7.2 Building Organizational Structures for Flexible Participation

In the previous chapter I introduced the notion of horizontality which I described as a key dimension in the 'doing' of autonomous politics. I argued that horizontality articulates a number of principles, expectations, practices, structures and strategies seeking to prefigure a non-hierarchical and non-authoritarian approach to social change. But how exactly do Latin American *colectivos* put this horizontality into practice? What are the structures and organizational strategies in place trying to foster horizontality?

Drawing on my case studies, I argue that structure plays an important role in the practice of horizontality, as long as it is aligned with the principles of self-determination and anti-authoritarianism (already discussed in **Ch5** and **Ch6**). In other words, the enactment of an effective and consistent horizontal politics requires the creation of democratic and non-hierarchical structures that foster open and flexible schemes of participation. The underlying idea here is that each member should be considered in the actions and decisions of the group regardless of his/her level of involvement. This perspective is based on the belief that autonomous political spaces should provide opportunities of participation to everyone who wants to seek radical social change, because any contribution, small or big, is to be appreciated.

In light of the above, the political work of *colectivos* is completely voluntary-based and it relies on the members' willingness to engage in the groups' actions as well as on their actual availability. Participation is not mandatory and the *colectivos* do not penalize non-attendances or low levels of involvement, at least in formal terms. In the same spirit, the activists freely decide which working groups they want to join or which tasks they wish to undertake. However, it is expected that their decisions will be consistent with the groups' non-hierarchical approach and with the principles of rotation and non-specialization (all elements to be examined in the next sections). The *colectivos* put great efforts into trying to abide by these principles but it is undeniable that there are many contradictions and challenges that they encounter in this endeavour. An important one is the acknowledgment that flexible participation triggers a series of problems and tensions within the groups. A member from *JRA* explains this issue in the following way:

> …the participation is non-mandatory, we don't impose any form of participation on people joining *JRA*, it's based on a voluntary basis, if you're interested in the project and you found your space, then you decide how much time you're going to spend in the group and you organise your time. But as participation is very open, some people don't get involved or get involved in a few tasks and this situation causes lots of problems (…) actually, the most important weakness of the group right now is about participation… (Centli, *JRA*)

As can be anticipated, the tensions arising from the uneven levels of participation represents a serious threat to the practice of horizontality. For example, a number of behaviours based on resentment, anger and disappointment are reproduced within the groups as a result of the low levels of involvement of some members. We could argue, then, that although no formal penalties are applied in the collectives, these behaviours[121] are implicit and subjective expressions of punishment towards those participating less. Naturally, this is only one of the many problems found in the practice of horizontality. As an attempt to offer a more organized analysis, this and the following sections will unfold how the organizational structures and procedures work within the *colectivos*,

[121] For example, some members reproduce passive-aggressive behaviours or make ironic comments towards those who participate less.

whereas the next chapter (**Ch8**) will provide a deeper analysis of the challenges and problems of horizontality.

With the exception of *El Rebrote*[122], all the case studies formalize in their structures two types of membership: full member and sympathizer. Becoming a full member requires that the activist is willing to make an important commitment to the collective. They must be willing to take over responsibilities, to spend time in the groups' activities and to participate in the decision-making processes. On the other hand, a sympathizer contributes with specific tasks of the group but they do not commit to other organizational responsibilities such as attending gatherings and assemblies on a regular basis, taking part in the decision-making and so forth. Sometimes, the sympathizer membership is a step prior to becoming a full member. In other cases, this type of membership gives some people the opportunity to participate in a way that suits them, considering their own availability and personal circumstances. Setting up these two types of membership also allows a certain mobility amongst the members, who can step back or step forward in terms of their commitment and dedication to the group. The following quote gives a clear example of this mobility:

> I assume myself as a full member because I believe in the project and I want to spend most of my time on it (…) but with this ecological itinerant project I'm going to be away for a while (…) so I need to tell them: please, count me as a collaborator during this period because I won't be able to go to the assemblies or to participate in the decisions but I will be producing some material that can be published by the collective. (Aldo, *Subversiones*)

As stated by Aldo, even if you are a very committed member of the group, there are times in which you need to take a break from it. Hence, switching from member to sympathizer status gives the activists the formal option of stepping back but still remaining connected with the collective. On the other hand, sometimes these breaks happen without a change in the membership. For example, Gizze has always been considered a member of *JRA*, but due to her financial precariousness and the type of paid jobs that she performs (see **Ch8**, section 7, for an analysis of activists' financial

[122] In the case of *El Rebrote* there is only one formal type of group membership: the full membership. However, when they run outward projects, they usually welcome contributions from other feminist peers or friends who want to work in specific tasks. This could be understood as a sympathizer membership, but it has not been formalized yet by the group.

precariousness), there are certain periods of time in which she is not able to get fully involved in the activities of the group:

> I'm much more involved now than two years ago, when I'm unemployed I spend most of my time in the group (…) But there have been periods in which I haven't been present. I'm still informed of what's going on, I'm in touch with my *compañeros* but I just can't participate… (Gizze, *JRA*)

Gizze's experience provides a good example of the flexibility that characterizes the organizing structures of the groups. In this particular case, keeping a regular flow of communication with the members during the inactive periods and assuming more responsibilities during the active ones, have been essential strategies for maintaining a sense of belonging with the group.

In addition to the membership schemes, each *colectivo* has developed its own and very specific organizational structures, but they all tend to be flexible and open to adjustments when necessary. Usually, the activists rotate amongst internal sub-teams (see section 7.3) dealing with different political and organizational matters. Some common working groups are: a) Communications, dealing mainly with dissemination of political activities, news and ideological standpoints; b) Finances, team managing the finances of the group and seeking to find new self-managed ways of running their activities; c) Political Training, group in charge of the development of regular training sessions about political, organizational and methodological issues; d) Coordination, depending on the collective, some tasks linked to coordination are: following up the activities of the group, setting up the weekly agenda, doing networking with other movements and groups and so forth; e) Popular Education, team leading the planning and implementation of skills-sharing and political analysis workshops with social movements and grassroots groups. In the case of *JRA*, an extra sub-team is the group managing *'Bajo Tierra Ediciones'* Independent Publishing. Slightly different has been the organizational journey travelled by *Subversiones*. By the time I conducted my fieldwork, this *colectivo* was organized around a working team called the Editorial Board, integrated by four members who dealt with the operative aspects of the group. This structure was also based on the principle of rotation (see section 7.3), meaning that all the full members should eventually take part on the Editorial Board. However, over the past two years, and after a collective reflection that identified excessive concentration of power in this committee, this structure was

replaced by a more flexible scheme. Without giving up on the importance of structure, Subversiones has now simplified its functioning, advancing an organizational scheme based on the assembly as its core and flexible rotating sub-teams.

As the previous paragraphs show, unlike some radical sectors that strongly reject any form of structure as it could lead to unwanted hierarchies and concentration of power, the *colectivos* in this research are experimenting with new types of organizational structures based on horizontality and direct democracy. According to them, the lack of structure is actually a more risky strategy and it could easily lead to scenarios of covert domination within the groups. As Mina points out:

> Some anarchists and other collectives give less importance to the role of organization, they say: the less organization the better. They think that with structures they will get institutionalized (…) but this call for non-organization can also become a dictatorship, because when you don't have clear decision-making procedures, organizational structures and channels of participation (…) it is easy that only a few end up deciding… (Mina, *JRA*)

This viewpoint is similar to the idea of the 'tyranny of structurelessness' suggested by Jo Freeman in the early seventies, in her attempt to criticise the creation of structureless groups within the women's liberation movement (Freeman, 1972). Freeman (1972) believed that the lack of structure pursued by feminist groups concealed the existence of informal elitism. This elitism was expressed in a small number of members exerting power over the larger group, discouraging participation and collective responsibility. In spite of the similarities between Freeman's argument (1972) and the groups' discourse, it is paradoxical to find out that Freeman's argument has been used both politically and academically[123] to widely criticise the dynamics of autonomous movements inasmuch as they are seen as structureless and unable to consistently articulate their principles with their practice. Well aware of this paradox, Leach (2013) replies to those associating structurlessness with autonomous groups, and calls, instead for a rephrasing of the main political question about structure:

> …in my experience of consensus-based groups over the last 20 years, their goal has never been to avoid *structure* (although they have tried to create a

[123]See Smith and Glidden (2012) for an analysis of the tyranny of structurelessness in Occupy Pittsburgh or Hauptmann (2001) for a critique of participatory democracy.

> different *kind* of structure) (…) Rather, the central goal has been to avoid *formal hierarchy* and *systematic inequalities of power* (…) So the question isn't whether or not to have a structure, but *what kind of structure to have* that will maximize participation and prevent anyone from dominating the group. In other words, the real problem is not how to avoid the tyranny of structurelessness, but how to sustain structures of tyrannylessness (Leach, 2013, p.183, [italics in original]).

In line with Leach's argument, the *colectivos* taking part in this research do not reject structure or organization. On the contrary, they rely on their own organizational structures as a way to put horizontality into practice. The challenge for those aiming to unravel the logics of autonomous politics then, is not to deny the importance of organization in these movements and groups but to understand that their forms of organization 'do not take recourse to structures of hierarchy or centralized control (…) with a pyramidal chain of command' (Maeckelbergh, 2011, p.9). Instead, they embrace horizontal structures based on 'principles of decentralized, non-hierarchical consensus democracy' (Graeber, 2002, p.70). The following sections of this chapter will deepen the analysis of this aspect, exploring the approaches, strategies and methods used by the *colectivos* in their attempts to build horizontal organising.

7.3 Rotation and Team Working

Rotation is seen as a pivotal principle by all the case studies. By rotating positions, roles, tasks and responsibilities they aim to prevent particular groups or specific people from holding positions indefinitely. Thereby, they try to avoid 'hierarchies in terms of controlling information, contacts, and certain operational decisions' (Dhaliwal, 2012, p.262). As a consequence, rotation contributes to achieving a fairer distribution of roles to the extent that it fosters democratic and collective learning processes. This strategy empowers individual members and enables their participation in different projects and activities. As Julia points out:

> The principle of rotation implies that we all participate in different teams so we have the chance to learn. For example, I haven't been in Finances so I couldn't do what Guadalupe does right now. This means that eventually I need to rotate

> into Finances (…) that's the goal of rotation, that we can all try different tasks so that we are all qualified enough to undertake them… (Julia, *JRA*)

In line with the critique of the specialization and professionalization of politics already examined in **Ch4** (section 4.4.2), rotation seeks to prevent specialization as much as possible by fostering the collective learning of different skills. Furthermore, rotation is consistent with the anti-capitalist ethos (see section 4.2) as it challenges the specialization stemming from the capitalist model of labour division. In practical terms, the collective and rotational distribution of tasks seeks to prevent the division between those who usually undertake the qualified and enriching responsibilities and those who tend to perform the tedious and repetitive functions (Adamovsky, 2011). Esperanza, from *El Rebrote*, puts it in these terms:

> I don't think there is a hierarchy inside the group but there are some women who definitely stand out (…) we try to fight this internally by challenging the dynamics of the group (…) for example, by rotating all the time, we rotate who speaks, who moderates, who assumes the more silent chores, such as working in the kitchen for the workshops (…) it's a collective process that urges those who stand out to step back and those who struggle with public speaking, for example, to step up… (Esperanza, *El Rebrote*)

Esperanza explains how her group tries to prevent the division between intellectual or creative work and practical or manual tasks. Thanks to the strategy of rotation, the members from *El Rebrote* are able to undertake different responsibilities. As they become more self-aware of their own positioning within the group, they are able to challenge their own comfort zones and to step up when necessary.

JRA also tries to fight this division by using, for example, the phrase: "if you propose, then you implement". This idea counteracts the division between intellectual and operational work and the power dynamics resulting from it. Nevertheless, embracing rotation as a guiding principle does not prevent the *colectivos* from developing certain levels of specialization: 'there are people working in the same teams for years and there are some who have rotated a lot, it's also a personal decision…' (Gaby, *JRA*). Gaby addresses an important characteristic of rotation: although desirable, it is a flexible and non-compulsory strategy that relies mainly on the members' consistency and commitment to the principle of horizontality. This implies the acceptance of

specialization at a minimum level or as long as it does not threaten the overarching principles of the group. A feminist activist, for instance, acknowledges the specialization of specific tasks in her group:

> I'm usually the only one updating Facebook, it's not a problem for me (…) because I like searching for good stuff and sharing them on Facebook (…) Nico always designs the posters, Andrea always collects the money…we know we should rotate but this is not something to be super concerned about… (Paula, *El Rebrote*)

Paula brings up another nuance in the practice of rotation: accepting everyone's capacities and encouraging them to take over different responsibilities is very important in the enactment of horizontality. Nevertheless, this does not mean denying that some people may find it easier to undertake certain type of tasks and that their contributions can be very valuable for the collective[124]. Encouraging members' skills is not a problematic aspect. What could be arguable is whether rotation can succeed amongst members with uneven levels of expertise and political experience. **Ch8** (section 8.3) will go deeper into this issue, analysing how the activists' disparities regarding political experience and knowledge represent a major challenge to the practice of horizontality. Furthermore, section 7.7 in this chapter will detail the methods developed by the *colectivos* for sharing members' skills, experience and knowledge and how these strategies contribute to rotation and horizontality.

7.4 Speaking up for the group: the role of spokespersons

Giving voice to the group's views and proposals in broader networks and strengthening the political linkages with other organizations and movements is considered an important, albeit sometimes intimidating, role for the research participants. Unlike traditional organizations relying on leaders for the regular performance of these responsibilities, the case studies opt for rotating spokespersons or delegates as a way to obstruct centralization (Della Porta, 2005) and preventing the consolidation of a professionalised, fixed leadership (Adamovsky, 2011). As Abraham points out:

[124] Argument also found in Freeman (1972).

> …we've tried to '*horizontalizar'*[125] our political relationships as much as possible; this means that there won't be one single *compañero* undertaking this responsibility, we rotate so we can all learn how to handle these relationships, how to speak up in other political spaces, with other organizations (…) nobody was born to be a leader or to run the movement, we can all assume these tasks, even if they seem complicated… (Abraham, *JRA*)

Unlike other tasks in which making exceptions to the rotation rule is not very problematic (see Paula's quote above for a good example), the spokesperson role is considered a symbol of horizontality. That is why all the *colectivos* make great efforts to constantly rotate this responsibility. Spokespeople are not considered leaders in the traditional sense, but rather as messengers of the assembly's voice. Accordingly, they are expected to 'respect the decisions of their respective assemblies and do not present their own individual proposals as if they were the decision of an assembly' (Dhaliwal, 2012, p.262). As Dhaliwal (2012) argues, spokespeople should refrain from bringing their own agendas to broader political gatherings. Their role is limited and it consists in communicating the decisions made in the assembly.

In the case of the Chilean *colectivos*, the replacement of leaders with spokespeople draws mainly on the students' movement tradition, which has used this model as a way to guarantee that main decisions are backed up 'by rank-and-file student bodies' (Somma, 2012, p.303). As Paula comments: 'we all have light and we can shine whenever we want, when it's our turn to be spokesperson, for example, this nice idea learnt in high school which has had a huge impact on social organizations' (Paula, *El Rebrote*).

On the other hand, and as explained in **Ch5**, section 6.4, the Mexican groups are highly influenced by *Zapatista* politics and its rejection of fixed representatives: 'we are guided by Zapatistas principles, such as running assemblies, rotating tasks, (…) spokespeople…' (Jero, *Subversiones*). As with many autonomous movements, the Mexican case studies find in *Zapatismo* an important source of inspiration. Thereby, the Zapatista principle of rotating spokespersons is taken into account and applied in their own organizations.

[125] The action of making something horizontal.

7.5 Consensus Decision Making

Existing research shows that one of the most important features of autonomous movements across the world is their commitment to consensus-based decision making (see, for example, Chatterton and Pickerill, 2006 2010; Katsiaficas, 2006; Flesher, 2007; Dinerstein, 2015, Sitrin, 2006). The four case studies of this research concur with this global trend, considering consensus decision-making as a pivotal organizational tool in their quest for horizontality. As Erick puts it: '…we explicitly advocate for consensus (…) it gives us the possibility to reach an agreement, to understand each other, to try to make adjustments in our opinions and ideas for the good of the School' (Erick, *ECP*).

According to the research participants, consensus decision-making is both a principle and a strategy. It aims at reaching collective agreement in a way that includes the opinions, ideas and consent of all the members of the group. It is based on the principle that 'every voice is worth hearing and that every concern is justified' (Aerts, 2005). In consistence with the refusal of state-centred politics (see **Ch4**, section 4), consensus decision making entails a strong critique of majority voting inasmuch as it disregards the minorities' viewpoints in favour of prompt decision-making. Referring to this issue, Manu states:

> …we understand that voting can be the dictatorship of the majority; instead, we believe that we can reach a general understanding through dialogue. Of course our horizon needs to be the collective welfare, as an organization; you're not going to prioritize your pride over a stronger argument. In general, we try to make decisions by arguing, talking, through understanding, and not through the simple act of raising my hand and tell the other: you lost! (Manu, *ECP*)

Manu's opinion is shared amongst many activists from Chile and Mexico. According to whom, the use of the majority rule is undesirable as it aims to determine the entire group's viewpoint or action plan from a competitive approach. Under this approach, there is no interest in meeting or listening deeply to everybody's interests and expectations. This can easily lead to the so called 'tyranny of the majority' (Tocqueville, 2000) in which minorities are overlooked and excluded from the final decisions and as a result they may come to feel disempowered or marginalised by the process. By contrast, and in close relation to the affective politics approach discussed in **Ch6** (section

6.3), a consensus-based tradition stimulates the collective discussion and deliberation, fostering a culture of respectful and mindful listening. As a result, the collective spaces are perceived as more participatory, egalitarian and cooperative.

Commenting on the Argentinean case, Sitrin (2012) remarks on the importance of consensus decision-making as it allows people to speak and be heard: 'it is a politics of listening without judgement rather than creating power over one another' (p.70). Notwithstanding, if the goal of the groups is to foster an attentive listening and to come up with proposals that work for everyone (Seeds for Change, 2013), it is imperative to assume that more time will be needed for decision making processes. This is evident in all the case studies, which acknowledge the slowness of consensus versus voting but still advocate the former. The willingness to devote more time to reaching consensus is based on the belief that lots can be learnt from the process by itself. In other words, the experience of practicing consensus decision-making is considered far more important than being time-efficient. Nevertheless, this slowness can also be problematic when the groups need to make prompt decisions regarding, for example, their participation in unforeseen mobilizations:

> …sometimes our horizontality is a problem because we debate about everything for longer periods (…) for example, when the Movement for Peace emerged unexpectedly, we discussed a lot about the chances of this movement, how did we get into it, we planned three workshops, we were in the third one and the movement suddenly finished! [laughs] (Enrique, *JRA*)

The amusing way in which Enrique describes *JRA*'s experience with this nationwide movement highlights the potential incompatibility of a consensus oriented approach with rapid decision making. However, despite these issues, the research participants seem to favour consensus over quicker decision-making strategies:

> The exercise of talking and going in deep with the discussions is an underestimated value (…) This constant desire for deciding quickly does not allow that everyone take the time they need to reflect, and this ultimately leads to political problems because not all the members feel really interpreted or committed with the decision… (Toti, *ECP*)

If rapid decision making can lead to distrust, disengagement and feelings of exclusion, a consensus oriented approach aims to promote a 'respectful dialogue between equals (…) looking for win-win solutions that are acceptable to all' (Seeds for Change, 2013, p.6). As a consequence, the participants feel a greater commitment to the decisions made. Additionally, the deliberation process allows the participants to work through the differences of opinion, leading to alternative viewpoints that can be slightly or radically different from the ones proposed at the beginning of the discussion. In the words of Esperanza:

> …with voting we stop giving our opinions, it's to negate the richness of the discussion, because it's very common in *El Rebrote* that we start having certain points of view but later we end up thinking totally differently, we change our minds all the time and this is because we are learning to talk, to say what we think about something, to debate… (Esperanza, *Rebrote*)

Through the act of 'weaving together everyone's best ideas and key concerns' (Seeds for Change, 2013, p.6), people involved in consensus decision making tend to be more mindful of other participant's proposals. In this way, they develop a more flexible and open stance that often leads to creative and unexpected collective solutions. Furthermore, consensus does not aim to be reached through exhaustion or compromising, even though these practices are reproduced with more or less frequency in several *colectivos*. Prime, for instance, expresses his concern about the difficulties of reaching consensus in *Subversiones*, especially when difficult topics are addressed: '…it's tough to reach consensus with conflicting issues (…) sometimes you end up withdrawing your proposal even if you disagree with other people's ideas, because you don't want to spend the whole afternoon fighting…' (Prime, *Subversiones*). While Prime's observation shows that consensus-based approaches are not free from problems and challenges, Lore brings up another angle:

> I find the constant dialogue and striving for consensus in this group great, we always encounter each other. This is so nice, because in my previous group, despite the fact that we tried to decide by consensus, we never reached a common ground, ultimately it worked like: 'OK, whatever, let's do what you want'. We didn't want, or know how to discuss, we agreed only because we were exhausted.

> On the other hand, the way we organize with the girls is so different; I'm very happy and comfortable here. (Lore, *Rebrote*)

As consensus requires the involvement of the entire collective in the decision-making, this process is not free from challenges and difficulties (see **Ch8**). Both Prime and Lore, for example, identify exhaustion as a possible outcome of this approach. Yet, they also conclude that reaching consensus is a doable task as long as the right procedures are put in place.

In view of the above, the *colectivos* have made great efforts in designing and implementing original deliberation and consensus decision-making methods. As mentioned early in this section, previous research (Chatterton and Pickerill, 2006 2010; Katsiaficas, 2006; Flesher, 2007; Dinerstein, 2015, Sitrin, 2006) have acknowledged the importance of consensus decision-making in autonomous politics. Nevertheless, none of these authors focused specifically on the methods and practicalities involved in consensus decision-making. This research seeks to fill this gap. Now, why do these practicalities matter? As explained in the introduction of this chapter, details matter because they allow us to assess the consistency of *colectivos*' practices in relation to their political standpoints. Consensus decision making, for example, could be understood as a creative tool that transforms the refusal of state-centred politics and majority voting (see **Ch4**) into a viable alternative of democratic participation. But as with all the other principles of autonomous politics, consensus cannot just be decreed. Reaching consensus requires great effort and commitment. That is why *colectivos* are constantly developing a series of original steps and methods that can help making this process easier. In the section that follows, an account of these strategies will be presented.

7.5.1 Methods for Consensus Decision Making

As stated in the previous section, the case studies are constantly trying to make decisions based on consensus. These range from practical everyday decisions to organizational ones, short and medium term planning, political positioning and networking, among others. Some practical and logistical aspects reach consensus very quickly as no concerns or reservations are raised by the activists. For example, deciding where and at

what time the next meeting will be held, who will be in charge of designing the leaflet, who will attend the meeting with other organization and so forth. It is also common that the groups give a vote of trust to the sub-teams (see section 7.3), so they can make small operative decisions without necessarily consulting with all the participants.

The issues requiring the whole group's consensus vary according to each *colectivo*. Nevertheless, they all find it crucial to reach consensus when important political or organizational decisions affecting the group need to be made. Likewise, consensus is needed during the definition and planning of the goals and activities of the year or term ahead. In order to reach consensus, the *colectivos* have developed a number of tools aimed at insuring everyone's understanding of the issue to be discussed. These tools attempt to encourage a friendly environment in which all the members may feel free to express their thoughts, needs, expectations, concerns and suggestions, 'regardless [their] individual levels of articulateness, shyness or expertise' (Anders, 1990, p.141).

As the case studies do not surpass the 20 members, developing 'one to one' techniques is an attainable goal that allows everyone's voices to be heard. The *go-round technique*, for example, is implemented with the purpose of gathering the opinions of all the members involved in the decision making process and it consists in 'everyone taking a turn to speak without interruption or comment from other people' (Seeds from Change, 2013, p.96). This is a popular tool used by all the case studies in their meetings and assemblies: 'In the assembly we present the topics to be discussed and we all give our opinion there, sometimes we do it in order and each of us speak after the other, sometimes we all speak at the same time [laughs]…' (Nico, *Rebrote*). In this quote, Nico acknowledges that sometimes the deliberation process can be chaotic, contradicting the attentive listening expected of a consensus-based process. Nonetheless, despite the moments of messiness observed in all the case studies during specific assemblies or meetings, the broad group dynamics suggest a strong commitment to reaching consensus. Rocio, for example, puts it in this way:

> When we are making decisions, we try to ensure that everyone gives an opinion, and if some of us are silent, then we attempt to create the moment, the space or the trust so the members who are not speaking can actually speak and take part in the decision making (Rocio, *ECP*)

This Chilean activist addresses an important issue to be considered during any consensus decision making process: even if equal members' participation is highly desirable, the reality shows that due to several factors[126], not all of them engage in the debate as expected. For example, speaking up in an assembly can be an overwhelming experience, especially for those who are shy or less experienced. In response to this difficulty, the groups have developed a series of methodologies seeking to create participatory dynamics based on mutual respect and equality. During my ethnography I had the opportunity to participate in different variations of *brainstorming exercises*. They were applied during deliberation with the purpose of boosting the confidence of the members and encouraging greater involvement in the discussion. The photo displayed below shows the outcomes of a brainstorming exercise undertaken by *Subversiones* during my fieldwork. This exercise sought to gather ideas about the redefinition of aims of the group, along with mapping the activities and projects in which the members would like to get involved in the near future. Here, I was chosen along with another member as a facilitator of the session. We introduced the topics and raised the questions to be discussed. Then, all the participants had plenty of time to write on paper cards their opinions, sticking them on the flipcharts already set out for that purpose. Finally, we grouped the cards with similar ideas and prioritized the topics, finishing with an open discussion about the outcomes. This technique was meant to open the discussion about decisions to be made in an upcoming meeting and it proved to be very successful as it encouraged the active participation of relatively new members of the group.



Figure 9: Picture of Brainstorming Exercise, Subversiones, Mexico, 13th November 2013. Source: Personal Photo.

[126] Such as uneven levels of participation, uneven political experience, different personal characters, among others. Go to **Ch8** for a critical analysis of these issues.

Along with brainstorming, *splitting into small groups or pairs* is another technique often deployed by the groups during collective discussions. It allows them to debate and gather ideas more effectively and to present them in a systematic way in front of the big group. A good example of this strategy is the *carrusel* (in English, carousel). This is an interesting technique that caught my attention during my participation in several assemblies and meetings with *JRA*. They implemented this method when there was limited time for deliberation and more than one issue to be discussed. Depending on the number of themes to be debated, subgroups were formed and each one discussed one subject for a certain period of time. Then they all switched to a different group with a different topic. The same procedure was repeated until all the participants gave their opinion about all the topics in question. This strategy enabled the participation of members who may feel uncomfortable speaking in large gatherings. Moreover, it created a more supportive atmosphere in which everybody felt more confident to express their opinions.

Despite the fact that all the case studies engage with a series of participatory techniques, I found significant differences amongst the *colectivos* regarding their levels of expertise and familiarity with these methodologies. The Mexican collective *JRA* is clearly the group with most experience and knowledge in popular education and methods for participation. This *colectivo* has been able to systematise (see section 7.7) these methodologies and incorporate them into their regular processes, both in their internal dynamics and in their relationships with other movements and collectives. The systematic way in which *JRA* uses and integrates these methods can be seen as the result of more than 10 years of political practice along with a strong focus on popular education as a tool for social change (see **Ch6**, section 6.5). Additionally, there has been a conscious attempt to research strategies and methodologies that could help to develop horizontality. The research exercise developed by *JRA* activists has allowed them to produce a toolkit of methods and techniques that contribute to the creation of democratic and inclusive processes. Earlier in this section we presented some examples of techniques that encourage discussion, analysis and the collection of ideas and emerging proposals. These are all necessary actions for the subsequent reaching of consensus. Now, regarding the specific decision-making moment, *JRA* applies a method called ‘levels of consensus’. Julia explains this method as follows:

> …with the levels of consensus there are four ways to agree or disagree. The first level happens when you totally agree, therefore you fully support and commit with the initiative (…) a second level occurs when you agree but you can't fully commit to the initiative. In the third level you disagree but decide not to oppose the initiative, you let it pass. And the fourth level, which rarely happens, is when you block the initiative, you disagree and you strongly oppose to it (…) if this happens we start the discussion again in order to find out the reasons of this disagreement. Finally, if after the new discussions there is still intention to block, then the group reverses the initiative. (Julia, *JRA*)

The levels of consensus described by Julia are expressed in *JRA*'s assemblies in the form of hand signals. With the three other case studies the logic seems to be the same, but the levels of consensus are not clearly defined as in *JRA* and the procedures are far less structured.

As explained earlier, due to the common interests and fairly homogenous ideological viewpoints of the activists, blocking a proposal is a very unlikely scenario, especially if we consider the importance given by the *colectivos* to a politics of care and collaboration. Nonetheless, the mere existence of this option is consistent with the principle of horizontality, as it acknowledges the contributions of the minority and it stresses that 'no decision should be made without the consent of every member of the group' (Seeds from Change, 2013, p.28). In this regard, all the case studies accept blocking as a possible outcome in a decision-making process. However, no blocking was reported during my fieldwork and I was not told about any blocking in the past either. Instead, they move between level 1 and level 3 of consensus, prolonging the time of discussion to whatever it takes. In this way, they can arrive at a proposal actively supported by everyone or, at least, one on which the members can live with. As Flux comments: '…in the assemblies we all put the best of ourselves to reaching agreement, and if we can't reach full consensus, at least we get to a point in which all the parts are satisfied with the proposal.' (Flux, *Subversiones*, Mexico).

Overall, the findings in this section suggest that the methods of deliberation and decision-making implemented by the *colectivos* are fundamental tools without which it would be impossible to move towards horizontality. As Gustavo points out:

> …the method is what helps us to *horizontalizar*, because without talking in pairs, then in small groups and so on, we would have the same people speaking all the time (…) all the tools we have learnt from the collective spaces we have been involved in, those [tools] help us in flattening the contradictions of experience, age, gender. We know they exist but at least we try not to encourage them… (Gustavo, *JRA*)

An important lesson learnt from this section is that horizontality is not a magical recipe and it cannot be decreed. Throughout this section I presented a detailed account of the methods for consensus decision making employed by the case studies. These examples helped me to illustrate all the efforts made by these activists in their attempts to create a coherent political approach that shows consistency between its ideas and practices. Making these methods visible in an academic work was a very much needed task. At the risk of being confused with an activist handbook, this section is highly relevant for my thesis because it shows how these methods, carefully created and/or adapted by grassroots activists, become powerful tools seeking to neutralize privilege[127] and to foster horizontality.

7.6 Assembly as the Collective Heart of Autonomous Movements

As was mentioned in the previous sections of this chapter, when autonomous movements incorporate the idea of horizontality into their discourses and practices, they attempt to commit to a series of principles, social relations and organizational dynamics that are deeply anti-hierarchical and anti-authoritarian. As such, they recognize in everyone the same rights and capacities to decide collective goals and actions (Thwaites, 2013). Under this political approach, the assembly is considered the preferred social space in which the decision-making and other organizational processes take place.

According to the case studies, the assembly is broadly understood as the social space in which the members of the group, ideally all of them, get together with the aim of analysing, discussing, deciding, planning and assessing all manner of political, operational and organizational matters. Metaphorically, it represents the heart of these

[127]See **Ch8** for a critical analysis of experience and age inequalities and **Ch4**, section 3, for a critical analysis of gender privilege.

collective bodies as it keeps them alive, active and loyal to the core values of horizontality and autonomy.

The assembly plays an important role in the configuration of autonomous movements because it fosters equal participation as well as empowered subjects. Moreover, it becomes the sovereign space for making decisions. From a different angle, Adamovsky (2011) raises some concerns about assembly-based structures, claiming that they can be very frustrating and with limited scope as everybody is compelled to be involved in all the decisions, ranging from important collective strategies to everyday small tasks. This could potentially lead to slowness (see section 7.5) and inefficiency in the groups' projects, jeopardizing their political impact. A member from *Subversiones* seems to agree with this view, suggesting that the assembly should not be place for deciding every single aspect of their activist practice:

> …sometimes the horizontality maximized becomes bureaucratic, if you clearly know the principles of the group and you respect them, then you shouldn't discuss everything in assembly (…) we could make decisions without doing an assembly and having everyone's approval (…) I'm not saying that we need to skip all the assemblies but sometimes it's enough to decide based on the principles that we actually share… (Prime, *Subversiones*)

Without dismissing the core role of the assembly, Prime advocates for relying more on the members' commitment with the principles of the group. In other words, if all the activists are aligned with these common grounds, the assembly's approval is not required for every small decision to be made. Although Prime's words could suggest a critique of the excessive use of assemblies, it is important to mention that most of the research participants are happy with the role played by this structure in their respective *colectivos*. Additionally, and challenging Adamovsky's (2011) argument, the findings of this research show that not "all" decisions are required to pass the filter of the assembly. As section 7.5 of this chapter explained, the implementation of decision-making processes varies according to the type of decision to be made. When the groups have to deal with operative aspects or small tasks, sometimes deliberation and consensus decision making are not necessary. In other cases, these processes are required but they tend to be very quick and straightforward. Besides, at this level of decision making the working teams have some degree of autonomy. This means that they can decide on a number of issues

without waiting for the assembly. Drawing on these examples, it can be argued that the emphasis placed on the assembly as the ultimate decision-making body does not mean it is necessary to subject every single issue to collective deliberation, but rather to acknowledge the importance of this space when strategic decisions need to be made at the political and organizational level. As Gizze explicitly states:

> The assembly is the maximum decision-making structure (…) if we have to make political or strategic decisions; we will do that in the assembly and under a consensus-based approach, using all the necessary methods for making possible that consensus... (Gizze, *JRA*).

The assembly, then, operates as a central mechanism for the circulation and transparency of information, and as a result, it becomes the privileged space for collective deliberation, contributing to enhancing personal and group self-determination (Ouviña, 2011).

Most of the time, the case studies hold weekly assemblies, and in occasions they meet fortnightly. As the assembly is considered pivotal in the enactment of horizontality, the regular participation of the activists in this space is highly encouraged by the groups. Nevertheless, in spite of the importance given to the members' active involvement in the assemblies, the experience shows that it is very unlikely to get full attendance in all the meetings. Considering this fact, the absent activists are expected to respect the sovereign character of the assembly and to accept the agreements reached in this space. If substantial disagreements are encountered, alternative mechanisms of participation for those missing the assembly are also available. The use of email lists is a popular mechanism used by all the case studies for allowing discussion or dissent regarding the agreements made in assembly. It consists in sending the minutes of each assembly to the members' emails so they can be up to date about the latest decisions made by their peers: '…we rotate the taking of notes during the assemblies, then we send the minutes to everyone's emails so absent people can give their opinion about the decisions we made…' (Gaby, *ECP*).

Many problems result from the absenteeism in the assemblies and the disparities between those who participate regularly at the meetings and those who do not. As the next chapter (**Ch8**) will show, the uneven levels of participation is considered one of the most challenging issues experienced by the *colectivos* in their quest for horizontality.

The experience of engaging with horizontal and assembly-based politics shows that those who often attend the assemblies are up to date about the political and organizational aspects of the group; are able to share their points of view with the rest of the members and can take part in the decision making. By contrast, those who usually miss the assemblies do not actively participate in the collective discussions nor in the decision making process, a distinction that undoubtedly undermines the *colectivos*' attempts to reach horizontality. Gizze puts it in this way:

> When not everyone has the same chances of participation, the decisions get centralized in some members and it's not because we want to do that (…) the things get resolved in the assembly and if you're not there, because you couldn't attend or because you didn't want to or whatever, then you're not taking part of the decision and you end up accepting what others agreed… (Gizze, *JRA*)

This quote puts in evidence some of the greatest difficulties experienced by *colectivos* seeking horizontality: the concentration of power amongst those who are more involved in the activities of the group, resulting in the creation of informal hierarchies (see **Ch8,** section 8.4). These hierarchies are also observed in the very space of the assembly, as Ita points out:

> …we aim to be horizontal but even though there will be voices speaking louder due to different circumstances, maybe because they've been longer in the project, they know more, they have more experience, and this is not necessarily something negative but they do have more moral legitimacy… (Ita, *Subversiones*)

Despite the fact that Ita does not give a negative connotation per se to this distinction between average activists and those speaking louder, the fact that the later are seen as members with more moral legitimacy is a feature that clearly contradicts the essential principles of horizontality. Nevertheless, my findings also show that the groups are constantly struggling against these subtle hierarchies. For this reason, they innovate with participatory and popular education methods (see section 7.5 and **Ch6**, section 6.5) and try to address these challenges in their everyday lives and interpersonal dynamics. In the case of *JRA*, for instance, the use of advanced participatory techniques seeks to flatten the space of the assembly: 'an honest idea is *horizontalizar* the moment. If there are eight people in the assembly, we are going to make it horizontal despite the fact that

Cristian is a newcomer and Enrique has been an activist his entire life…' (Gus, *JRA*). Unlike *JRA*, *El Rebrote* has not paid that much attention to enhancing their participatory methods, but they have developed a culture of 'caring feedback' and self-criticism. This means that they are constantly encouraging honest conversations about the challenges and contradictions in their personal and activist practice. As Fabiola comments:

> …it's about horizontality, that's why we all need to be able to speak up in the assemblies or in broader audiences. We need to make efforts if we want to avoid reproducing these leaderships and that some of us become more prominent. For example, there are *compañeras* who are bright and know a lot and they attract attention for those things, but those of us who speak lowest or who are embarrassed of talking, we are constantly criticising and encouraging ourselves and I love that we have built the trust to do that… (Fabiola, *El Rebrote*)

Following Fabiola's words, it is interesting to notice how she agrees with Ita from *Subversiones* about the existence of members with more resources and who could potentially develop a leading role (see **Ch8**, section 8.6) in the assembly. However, she goes further by contesting this dynamic and by giving agency and responsibility to those who have remained less active, acknowledging their capacity to improve their skills.

Taken together, these results suggest that the space of the assembly is full of democratic ideas and practices seeking to recuperate people's self-governing capacities (**Ch4**, section 4.4.2) and to prefigure anti-authoritarian political alternatives (**Ch5**). Nonetheless, the analysis shows that many difficulties and contradictions are encountered in this space too (see **Ch8**). The findings from this section corroborate again that horizontality is not a pure form to be found within the sphere of autonomous movements. On the contrary, it is a 'constant struggle against verticality' (Holloway, 2010b, p.44) and as such, it requires great commitment and creative solutions to overcome the main challenges hindering this approach.

7.7 Sharing of Information, Knowledge and Experience

As discussed earlier, in their quest for horizontality the *colectivos* commit to a series of principles and strategies that try to flatten out and democratize their organizations. Using consensus decision-making, running regular assemblies and rotating roles and responsibilities are definitely some of the most important methods undertaken by the groups in their attempts to work horizontally. Nonetheless, these strategies could face serious difficulties if the differences of experience and knowledge between the members are not challenged or if there is a systematic imbalance in the amount of information that the activists hold. The research participants are well aware of these issues, hence, they place special attention on the exchange of information, knowledge and experiences.

With regard to the first point, the *colectivos* understand that disseminating all the relevant information amongst the members is essential for the good health of the groups. As Toti states:

> I believe that if you want to be horizontal, then informational asymmetries in which some members have more information than others need to be avoided. We are not talking about knowledge here but about having the elements you need in order to make a proper decision when required… (Toti, *ECP*)

This quote confirms again the importance given by autonomous activists to the practice of horizontality. Following Toti's words, it can be argued that informational asymmetries could jeopardize consensus decision-making and, therefore, the effective enactment of horizontality. This can be expressed in the concentration of crucial information amongst a closed circle of members. An activist from Mexico also raises this issue, acknowledging the difficulties in her group to fully embrace horizontal information flows. In the following quote, she refers specifically to the work of delegates dealing with political networking:

> …sometimes we fail because we concentrate too much the information about the movements and about the meetings that we attend, and sometimes the whole collective doesn't have enough information about what's actually going on with the other organizations. So, people in the assembly say: but you guys haven't told us about this, and that's true (…) it's difficult to make it possible but we do

try, we really want to share the information so everyone has the same info for the decision making process. (Julia, *JRA*)

Despite several difficulties such as lack of time in meetings and assemblies, uneven levels of participation, problems of communication and so forth, my findings suggest that autonomous movements try hard to develop open and horizontal information exchange between their members. Further research (Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006; Waterman, 2003) argue that this effort is not observed with the same degree in more vertical-type organizations. In contrast, it is suggested that vertical organizations, such as political parties, usually incorporate dynamics of closure and secrecy (Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006) and try to centralize and control the groups information's flows (Waterman, 2003).

The exchange of political and organizational experience and knowledge are also crucial elements for the practice of horizontality. The research participants show great awareness of the problems resulting from uneven political experience (see **Ch8**, section 8.3). As a consequence, they foster the development of spaces of self-education aimed at creating common ground amongst the members. The previous chapter expanded precisely on this aspect, identifying popular education and collective knowledge production as a defining feature of autonomous politics in Latin America (**Ch6**, section 6.5). The findings discussed in **Ch6** are similar to those found in Motta and Esteves's (2014) work on pedagogical practices of social movements. According to these authors, social movements develop formal and informal 'pedagogies and educational practices that enable the emergence and consolidation of counter-hegemonic politics of knowledge' (Motta and Esteves, 2014, p.12). These practices are usually guided by popular education principles applied both inwards and outwards. On the one hand, the *colectivos* develop learning strategies for their own political, organizational and technical training. On the other hand, they create external educational projects with other groups, social movements and communities in struggle, with the aim of fostering 'experimentation, reflection and collective learning' (Motta and Esteves, 2014, p.1). A detailed account of these external projects was already given in **Ch6** (section 6.5), so in what follows I will explore in greater detail the internal pedagogical strategies carried out by the case studies.

First of all, it is worth mentioning that each *colectivo* has developed very specific methods and procedures for self-education. *JRA* and *ECP*, for example, include in their structures a subgroup that deals with the regular planning and implementation of political and organizational training. In the following quote, Centli describes *JRA*'s self-education methodology:

> We have a commission that prepares the methodologies to discuss certain themes. We decide the themes early in the year and we run monthly or bimonthly sessions, depending on how busy we are. We have to prepare for the sessions, usually through the reading of some texts and during the day the delegates facilitate with participatory methods… (Centli, *JRA*)

Unlike *JRA* and *ECP* which follow a standard procedure for internal training, the remaining two case studies don't have permanent self-education sub-teams. In these groups, different members volunteer to facilitate pedagogical sessions when the need arises. *El Rebrote*, for instance, runs collective study sessions prior to its external gatherings. The aim of these sessions is to refresh the subjects to be addressed publically and to elaborate collective reflections about different topics, such as types of feminisms, patriarchy, gender violence, abortion and so forth.

With respect to the engagement with intellectual political debates, *JRA* and *El Rebrote* seem to be very open and committed to this practice. They are followed by *ECP*, which addresses some political debates, but it prefers to avoid others, especially those referred to political ideologies[128]. According to Toti, they try to be careful in this topic, because at the moment the group brings together an amalgam of political views and there is not one single standpoint defining the group: '…maybe we should discuss about our political definitions first and then think about training in these areas. We don't want to bypass anyone, because even deciding which author to read is a political choice…' (Toti, *ECP*). As discussed in **Ch5** (section 5.6), the *colectivos* do not adopt a single ideology but interesting theoretical-political amalgams that are unique and flexible. Drawing on these findings, Toti's concern mirrors *ECP's* refusal to impose a singular political reading of reality and its commitment to develop collective political definitions.

[128] For example, although they engage in informal discussions about Marxism, Anarchism and Feminism, they have not developed formal sessions to debate about these political standpoints.

Unlike the three other groups, *Subversiones* is very much focused on action; thereby the creation of formal spaces for political discussion is not considered a priority for the group. This is because the group relies on the previous experience and political affinity of its members for its effective functioning. On the other hand, the activists do allocate time for technical training, as they see these sessions as practical ways to foster horizontality. Each skills-sharing workshop is run by activists with more experience in the topic. For example, I was able to attend two technical workshops during my fieldwork. The photography workshop was run by Regina, a member of the group who also works as a professional photographer. The video workshop was run by Prime, another member who free-lances in video productions. In line with other organizational strategies previously addressed in this chapter (see section 7.3; 7.4; 7.5), the exchange of technical skills aims to foster rotation and to prevent the over-specialization and creation of experts who could potentially assume fixed roles within the group (see **Ch8**, section 8.3).

The action-based approach followed by *Subversiones* brings up another important dimension of the pedagogical practices of *colectivos*: the praxis by itself is political training. As Jero argues: '…we don't do political training but the practice itself is political training. Going and covering a struggle is teaching you politics' (Jero, *Subversiones*). The findings of this research suggest that an important part of the exchange of knowledge and experience occurs in the domain of the activists' everyday life (Motta and Esteves, 2014). This means that the political practice by itself engenders powerful processes of learning in which a wide range of skills, analysis and strategies are shared amongst the members, regardless of their political experience. In this regard, the sole action of getting together as an activist community fosters a flowing pedagogical cycle in which both the newcomers and the more experienced members are able to learn from each other. As a relatively new member of *JRA* points out:

> It's not uncomfortable that some members know more than you, because I do believe that we all learn from each other. In my case, I've been learning and updating myself from the previous discussions that the group had in the past. In this way, horizontality is not under threat because the guys try to recuperate these old topics so we can be up to date and include our own viewpoints. (Cristian, *JRA*)

In this quote, Cristian gives a positive outlook on the exchange of knowledge and experiences in *JRA*, suggesting a strong consistency between these processes of sharing and the striving for horizontality. However, it has to be mentioned that other *JRA* members and participants from the other case studies partly disagree with this view. Some of them perceive that, despite all the efforts made in regards to this matter, the existence of great dissimilarities regarding political experience or intellectual background hinders the possibility of reaching higher standards of horizontality. **Ch8** will provide a more detailed account of the challenges that the *colectivos* face when they bring together members with different political experience, skills and knowledge.

7.7.1 Induction Processes

Induction is another central strategy for the sharing of knowledge, information and experience that seeks to integrate the newcomers into the ongoing political work. Undoubtedly, *JRA* is the group that has built the most sophisticated induction methods for its new members. They usually run two to three specific meetings with potential members, in which they are told about the principles, organizational structures and activities of the group. They are also asked to read some basic texts about anti-capitalism and autonomous politics so they have the resources to assess their affinity with the core principles of the group and to decide whether they want to become a member or not. If the person finally decides to stay, one or two members have the role of making sure that the newcomer feels welcomed and integrated into the group's dynamics. As Julia recalls: '…when I entered the group, two *compañero*s supported me for 4 months, they asked me how I was feeling, if I was feeling integrated (…) they explained things to me, I asked them questions, it was a very easy and smooth entrance into the group…' (Julia, *JRA*). If Julia's initiation into *JRA* was perceived as easy and smooth, Cony's entry to *ECP* was experienced in a totally different way:

> In the past we didn't have the induction process that we have now (…) when I went to the first meeting, they said: 'Hi, how are you?' and they kept discussing their issues. I tried to give my opinion but I didn't understand a word [laughs] (…) no one told me: look, this is the school, we have these documents if you want to go through them, you can participate in this way or in that way, it wasn't a friendly arrival. The other girls who entered with me, they couldn't continue,

> because it wasn't a dynamic that invited you to participate, it wasn't horizontal, no one introduced us to the space. (Cony, *ECP*)

By the time that Cony entered the group, the lack of induction and integration strategies led to unwelcoming dynamics which strongly contradicted the principles of horizontality. After a collective reflection about their internal dynamics, the group decided to initiate an induction process with all the new members, consisting in an introductory meeting that explains the mission, principles and activities of *ECP*. The new members are also provided with written materials explaining the core aspects of the *colectivo*.

From a different angle, groups such as *Subversiones* and *El Rebrote* do not conduct formal mechanisms of induction, instead they rely on informal strategies. Some of these strategies include: a) casual conversations before and after the group's gatherings; b) chats in other social spaces, such as a pub, a cultural event or a café; c) updates and information exchanges during the meetings; d) informal apprenticeships in which both the experienced activists and newcomers get together in order to perform different types of tasks. In the case of *Subversiones*, a new member usually joins an experienced one in the coverage of a story. Here, through learning by doing, the newcomers end up understanding the practice and principles guiding the group's actions. On the other hand, as *El Rebrote* decided to keep the group's number small, there are not too many new members entering the collective and the newcomers have been women who either took part in the forerunner feminist group (*La Ruptura*) or who have previous activist experience. These specific conditions facilitate the development of informal processes of induction in which the new participants easily get up to date and integrate into the group.

7.8 Concluding Remarks

This chapter has provided a detailed account of the structures and everyday strategies carried out by Latin American *colectivos* in their quest for horizontality. In light of the thorough analysis presented in this chapter, I suggest that these political actors put great efforts into reaching consistency between the discourse and practice of horizontality. As the previous sections have shown, the case studies express this commitment through the creation of democratic and non-hierarchical methods and structures seeking to prefigure a radical and antiauthoritarian politics. The sum of these practices, coupled with a clear political standpoint (analysed in **Ch4** and **Ch5)**, shape an organic and feasible approach to social change that challenges state-centred politics and commits to a politics from below.

As opposed to the arguments that equate autonomous politics with structurelessness and ineffectiveness, in this chapter I have proved that *colectivos* strongly rely on organizational structures and are effective in many fronts, such as in integrating new members, creating a culture of inclusivity and making consensual decisions, among others. Unlike more top-down approaches to social change, the structures devised by *colectivos* are flexible and non-hierarchical. Through this approach, they seek to maximise participation and to neutralize privilege and systematic power inequalities. Rotation, for instance, is an essential principle found in the structures of all the case studies. By rotating roles, tasks and responsibilities, *colectivos* foster a more democratic distribution of the workload, challenging the specialization of politics, so common in the state-centred paradigm. Following the same rationale, the replacement of traditional leaders for rotating spokespersons aims to prevent the consolidation of fixed leadership and to emphasise the collective voice of the assembly. Under this approach, the assembly plays a pivotal role, as it provides a flat and democratic space for decision making and other organizational processes. It also operates as a central mechanism for the sharing of information, becoming the privileged space for collective deliberation.

Coupled with the previous elements, consensus decision making is another choice made by autonomous activists in their attempts to build horizontal politics. The focus on consensus represents a radical rejection of majority voting and state-centred politics and the prefiguration of alternative ways of democratic participation. The findings of this

chapter demonstrate that the creative methods of deliberation and decision making crafted by *colectivos* are so essential that without them the horizon of horizontality is nothing more than an unrealistic dream.

Together, all these structures and methods try to flatten out and democratise autonomous spaces. Nevertheless, the uneven political experience in the groups is an aspect that seriously jeopardises the enactment of horizontality. Well aware of this issue, the groups develop a series of spaces of self-education and induction seeking to create common grounds amongst the activists. Along with the differences in terms of political experience and knowledge, many other difficulties and contradictions are encountered in the practice of horizontality. This chapter insists that horizontality is not a full property to be achieved but a constant struggle. As Ouviña claims: '…there is no horizontality in pure form, but several and fluctuating attempts to approach to it' (2011, p.277). The methods and structures discussed in this chapter illustrate some of these attempts, but a more detailed analysis of the tensions and problems hindering these practices is needed. The next chapter (**Ch8**) will do this job, focusing completely on the difficulties and challenges jeopardising the enactment of horizontality.

CHAPTER EIGHT:

CHALLENGES OF HORIZONTALITY

8.1 Introduction

In the previous two chapters I examined the main features of the praxis of autonomous politics, giving special attention to the analysis of horizontality. Through a 'thick description' (Denzin, 1989) of the structures and strategies implemented by my case studies I have been able to present autonomous politics as an effective and coherent approach to social change. However, this alternative way of 'doing' politics is far from being a perfect utopia. **Ch6** and **Ch7** addressed some of the problems and challenges in the practice of autonomous politics in general, and horizontality in particular; but a more thorough analysis of these issues is still required. This final empirical chapter aims to fill this gap, by exploring in detail the main obstacles to the enactment of horizontality.

I have divided this chapter into seven main points. The first point refers to the problems and tensions derived from the uneven levels of participation in *colectivos*. Second, I expand on the challenges of horizontality due to the uneven degrees of political experience, skills and knowledge among the activists. Thirdly, I refer to the disparities in member's influence over deliberation and decision-making. The fourth section explores the tensions between activists who tend to overwork and those who withdraw from tasks and responsibilities. Next, I examine how *colectivos* deal with the emergence of informal patterns of leadership. In the sixth section I discuss the relationship between financial precariousness and participation. Finally, I ask whether there is anyone to blame for the hindrances of horizontal politics, exploring the viewpoints of highly involved activists and those with low and moderate levels of participation.

8.2 Uneven levels of participation

As was pointed out in the previous chapter (**Ch7**), an important challenge in the practice of horizontality is finding a balance between schemes of flexible participation and organizing structures that stand against hierarchies, over-specialization and workload inequalities. In an ideal scenario, all the members would be aware of their freedom to choose how much they want to get involved in the *colectivos*, but as their availability and level of commitment would be very similar, they would participate evenly in the collectives. Usually, the research participants imagine these ideal conditions, but they are well aware that reality is far more complicated. In other words, they know that it is improbable to achieve equal levels of participation just as it is unlikely to achieve full horizontality within their groups. Leaving aside the imaginary scenarios, the actual performances of the case studies show that the uneven levels of participation create a series of tensions and dilemmas that challenge the implementation of a horizontal agenda.

El Rebrote provides us with a good example of the tension arising between horizontality and the real involvement of the group's members. The uneven levels of participation in the former feminist group (*La Ruptura*) was precisely one of the causes that led to the dissolution of the collective and the subsequent creation of *El Rebrote*: '…it happened a lot that the same women were always participating in the projects and the others formed an almost separate group; it was uncomfortable to say that we were an horizontal group when the tasks were not evenly distributed…' (Andrea, *El Rebrote*). The participation's disparities and the perceived inconsistency between these dynamics and the principle of horizontality caused a general feeling of discomfort amongst the members of *La Ruptura*, who decided to cease their collective activities until the new group was set up one year later. Consequently, *El Rebrote* was born with the intention of fighting this tendency as much as possible and learning from the former collective experience. Fabiola explains this transition as follows:

> …we agreed that we wanted to get organized again but with a different dynamic (…) we don't want to make the same mistakes, we don't want to allow the same people to take over all the tasks. We also decided that we didn't want to be a large group such as *La Ruptura* (…) despite we talk about this all the time, it's

> inevitable that some girls undertake more work than others… (Fabiola, *El Rebrote*)

As mentioned by Fabiola, *El Rebrote* emerges after an exercise of critical self-assessment regarding the political and organizational dynamics present in the former feminist group. Remaining small and with members who have similar availability, commitment and political experience (almost all of them were members of *La Ruptura*) have been some of the strategies implemented by the feminists in order to prevent great inequalities in the levels of participation. As expected, they have not proved to be perfect and disparities in women's participation still exist although at a much smaller scale than in the preceding group. Undoubtedly, these choices bring up several questions and doubts about the scope and replicability of autonomous politics. Thwaites (2011), for example, wonders to what extent autonomous movements become an effective political option and not only isolated and micro collective projects. In the case of *El Rebrote*, they prioritize a small-scale project, but as we have seen in **Ch6** (section 6.6), they also engage with broader networks and actions oriented towards the expansion of autonomous feminism, in particular, and autonomous politics in general.

The articulation between flexible participation schemes and the practice of horizontality inevitably leads to interpersonal and organizational tensions that do not find easy solutions. The activists advocate for flexible organizational approaches inasmuch as they embrace the value of freedom, self-determination and antiauthoritarianism. However, they also identify many problems resulting from this flexibility. As this chapter will show, the emergence of informal leadership, overworking, concentration of tasks amongst a few people and inequalities in the members' influence over deliberation and decision making, among others, are some of the most important issues that challenge the enactment of horizontality within *colectivos*. In the following quote, Abraham makes clear how his group is at a crossroads between the value of flexibility and the problems arising from it:

> It is not right to demand of everyone the same work pace that some of us have, because there are some people who simply can't commit more, and this flexibility is something that I've always loved from the group and I wouldn't want to give this up (…) but this also brings us several problems, starting from the concentration of work… (Abraham, *JRA*, Mexico)

The over-concentration of tasks and responsibilities in subgroups of activists is an issue found in all the case studies, even in *El Rebrote*, a group that due to its size and homogeneity has reached more uniform levels of participation. According to my findings, some participants find the coexistence of members with very different degrees of involvement and motivation problematic, as these inequalities hinder horizontality. Nevertheless, more pragmatic readings of the situation are also available in the scholarship on autonomous movements. Thwaites (2011), for example, believes that it is inevitable to find more active members in a political group. These are the ones who usually assume more responsibilities, commit to the collective organization, transcend the immediate and implement a number of actions for the group.

Time availability is another variable that influences the levels of participation in the *colectivos*. Time constraints derived from paid jobs, studies, other political commitments and/or family responsibilities are reported as important conditions that partly explain the disparities in the members' involvement. As a consequence, the groups have had to take into account this dimension, modelling flexible organizational structures (**Ch7**, section 7.2). As Xilo points out:

> …the organizing structure is based on the time that the members can devote to the group, because we know that everyone has other jobs and activities to do. A problem comes with this, though, and it's that the tasks are undertaken by a few people… (Xilo, *Subversiones*)

The research participants understand that not everyone can spend the same time in the groups and that the acceptance and respect for the different levels of activist involvement should be a common ground for all of them. It is interesting to notice, though, that this objective analysis loses strength when the members, usually the most active ones, correlate time availability with personal commitment and motivation. In other words, when they realize that some members do not invest more time in the *colectivos* because they do not want to go further with their commitment or because they prioritize leisure activities, different negative emotional responses emerge from both the activists spending more time in the groups and the less active ones. Toti, for instance, provides an interesting illustration of a common emotional reaction:

> …the workload disparity has been a historical problem in the *ECP* (…) I'm always recriminating, telling them: why are you not doing this? It's very hard for

> me to accept that not all of us have the same commitment (…) availability and willingness to do what needs to be done. I also struggle to express what I feel in a way that is constructive… (Toti, *ECP*)

Frustration, anger, disappointment and recrimination are the most common emotional responses emanated by activists when they see how certain members opt for a very narrow participation as opposed to the almost full time commitment that they embrace. As a consequence, the less active members may feel judged, guilty, disempowered and excluded, withdrawing even more from the groups' activities. Regarding this point, it is interesting to notice that the literature informing the enactment of autonomous politics in the West (see, for example, Dhaliwal, 2012; Flesher, 2007; Chatterton and Pickerill, 2010 Routledge, Cumbers and Nativel, 2007; Smith, 2013) does not report similar emotional tensions resulting from the differences in the intensity of participation. They do report autonomous activists' discomfort in relation to informal leadership or members having more influence in deliberation and decision making, but disappointment and recrimination towards the less active members does not seem to be a feature in these groups. As Smith (2013) points out, the majority of alternative organisations operating on a horizontal plane accept the freedom of their members to participate or not in the groups' activities, in function of their own needs and abilities. Perhaps the emotional responses deriving from the tension participation/horizontality exist in these Western spaces but they have been understudied. I venture to suggest a different hypothesis here: while Western autonomous projects (occupy movements, global justice networks, social centres and so forth) emphasise contingent, open and flexible models of participation that are consistent with network organizing and with 'the fluid movement of individuals between political spaces and nodes in [those] network[s]' (Flesher, 2007, p.339); Latin American *colectivos* find it more difficult to embrace this flexibility due to their *sui generis* synthesis of political traditions. As discussed in **Ch3** and **Ch6**, the case studies, as well as other Latin American movements, combine different political approaches, such as anarchism, Marxism, feminism and indigenous traditions. They also acknowledge the legacy of the Latin American revolutionary movements of the sixties and seventies, yet they remain very critical of the political goals and organizational strategies undertaken by their predecessors. I see this historical legacy as pivotal in the internalization of a militant ethos amongst radical Latin American activists. Although they develop an entire different approach to political practice, they seem to share with

the former tradition (sometimes symbolised in Guevarism, see **Ch3**, section 3.4.1) an understanding of militancy as a life priority that demands high levels of discipline and commitment. In a feedback meeting with the members from *El Rebrote*, they agreed with my hypothesis presented above but also added a new element. According to them, the Latin American militant ethos draws on the historical legacy of popular movements but also on the urgency of the struggles developed in the region. Unlike countries from the Global North in which the dismantling of the welfare state is a relatively recent phenomenon, the history of dispossession, injustice and misery in Latin America is much older and violent, therefore embracing militancy as a life priority is seen both as a duty and a necessity. Similar were the opinions given by *JRA* activists in our feedback meeting. Agreeing with the Chilean feminists, they believe that the militant ethos is a necessity in the region. According to them, only a stronger culture of resistance can oppose the levels of violence and repression being enacted by several Latin American governments. Moreover, they argued that the militant ethos embraced in Mexico is also informed by the indigenous traditions and their example of building strong social and political communities in their everyday lives. Finally, they believe that my hypothesis can also be applied within Mexico itself, as in the recent years a more 'rhizomatic' ethos within social movements has emerged, echoing the contingent and fluid type of activism dominant in the West and conflicting with the militant ethos that they embrace.

In its complexity, this militant ethos could partly explain why certain activists struggle with the low levels of participation that some members prefer to maintain. Moreover, it allows us to analyse horizontality in relation to the specific contexts in which it is pursued and to understand the greater challenges that the quest for horizontality entails in the Latin American context.

8.3 Uneven political experience, skills and knowledge

Undoubtedly, the disparities of the members in terms of their political experience and knowledge represent a major challenge to the practice of horizontality. As **Ch7** (section 7.7) has shown, the *colectivos* try to challenge these asymmetries, by deploying, for example, formal and informal pedagogies aimed at levelling the skills and knowledge of their members. Although these efforts definitely help in the creation of a common ground amongst the members, dissimilarities between them still persist. On the one

hand, those with more political experience have had the chance to improve their analytical and public speaking skills and to boost their confidence. On the other hand, the beginners are just starting this learning process, thus they feel less confident about performing tasks and responsibilities in the collectives. Quique, another member from *JRA*, puts it in this way:

> A problem of horizontality is that there are some people who think with a certain speed and those who already thought the same but ten times faster. Or those who silence themselves because the most experienced ones have a better speech (…) sometimes these situations create subordination and specialization within the group: 'if they know more, then it's better that they do the things that need to be done'… (Quique, *JRA*)

This activist warns us about the potential risks of having members with differing levels of experience in the *colectivo*: while the less experienced activists can become subservient to the senior ones, the more experienced ones may become over-specialized, circumstances that are not expected from groups claiming to follow horizontal principles. In general, the research participants agree that the uneven levels of political experience are unavoidable, but they insist that more should be done in order to counteract their potential side effects. In the case of *ECP*, for instance, most of its members recognize that they are not developing enough skills-sharing spaces within the group and this inevitably affects the practice of horizontality. In the words of Gaby:

> I'm not sure if we are fully horizontal (…) there are people with many years in the group and others with less time. We don't have the same level of training and experience (…) the more experienced ones are super important in the group (…) there are activities that they know well so they keep doing them, and not because they impose this, but because we are scared so we don't volunteer… (Gaby, *ECP*)

As explained above, an important issue arising from the uneven levels of political experience is the disempowerment felt by the newcomers. They understand the rationality behind horizontal participation; nonetheless they feel scared or unable to cope with the tasks or responsibilities of the group: 'I don't feel ready to take responsibility in many things (…) the other guys have been activists for ages (…) so they work faster and I still need some time to understand the things they are talking about…' (Cami,

ECP). This quote is another illustration of the difficulties experienced by new members, who end up conceding some sort of authority to the more experienced activists. As a consequence, the latter are seen as indispensable and leading figures in spite of the anti-hierarchical and horizontal principles guiding the *colectivos*.

Probably due to this perceived distance between more and less experienced activists, the *ECP*'s newcomers introduced the terms: 'old' and 'new activists' in their everyday interactions. According to some *ECP* members, it is important to be cautious even when it comes to language, as the use of this terminology could potentially promote the establishment of informal hierarchies amongst the members. As Erick reveals:

> …people began to use the terms the 'new ones' and the 'old ones', and I said, let's stop with this shit, why are we making this distinction? We understand that there are people who are just entering the group and that it will take some time for them to feel confident in the space, but let's do everything in our hands to make that confidence possible. Seniority here doesn't command… (Erick, *ECP*)

The call to trust in the newcomers' capacities and stopping the distinction between experienced activists and beginners was an important step taken by the *ECP*'s members, but relying solely on this action would barely challenge the asymmetries present in the groups. Indeed, just as with the other components of horizontality, aiming for full equality of knowledge and skills is an aspiration that mobilizes the members but which cannot be pursued in absolute terms.

8.4 Disparities in members' influence over deliberation and decision making

Another challenge to the practice of horizontality refers to the differing degrees of influence that the activists have over deliberation and decision making. Two intertwined issues were identified as the main reasons for these disparities: uneven levels of participation (section 8.2) and uneven levels of political experience, skills and knowledge (section 8.3). Regarding the first issue, the activists note a clear correlation between intensity of participation and influence over debating and decision making. Guadalupe puts it in this way:

> …there is a problem that several organizations wanting to be horizontal need to face (…) and it's that the difference in participation hinders the practice of horizontality. If you participate less, you are not in the meetings and assemblies enough and so you end up deciding less (…) and those who participate more, they have to assume more tasks, they are regularly in the assemblies, therefore they decide more, if you are not there, no way you're going to communicate by telepathy… (Guadalupe, *JRA*)

The correlation between participation and influence is straightforward: the more active members attend more assemblies where deliberation and decision making processes take place, therefore they have more chances to be heard and to influence the collective decisions. On the contrary, those who have low levels of participation are less present in meetings and assemblies; hence, they have fewer opportunities to influence the collective decisions. With this dynamic, the more active members may end up concentrating information and deciding for the rest, a scenario that could lead to the concentration of power and creation of de facto hierarchies within the groups. A member from *Subversiones* agrees with this analysis, by suggesting that inequality in decision making is one of the greatest challenges in the implementation of a horizontal agenda: 'the centralization of the decision making processes has been one of the biggest problems (…) this happens because we decide to delegate responsibilities in the members who are always there…' (Flux, *Subversiones*). Interestingly, this activist acknowledges that the less active members, such as himself, have contributed to the reproduction of centralized decision making by letting others take over most of the responsibilities of the collective.

But attending the gatherings in which deliberation and decision-making take place does not guarantee that power inequalities will be fully overcome. As Maeckelbergh (2013) argues, having physical access to assemblies and meetings is not a synonym for inclusive participation. According to Maeckelbergh (2013), more than focusing on attendance, autonomous groups should foster meaningful participation, which implies 'the ability to influence decisions being made as well as determining which decisions need to be made in the first place' (p.32). This leads us to the second main element affecting decision making in the groups: the sharp differences in members' political experience, skills and knowledge. As already explained in section 8.3, the years of political practice, familiarity with political and organizational theories and methods, the quality and

quantity of activist trainings and so forth, are pivotal elements that define the enactment of horizontality. At the level of the assembly, for example, even if the groups implement a series of mechanisms of participation aimed at *horizontalizar* the discussion, divisions between members still occur (see **Ch7**, section 7.5 and 7.6). Centli explains this as follows:

> There is a division between those who participate more in the assemblies and those who don't (…) we know it's up to them but this restricts them because they don't feel they are being part of the decisions we make (…) if we are deciding by consensus then they should say what they think, even if it's basic, we know that not all of us have the same training but it doesn't matter, the voices of everyone are heard here… (Centli, *JRA*)

According to Sitrin (2012), the principle underpinning autonomous groups' practices is that everyone should speak and be heard 'with the same equality and intention' (p.79). However, what tends to happen in the deliberation and decision making spaces is that the most experienced activists are able to articulate their thoughts and proposals better, whereas the less experienced struggle to speak up in front of the assembly. As Wilkinson (2009) remarks, although consensus decision-making is an attempt to give voice to all the activists involved in a group, 'those who do not have the confidence to speak up can often get sidelined in the decision-making process.' (Wilkinson, 2009, p.39)

During my militant ethnography I also noticed that certain members with lower levels of participation find it very difficult to express their opinions and challenge the ideas of the more active and experienced activists, even if they disagree with them. Here, the two issues identified as the causes of the inequalities of influence (uneven levels of participation and uneven levels of political experience, skills and knowledge) intertwine and trigger this kind of reaction. Here is an example from Ita, a member of *Subversiones*:

> There is an informal hierarchy (…) despite the fact that we all have a voice, some voices are stronger than others (…) this happens with a founder member of the group, he has more weight because he started the project (…) sometimes I disagree with a decision but I think: well, he does a lot for the group and I don't, if I don't have a better proposal then I don't question the decision and even if I have one, I don't have the time or the influence to implement it. (Ita, *Subversiones*)

As mentioned above, the disparities regarding intensity of participation and political experience have a direct effect on the groups' dynamics. Ita's words are a good example of this: she does not feel comfortable disputing proposals or suggesting original ideas to the collective, even if she wants to. This is due to her perception that members with low or moderate participation, as in her case, do not have any authority to take an active voice or to debate the viewpoints of the more active and experienced participants. Other members of *Subversiones* are aware of this issue and insist that the spirit of the *colectivo* is to make sure that all voices are heard, no matter how much they work. As Sari states:

> Who works more, doesn't decide more! This is a collective project, it's great that some people can spend more time in the group, but we need to create a communal approach, no one can think that he or she has a sort of authority (…) we developed some kind of karma, a nasty and debilitating guilt, a great need to do more but feeling ashamed for being unable to do so. We've tried to change our mind-set: if we can't, then we can't, we're going to give what we can and want, respecting our decisions and acknowledging that any contribution is precious… (Sari, *Subversiones*)

There seem to be a sense of guilt amongst some activists, as expressed here by Sari, who blame themselves for being unable to commit and devote more time to the group and, as a consequence, end up accepting the ideas and proposals made by others. In the case of *Subversiones*, there is an open acknowledgment of this situation and concrete actions have been taken in order to modify this belief. I had the chance, for example, to participate in several formal and informal gatherings where the activists got together with the purpose of talking openly about these issues. Here, they reinforced the importance of each member's contributions, no matter the level of participation or experience that they had.

8.5 Intensity of Participation: the tensions between overwork and withdrawal

As already explained in the previous sections, the different levels of participation observed in the case studies represent a great challenge for the praxis of horizontality. A specific consequence of these disparities is the discomfort felt by the more active members, who perceive that the lack of commitment of their peers compels them to

undertake an excessive workload in their *colectivos*. In order to foster schemes of participation that are flexible and anti-hierarchical, but at the same time effective and horizontal, the activist community should be able to speak openly and honestly about the amount of work that they can and want to undertake. Nonetheless, the reality of the case studies shows that on several occasions members' withdrawal from tasks and responsibilities happens in silence and without further notice. For several members, this behaviour is seen as irresponsible and unfair and it is considered a significant threat to the good health of the groups. Reflecting about his group, Richi states: '…one of our biggest conflicts is the irresponsibility, when you commit, when you say you're going to do a certain task but in the end you're not there when the day comes…' (Richi, *ECP*).

Some research participants believe that the problem is not just the lack of engagement, but the activists' incapacity to communicate assertively their limits and real availability. Centli, for instance, observes this tendency in the internal dynamics of *JRA*: '…some members don't express clearly the way in which they are going to participate (…) they don't say explicitly: I can't participate right now or I'm going to contribute with something small…' (Centli, *JRA*). Interestingly, the silent withdrawal of tasks occurs in *JRA* despite the existence of explicit procedures for replacing those who need to take a step back from their responsibilities:

> There is a replacement system, if you need to finish your thesis; then you are replaced by someone else who finishes your task, this is the positive version. But what usually happens is that the one who withdraws from the work doesn't say a word, so nobody does what they left unfinished, then we don't meet our agreements and tensions arise between those who participate more and those who participate less. (Enrique, *JRA*)

As explained by Enrique and other research participants, the members' incapacity to inform the *colectivo* promptly when they cannot cope with their tasks, triggers other problems for the organization. Failure to comply with collective agreements is one of these problems. At the same time, tensions between the members become another serious problem, as some may feel that their work overload is a direct consequence of others' lack of commitment. Nevertheless, it would be inaccurate to state that this is the only cause of activists' overworking. Drawing on the literature about activism and personal sustainability (Cox, 2010; Chen and Gorski, 2015; Rettig, 2006; Barry and

Dordevic, 2007, Rodgers, 2010, among others), it can be argued that overwork is a very common trait shared amongst many activist communities across the globe, not always derived from uneven distribution of work. In many cases, overworking is the activists' response to a world full of injustices, exploitation and suffering and it is seen as the best moral choice to be made in a context of emergency. In her work with London activists of Amnesty International, Rodgers (2010) notes how they embody a culture of selflessness, based on the idea of sacrifice and self-inflicted pressure. Despite the different nature of the activists and geographies under study, Rodgers' (2010) findings resonate with some of the features observed in some of my research participants, who seem to subordinate everything else in their lives to activism: '…sometimes we are overwhelmed by the work in the group and we don't have time to sleep or money to eat, and then we think: hang on a minute, I don't have money to eat but I have time to write?' (Sari, *Subversiones*). As there is so much to be done, they devote most of their time to their political practice, a dynamic that has important consequences at the organizational level, but even more importantly, at the personal level. In the above quote, Sari reveals how the work overload in *Subversiones* leads them to financial precariousness (see section 8.7) and to deprive themselves of their sleeping time. But the sacrifices made by the activists are also intertwined with satisfaction and a sense of reward for their work. In the following quote, Beto illustrates both the positive and negative impacts of overwork in his personal life:

> The project is exhausting; I think I aged ten years faster than I should, because it's everyday work, I have to be attentive 24 hours a day, working at nights, in the early mornings, always checking the phone, calling, coordinating (…) but in personal terms *Subversiones* is one of the most interesting processes I've ever lived; I wouldn't change it for anything. (Beto, *Subversiones*)

Exhaustion, tiredness, stress, burnout and interpersonal conflicts are some of the effects that work overload may have on the activists. However, despite acknowledging the dark side of overwork, they seem to prioritise the ultimate goals of their collective projects, highlighting the positive outcomes that their hard work brings. As Abraham mentions:

> …sometimes we work until two or three in the morning (…) we overwork and we exploit, we get angry at each other but after a couple of hours we are fine again (…) sometimes I feel: I'm done, I'm tired, but then I see all the work that

needs to be done, the amazing project we are creating and that cheers me up… (Abraham, *JRA*)

For many of the research participants, the work that needs to be done in order to build a better world never ends. As Barry and Dordevic (2007) argue, 'while activists are deeply concerned and stressed about the amount of work they have to do, they almost *universally accept this level of work as an inevitable fact of activism*' (p.24, italics in original). In this way, the activists get used to a highly demanding working pace, to work under pressure and to undertake multiple tasks at the same time and with tight deadlines. However, these standards are difficult to meet for newcomers and less experienced members, who find it difficult to fit into this particular culture. This, situation, again, threatens the implementation of flexible and horizontal schemes of participation. In this regard, Gus acknowledges the difficulties of integrating new *compañeros* to the demanding character and super-fast pace of *JRA*. He compares the group with a moving train that finds it hard to slow down:

> …we go very fast and it's difficult for the new people who want to board the group (…) the dynamic that we have doesn't allow us to stop, to slow down for them… well, it's also because we decide that (…) we got used to this work pace and most of us are similar, we tend to get overwhelmed… (Gus, *JRA*)

The metaphor of the high speed train illustrates how overwork can become a regular practice for the activists, who may end up naturalising it and accepting it as part of their choices. Only after a painful crisis experienced within *Subversiones* in 2016[129], its members decided to decrease its highly demanding working pace and to place their energies in the internal restructuring of the *colectivo*. In light of the difficult events experienced by the *colectivo,* reducing the amount of work was an urgent decision that had to be made in order to protect the health of the group and of its members. Similar is the experience of *El Rebrote* regarding overwork. Drawing on their own past, the feminists have tried an alternative path that seeks to prevent burnout and work overload. As Andrea comments:

> …in the past we wanted to do so much…we felt we were able to do everything, do you remember when we wanted to create a play and perform it? [Laughs] (…)

[129] Partly triggered by the departure of an important member of the *colectivo*. See section 8.7 for more details.

> now we decide to focus on fewer things but we ensure that they are really performed; that's why the experience of the Circles of Study has been so rewarding and successful… (Andrea, *El Rebrote*)

In the case of *El Rebrote*, they draw on their previous experience with the feminist *colectivo La Ruptura* to elaborate a different collective strategy this time. Unlike their work in *La Ruptura* in which they were usually overwhelmed with several activities that they committed to do, the flow of *El Rebrote* is completely different. They consciously decided to reduce the workload in the group so they can fully concentrate on the projects but without the stress and exhaustion resulting from overwork.

8.6 Informal Leadership

As the previous chapters have shown, a core principle of autonomous politics is the rejection of party-type structures, opting instead, for horizontal and non-hierarchical organizational schemes. Under this approach, the idea of leaders as representatives is contested, as the 'vanguard cedes its place to collective action' (Ornelas, 2012, p.158) and political leadership takes the form of facilitation. According to Zibechi (2012), this is also the case of Latin American autonomous movements, characterized by the refusal of organizing models in which a few give orders while the majorities execute them. In line with Zibechi's (2012) analysis, the four case studies dismiss any fixed and formal leadership in order to fight the divisions between rulers and ruled and thinkers and doers. They categorically reject what in Spanish is called '*dirigente*'. This concept refers to a formal leader of a political organization who assumes a representative role and who usually undertakes the most important tasks of the group, such as setting the agenda, making decisions and acting as the voice of the collective in broader networks and meetings. Nevertheless, the clear rejection of '*dirigentes'* or any other institutionalized structures of leadership, does not prevent autonomous movements from having people who 'hold positions of more respect [that] often looks like leadership' (Sitrin, 2012, p.78). Toti puts it in this way: '…there are not hierarchies within the organization, of course there is leadership, that's obvious, but we definitely don't have a *dirigente*, we don't have a boss…' (Toti, *ECP*).

If we consider that autonomous activists are usually driven by high levels of commitment to the principles of horizontal, anti-hierarchical and anti-authoritarian politics, then the acceptance of formal leaders telling them what to do is totally out of the question. However, dealing with more tacit and subtle forms of leadership can be a great challenge for them. As the research participants report, the problem does not seem to be with leadership in itself, but the emergence of fixed, unipersonal leadership and de facto hierarchies that may jeopardise the communal spirit of the groups. Mina notably explains this tension in the following quote:

> We have to recognize that each of us has certain qualities and as a group we should be able to enhance them and not to deny them (…) there are people with outstanding qualities in *JRA* and we shouldn't have to give up on them as long as they serve the collective and the communal logic. That's why it's very important the self-regulation of those leaderships and limiting them so that they don't become unipersonal, unidirectional, resulting in hierarchical relationships. The thing is to acknowledge that we are embedded in power relations, we see them but we also challenge them… (Mina, *JRA*)

In his theory of the iron law of oligarchy, Michels (1911/1962) claimed the impossibility of direct democracy as all organizations, including the most democratic ones, will inevitably develop oligarchic forms and elitist types of leadership. Michel's iron law would be an easy way to explain the complex difficulties that autonomous movements face in their attempts to prevent fixed leadership, but the findings of this thesis provide enough evidence to be sceptical about this theory. In general, the research participants acknowledge the existence of power relations traversing the groups and the potential risks associated with them. This awareness, however, encourages them to develop methods and strategies such as rotation of roles and responsibilities, temporary spokespeople and consensus decision-making, among others (see **Ch7**), both as a way to prevent the emergence of hierarchical leadership and to foster a culture of democratic leadership in all the members. This collective and more positive understanding of leadership can be seen in Paula's words: 'we are all leaders in the group, we all have light and we can shine whenever we want…' (Paula, *El Rebrote*).

Paula's reflection is aligned with recent studies on leadership in social movements and radical activism (Sutherland et al., 2014; Western, 2013, 2014; Laamanen and Den

Hond, 2015; Nunes, 2014, 2015) seeking to challenge the individual perspective of leadership found in mainstream research. Nunes (2014), for example, asserts that autonomous collectives foster 'distributed leadership', a type of leadership that is freer to circulate and has nothing to do with stabilized and formalized leadership positions: 'It is not that there are 'no leaders'; there are several, of different kinds, at different scales and on different layers, at any given time; and in principle anyone can occupy this position.' (Nunes, 2014, p.33). According to Nunes (2015), a leader is someone who starts a behaviour (it could be words, gestures, intellectual or emotive attitudes) to compound collaborative actions which will be adopted or adapted by others. Similarly, Western (2014) uses the term 'autonomist leadership' to refer to the 'non-hierarchical, informal and distributed forms of leadership found in emancipatory social movements' (p.673). Five principles define Autonomist Leadership according to Western (2014): a) spontaneity, meaning that leadership is temporary, it does not have fixed roles and it emerges depending on the context; b) autonomy, meaning that anybody from the movement can take on leadership; c) mutualism, meaning that leadership is enacted with mutual responsibility, mutual consent and for the benefit of the whole movement; d) networks, meaning that leadership is changing, fluid and dispersed throughout the socio-political network, and; e) affect, meaning that leadership is intertwined with strong personal and collectives affects.

Taking both Nunes (2015) and Western (2014) analysis of leadership, we could argue that when leadership moves away from the idea of *'dirigente'* and takes on a broader definition, the tensions between leadership and the practice of horizontality ease up. If the individual understanding of leader is replaced by a processual one, then leadership can be 'enacted by a multitude of organizational members' (Sutherland, 2014, p.762) who become part of a collective flourishing of skills and knowledge. This is why the implementation of strategies such as rotation and sharing of skills and knowledge are so important: they prevent the emergence of fixed, hierarchical leadership and contribute to the creation of a distributed (Nunes, 2014) and autonomous (Western, 2014) one. Enrique summarises this as follows:

> …there are power relations between us, so we are constantly trying to capture these processes in organizational techniques, in mechanisms that help us to neutralize leadership, specialization and so on. For example, in every conference, gathering, meeting with other organizations, the spokespeople rotate…this is not

> punitive or about persecuting leadership, we want to distribute knowledge, roles and to avoid divisions according to the type of work … (Enrique, *JRA*)

As Enrique argues, the commitment to pro-horizontality methods and strategies is pivotal to fostering collective leadership. However, they do not always prevent the emergence of dynamics in which some members hold positions of more respect, influence and visibility while others remain in the background. These informal leaders are usually the ones with more experience, interpersonal skills and knowledge or those with particular character and psychological traits that make them stand out compared to the rest. This scenario leads to evident tensions with the praxis of horizontality, as Fabiola describes:

> …it's very easy to reproduce leaderships, for example, the one who speaks more, or the one who knows better how to do certain tasks. Horizontality is not easy, we need to work on it all the time, for example, if you speak in this round, don't do it again, because no matter how well you do it, it's better to let the others speak… (Fabiola, *El Rebrote,* intervention in Workshop)

Most of the research participants agree with Fabiola on the importance of public speaking in the configuration of power dynamics within the *colectivos*. When the activists master the ability to speak in public, they are able to assertively express their thoughts, opinions and proposals, both in the internal spaces of the groups and with external audiences. Usually, the groups manage to build relatively safe and comfortable spaces in their internal gatherings, in an environment that invites the members to share their opinions. Nevertheless, the situation changes when it comes to speaking up in front of broader audiences in both activist and non-activist settings. As can be imagined, a great part of the activities performed by the *colectivos* are outward oriented, therefore, their capacity to properly communicate their ideas is pivotal for the success of their actions. As the pressure to perform well in these external spaces is very high, it is common to find that the less experienced and less self-confident members step back from these responsibilities, asking the more confident ones to go ahead with the public speaking tasks. This finding is further supported by research on autonomous movements (Juris, 2008; Maeckelbergh, 2009; Graeber, 2009b; Sutherland et al, 2014), which suggest that even in more radical milieus, the more self-confident activists can easily eclipse their peers. As a consequence, this dynamic can serve to excessively boost the

position of those speaking up, who could end up assuming the visible role on a permanent basis, becoming fixed (although informal) leaders for the groups. All the case studies are aware of this risk and its costs for horizontality. As Nicole comments:

> Being a horizontal organization is a constant struggle, we need to fight the leaderships emerging in the group because some are afraid to do things and others know very well how to do things (…) in the past they were all the time asking Espe or me to be the ones who present in public, and we were frustrated, you girls also can do this! Now we are much more aware of this and we try to criticize these patterns… (Nicole, *El Rebrote*)

The tension between leadership and horizontality is always present, but as the example from *El Rebrote* illustrates, the *colectivos* can challenge it on different fronts. As I explained in **Ch7** (section 7.4), one way to prevent fixed leaderships emerging is by having rotating spokespeople. In the Feminist Circle of Studies organized by *El Rebrote* (see **Ch6**, section 6.5), the members are constantly pushing themselves to assume more visible roles, even if they feel scared, embarrassed or not ready for it. Here, the caring feedback (**Ch7**, section 7.6) and full support of the rest of the group are essential strategies for encouraging the activists to speak up. Similar tactics are used in the other case studies. In *JRA*, for example, they constantly rotate the delegates who attend the meetings with other political groups and movements, no matter if they make mistakes or not. 'Learning by doing' is the guiding principle here, and all the members should have the opportunity to assume tasks that are considered to be of high responsibility. As the role of spokesperson in political milieus has been commonly tied to traditional *dirigentes*, they believe that neutralising fixed leadership in this arena is a great way to put horizontality into practice. However, despite the group's approach, there are some members who still consider it strategic to send the best prepared activists to the external events and gatherings:

> …we can all speak up but some are more skilful than others (…) when we need to speak in demos, in broader assemblies, in committees or whatever, then I think it's better to send those who have more training and argumentation skills (…) I'm happy speaking in our assemblies but I don't feel comfortable assuming these responsibilities outward (…) and I don't like the idea of a leader, but there needs to be someone taking the message to the outside…" (David, *JRA*).

David's words bring up another issue present in the *colectivos*: although they try to rotate the positions of influence and visibility, they cannot force the members to take over a role that they do not want. Thus, when some activists exclude themselves from the more visible roles, they are indirectly creating the conditions for the emergence or maintenance of a minority of informal leaders, who have to assume the responsibilities that the others reject.

Similarly, the level of commitment and dedication to the *colectivos* is another dimension that may explain the emergence of informal leaderships. As already described in **Ch7** and earlier in this chapter (section 8.1), the flexible schemes of participation adopted by the case studies imply that the activists are free to choose how much they want to get involved in the groups. This flexibility allows the coexistence of members with different intensities of participation, ranging from those with low or moderate involvement to those who devote most of their time to the collective project. Ideally, all the members should be considered equally important, regardless of their level of participation. Nevertheless, this ideal is not consistent with the reality of the groups, in which the so called '24/7 activists' (activists 24 hours, 7 days a week) are usually perceived as the more influential ones. In the case of *Subversiones*, Elis exemplifies this dynamic as follows:

> [they] are pivotal members in the group because they have a great commitment (…) I don't think they have an abusive power, but as they are so engaged working 24 hours for the group, of course they have more influence (…) they are always there… (Elis, *Subversiones*)

Here, Elis acknowledges the existence of members who are more influential due to their higher involvement in *Subversiones*. Other members seem to concur with Eli's insight, naming the same activists as examples of informal leaders. One member, for example, is recognized as a good promoter of horizontality, someone who uses her commitment and charisma for fostering democracy within the group: '…she has this role of integration, she fosters participation; she always makes sure that the processes are being democratic and that we comply with the principles of the group…' (Ita, *Subversiones*, Mexico). These features definitely do not match with the traditional model of *'dirigente'*, but they get closer to the 'facilitator model' suggested by Adamovsky (2011). The facilitator refers to someone who is able to use her/his knowledge and skills,

not for making decisions for others, but for collaborating in the organization of collective processes of deliberation (Adamovsky, 2011).

This facilitator type of leader identified in *Subversiones* coexisted with another leader perceived by his peers as someone with more unipersonal and dominating traits. He was well known for being an unconditional and highly committed 24/7 activist with several years of political experience, well connected in the political scene, charismatic and knowledgeable about current political affairs and intellectual discussions. He was also remembered for taking over most of the work and responsibilities of *Subversiones*, especially at the early stage of the group and during the transitional period, when *Subversiones* moved from being a small affinity group to become a bigger collective with a clear organizational structure. The organizational maturity achieved by *Subversiones* and materialized in the implementation of collective structures of action and decision making has significantly contributed to the neutralization of potentially harmful leadership practices within the group. In fact, a follow-up meeting with *Subversiones* held after my fieldwork provided me crucial information about how the group dealt with the unilateral leadership enacted by this activist. After years of debating his dominating tendencies[130] and trying to neutralise them, the assembly made the hard decision to ask him to leave the group. This decision, made by consensus, was based on the argument that his behaviour dangerously contradicted the autonomous and horizontal politics that *Subversiones* is trying to embrace.

From a different front, the less active members are also aware of the role that they play in the reproduction of informal leaders. As Gaby stresses:

> …horizontality cannot be possible without enough involvement of all the members of the group; many times these leaders exist because we allow them when we don't commit enough or when we are not well informed (…) we need to acknowledge that there are mechanisms for us to participate and to change those power relations or to set counterweights to those dynamics of power…" (Gaby, *JRA*)

Likewise, Elis believes that her decision about how much to participate has a direct effect on how the power relations develop in her group: 'I choose how much I want to

[130] And for some members, patriarchal behaviours too.

be involved and I know that this decision increases or decreases my capacity to exert my power…' (Elis, *Subversiones*). Both Gaby and Elis acknowledge their capacity of agency to neutralize emerging leaderships and to counteract relations of power that may threaten the groups' quest for horizontality. In other words, these power dynamics could be reversed as long as people currently assuming a more passive stance come to the fore, becoming a counterweight for those seen as informal leaders.

Another negative impact resulting from the existence of informal leaderships is the excessive visibility that certain members have outside the *colectivos*. Even if it is not their intention, they are usually seen as the key actors of the collective, emulating the representative role of *dirigente*, the same role that they so strongly reject in principle. In this regard, it is common to see that when people need to reach someone from the groups, they usually approach the activists that assume more visible roles. As Esperanza points out: 'People from outside, when they need to speak with us, they always approach the same girls (…) we have to fight this, how? Rotating, all the time…' (Esperanza, *El Rebrote*). According to Esperanza, rotating as much as possible is a concrete strategy that has proved useful for controlling the emergence of informal leaders. On the other hand, another problem derived from the excessive visibility of some members is the invisibility of the rest. The latter may feel very frustrated or disempowered as they perceive that they are not getting the same recognition as others even if they perform the same tasks and roles. By remembering her own experience during the coverage of a protest in Mexico City, Xilo confirms how these dynamics of visibility-invisibility impact negatively the praxis of horizontality:

> The coverage of the 1st of December has been acknowledged as Beto's coverage. But I was also there, a lot (…) we conducted interviews with the families of the arrested people and when they wanted to talk to *Subversiones*, they looked for Beto. I was there, in front of them, saying, I'm from *Subversiones* too! I'm participating too! And nobody really saw me… (Xilo, *Subversiones*)

By explaining how people in the protest chose not to see her, Xilo's quote illustrates the risks involved in the development of informal leaders. Of course, this occurs in the context of a patriarchal and state-centred society that expects and encourages male *dirigentes* or representatives, even in the field of social movements.

Finally, the diverse personal characters of the activists are also seen as influential in the emergence and/or maintenance of informal leaders. The dissimilarities between the more proactive, extrovert and dominating members and the shy and introvert ones may facilitate the establishment of leadership positions. However, the research participants assert that changing people's personalities is definitely not the role of *colectivos*. Quite the contrary, their starting point is the celebration and acceptance of difference and the understanding that every activist is unique. Under this understanding, they all make a great contribution to the collective project as long as they do not bypass the democratic and antiauthoritarian principles of the group. Rocío, for example, believes that the amalgam of personalities present in her collective provides some sort of balance in their organizational dynamics:

> Having a diverse group of people is more of a strength than a weakness, if we think in terms of age, ideology, but also in terms of personality types. If we were all intense we would live in the chaos, but if we were all slow, non-proactive, we would do nothing, you see? This mixture allows our internal dynamic to work… (Rocío, *ECP*)

Although the *colectivos* welcome diversity and develop a number of collective methods to prevent the emergence of hierarchical leaders, it should be acknowledged that the personality type is a variable that is very difficult to neutralize. As Enrique argues:

> We don't want all the members to be the same (…) we don't want to shape people (…) but the differences create de facto hierarchies in which some speak too much and others almost don't speak, not because they're not capable, but because of their way of being, and this situation limits horizontality. (Enrique, *JRA*)

Enrique identifies an interesting tension: on the one hand, he is clear about his group's rejection of any attempt to shape an 'ideal type of activist', because diversity is considered a great asset rather than a disadvantage. On the other hand, he implicitly acknowledges that this diversity clashes with the quest for horizontality as the more dominant, proactive and outgoing members are the ones who usually come to the fore at the expense of the shyer and more reserved ones. This is why some participants insist that dominant and over eager personalities must be challenged: '…there are so many things that we can do for making the group a better space, but if some members insist on leading, in being dominating, then things are not going to change…' (Anda,

Subversiones). As Anda points out, it is the exclusive responsibility of the autonomous activists to regulate themselves and to make sure that they do not reproduce dominating and leading roles. Otherwise, the groups will get trapped in hidden leadership structures and unequal power relationships that contravene their horizontal orientation.

The findings from this section present a complex tension between the groups' attempts to prevent fixed, hierarchical leadership and the inevitable emergence of informal leaders. While they overtly refuse the '*dirigente'* type of leadership, they also acknowledge their capacity to create an alternative understanding and enactment of leadership (a more distributed and autonomous one). Following Western's (2014) theory, if leadership is mostly associated with authoritarianism and hierarchy, then the activists get trapped in a series of conflicts and tensions without any easy way out. I would venture to suggest that the case studies are certainly dealing with this turmoil, both counteracting hierarchical leadership and experimenting with alternative methods that together could articulate a radical leadership approach.

8.7 Financial precariousness

Another component that fosters or hinders activists' participation is what Cox (2009) calls 'survival dimension' (p.58). Broadly speaking, survival dimension refers to the activists' living and working circumstances, their resources, family and personal networks, their physical energy and vulnerabilities and so forth (Cox, 2009). Within this broad dimension, the component of economic survival is essential for understanding the disparities of participation present in the case studies. In general terms, most of the research participants, both in Mexico and Chile, come from low-income, working class or impoverished middle class backgrounds. A minority belong to middle class families, usually composed by parents holding higher education degrees. Regardless of the socio-economic background, all the research participants are studying or have finished university or college degrees, most of them in the areas of education, social sciences, humanities and the arts.

With some exceptions, the research participants who are still studying usually live with their families or get financial support from their relatives, but as many come from low-income backgrounds and only managed to study thanks to scholarships or loans, they

still need to work part-time in order to meet their needs: 'I'm a student, so I should spend most of my free time in the *colectivo*, but this doesn't happen because you need money, you need to work, for example, I have 2 part time jobs and it's exhausting…' (Nico, *ECP*). Here, Nico describes how he splits his life between his degree, his political activities and his paid jobs. As can be imagined, the pressure to earn an income are very high and inevitably this situation impacts on the participation of many members. Even more difficult is the case of Xilo, a university student who lives on her own at a young age (20 years old) and receives little financial support from her family, a situation that forces her to work several hours per week:

> I would really like only to study and to work in our political project (…) I'm so sick of my jobs, I don't want to work anymore in these fucking schedules (…) you don't know what I would give to spend most of my time in *Subversiones*, but right now my number one priority is to survive… (Xilo, *Subversiones*)

As Xilo relates, her current involvement in *Subversiones* does not conform to her own desires of participation. On the contrary, there is a clear tension between her expectations and the material conditions needed to make them possible. As she mentions, she would really like to spend more time on her activist practice but this desire is unfeasible due to her current employment responsibilities. This is only one example among several cases of financial precariousness observed in the collectives. In the case of *JRA*, for instance, there is an alarming tendency towards precariousness in their members, a trend which has become increasingly evident in the last few years. They believe that the changes in the *colectivo*'s composition has contributed to this precariousness, as an important number of members have transitioned from being students with family support (at least with shelter and food guaranteed) to young professionals or technicians with not very profitable degrees and the urgency of meeting their basic needs:

> We are not 20 years old anymore and this puts us in a very different scenario regarding survival, because I need to pay the rent, I need to eat (…) we would love to participate more but we just can't (…) some members work part-time so they can spend the rest of the time in the collective, but you half survive with this, you don't get enough money… (Pablo, *JRA*)

As Pablo argues, some of the activists who do not hold the status of 'student' anymore avoid full-time jobs so they can spend a reasonable amount of time on their political

commitments. Making this decision, though, means living with a low income that is not always enough for covering the basic necessities of everyday life. For this reason, some members such as Quique, for example, reluctantly have had to switch from part-time to full-time jobs, decreasing their intensity of participation: 'I used to work part-time and spend most of my free time in *JRA*, if I could be a full-time militant I would do it (…) but now due to financial problems I had to get a full time job and I'm participating very little…' (Quique, *JRA*).

Being in a precarious financial situation certainly hinders the activists' chances of getting fully involved in the groups, leading to unequal levels of participation, and, as a result, to non-horizontal dynamics between their members. In the case of *Subversiones*, the coverage of struggles outside Mexico City is a concrete activity in which subtle non-horizontal dynamics can be observed. Usually, the urgency of the need to cover events hastens the creation of teams integrated by self-funded members with immediate availability. This procedure automatically leaves out the members who cannot afford their trip expenses or those who have fixed full-time jobs. Anda elaborates a critique of this non-horizontal dynamic:

> …there was not even a reflection about who can go to the trips, who can leave their jobs, or what do we do with people who want to go but don't have the money (…) There are people devoting their lives to *Subversiones*, some of them don't struggle that much with money so of course they have more time and end up having a stronger voice, their opinions are more important (…) this dynamic disregards the contribution of members who have to earn their living, who have to pay a rent, who have to support their families… (Anda, *Subversiones*)

Anda calls attention to some of the secondary effects resulting from the uneven financial situations of the activists. According to her, the more privileged members have the conditions to devote their time to the *colectivos* and this inevitably puts them in a position of more influence than others, jeopardising the collective attempts to build horizontal organization. However, even though this activist brings up an important point, it is necessary to clarify that not only the more privileged members (in financial terms) can become more influential and potential informal leaders (see section 8.6). Conversely, my ethnographic practice has shown that, in all the case studies, there are highly involved activists, some of them with features of informal leadership, who

neglect their material lives and devote most of their time to their collectives, regardless of the precariousness in which they live.

The tension between horizontality and financial precariousness is also observed in the behaviour of some activists, who reproach the lack of involvement of other members, without necessarily reflecting about their financial constraints and how their vulnerable material conditions hinder their levels of participation. As Sari reveals:

> …those working more in the project reproached those working less even if they were in situations of more precariousness (…) We discussed about systemic oppression, such as the economic one (…) we realized that we were asking too much of Xilo, not because she is too young or she cannot undertake the tasks, but because her age puts her in a particular social dynamic, the fact that she has to study and she doesn't have any money… (Sari, *Subversiones*)

Following Sari's words, it is important to mention that, despite the persistence of some subtle actions of recrimination, *Subversiones'* activists have been able to see this tension and to understand that precariousness and impoverishment are not abstract things but real conditions being experienced by their own peers in the present. This awareness has contributed to the acceptance that the pressures for survival will definitely influence the intensity of participation and, consequently, it will make harder the enactment of horizontality.

But despite this acknowledgment, there have been concrete efforts made by the *colectivos* in order to challenge and counteract the potential side effects of the activists' uneven financial conditions. *JRA*, for instance, has developed a funding system that supports one or two members who are the most financially disadvantaged but who still want to devote half of their time to the group. The activists from *Subversiones* do not have a formalised system like that of *JRA* but they have been discussing the option of fundraising as a way to assure a financial contribution to the members who assume temporary coordination roles within the collective. *El Rebrote* has addressed the issue differently by decreasing the whole number of activities run by the group. This means that each activist can have a full-time job or comply with her student responsibilities without having to withdraw, as the workload has been adjusted to their busy lives.

Finally, thanks to my ethnographic approach I could also witness other strategies undertaken by the research participants, not as part of their groups' planning this time, but in the informal settings of their everyday lives. It was common, for instance, to see members sharing their flats with activists who were in a more precarious situation, asking them to pay a very low rent or only a small money contribution for the bills. Additionally, when a job opportunity came and certain members had the chance to hire or recommend a candidate, they did not hesitate in prioritising their political peers, especially those who were in more need.

8.8 Is there anyone to blame?

The previous sections have shown that the quest for horizontality is constantly challenged by a number of issues obstructing the intended non-hierarchical and egalitarian relationships to be developed by the *colectivos.* In general terms, it can be argued that the dissimilar intensities of participation coexisting within the groups explain several internal problems hindering the praxis of horizontality. At the same time, they trigger different degrees of discomfort and frustration among the research participants, who struggle in identifying the actors or situations responsible for the hindrances to horizontal politics.

When analysing the challenges of horizontality, it is possible to identify two main positions embodied in the 24/7 activists, those who devote most of their time to the political project; and the members with low and moderate participation. Each of these actors engages in self-critical reflections but they also point to the members assuming the opposite position as accountable for the deployment of non-horizontal dynamics. For example, Erick, an activist fitting in the 24/7 category, believes that the inequalities in the group are mainly caused by the lack of commitment of some members who, unlike him, do not consider militancy as a life priority:

> …some people in the *ECP* don't think in the political project every single day of their lives, they don't see it as something vital, as essential life experience (…) militancy is not a job from five to eight, it's an activity embedded in ourselves but some people don't see this and without wanting it, they reproduce neoliberal practices… (Erick, *ECP*)

In general, the most active members accept their peers' freedom to choose the level of involvement that suits them best. Nevertheless, this acceptance comes with a manifest discomfort, as they would like to see them assuming a more proactive, committed and straightforward role.

On the other hand, some members who have a more moderate participation admit feeling uncomfortable with the unequal power relations present in the groups, which could lead to scenarios in which a small number of activists make decisions for the rest. These activists also believe that the more active members have an important responsibility for the disparities of participation, because on many occasions they volunteer to take over several tasks, even if others are available and willing to assume those responsibilities: 'In the distribution of tasks there are still inequalities, not because some take advantage and try to leave all the burden to others, conversely, it's because these others voluntarily overwork…' (Manu, *ECP*). Some research participants contend that this tendency is the result of some personality traits of the 24/7 activists, who can be excessively stubborn and perfectionist. Consequently, they believe that they are the most capable for performing certain tasks and struggle when it comes to trust in the abilities and commitment of their peers:

> …they should let some tasks go, assume that other *compañeros* don't do the things exactly as they want them to be done and trust them (…) the members who assume some kind of leadership want to be in all the activities and sometimes I feel that they want things to be done under their tutelage (Gaby, *JRA*)

As Gaby points out, there is a call for the 24/7 activists to let go, to accept that things cannot be done always in their way and to trust the capacities of other members, even if they are less experienced or spend less time in the group. But in other interviews excerpts and in informal conversations with her, Gaby acknowledges that the less active members are also responsible for the exercise of non-horizontal practices. Most of the research participants seem to agree with this view, acknowledging that both the 24/7 activists and the less active ones have responsibility for the reproduction of inequalities within their groups: 'there are two responsibilities in the group's inequalities: we, who delegate to others too many responsibilities, and they, who assume our lack of participation as an open invitation for acting…' (Flux, *Subversiones*).

Is there anyone to blame then? I would venture to reply no. No, because there is not a particular sector which can take full responsibility for the difficulties experienced when attempting to apply a horizontal agenda. As the research participants have mentioned, all the members share a degree of responsibility and accept that they could do better, although they are also clear that horizontality cannot be decreed nor achieved in absolute terms.

8.9 Concluding Remarks

This chapter set out to explore the main hindrances and challenges for the enactment of horizontality. Taken together, the findings from this chapter depict a type of activism that is thoughtful and self-critical. By engaging with a critical analysis of their own *colectivos*, autonomous activists do not get trapped in the smugness of their politics. On the contrary, they are able to develop a realistic assessment of their praxis, identifying both the pros and cons encountered in their collective endeavours. As this chapter and **Ch7** have shown, this self-critical account has allowed the *colectivos* to act proactively, bringing in new tools, practices and methods seeking to address and overcome these issues. This reaction is consistent with the activists' understanding of horizontality more as a process and a struggle rather than as a pure state to be achieved. Nonetheless, my findings also suggest that this awareness does not prevent them from setting high-reaching standards regarding their performance and commitment, almost as if they wanted to see a full horizontal politics in place. This dilemma clearly triggers a number of organizational problems and emotional responses that endanger the effectiveness of their politics.

Particularly difficult is the dilemma between flexible schemes of participation and the quest for horizontality. This chapter has illustrated how the activists struggle in order to foster flexible organizational settings that honour the principle of self-determination (**Ch5**) whilst trying to enact a horizontal politics. Flexibility in participation inevitably leads to disparities in the members' involvement, a situation that jeopardizes the attempts to implement a horizontal agenda. Overworking, unequal influence over decision making, emergence of informal leaders, withdrawal and disengagement; these are just some examples of the problems derived from the uneven levels of participation

in autonomous groups. A decisive factor in the differing degrees of participation is the survival dimension. In this chapter I have argued that precarious financial situations hinder the activists' chances to get fully involved in their groups, leading to unequal levels of participation, and, as a result, to non-horizontal dynamics within the collectives.

Additionally, the asymmetries regarding political experience, skills and knowledge can also become a hindrance in the enactment of horizontality. As this chapter has shown, when the disparities in these matters are acute, the *colectivos* face the risk of having over-specialized senior activists, on the one hand; and newcomers feeling disempowered and unable to cope with collective tasks and responsibilities, on the other. All these issues trigger a number of emotional responses such as anger, frustration, disappointment, anxiety, guilt and so forth, affecting the whole activist community, from the so called '24/7' members to the less active ones. An interesting finding from this chapter refers to the unique militant ethos internalized by Latin American autonomous movements. By drawing on former revolutionary traditions in Latin America and on the urgency to resist in the region, these movements understand militancy as a life priority that demands high levels of discipline and commitment. This ethos, therefore, could explain some of the emotional tensions resulting from the uneven levels of participation. In line with this militant ethos, the activists set up high expectations about themselves, trying hard to reach consistency between their practices and their principles. The way they address leadership is an example of this attempt to remain loyal to an anti-hierarchical and non-state centred politics.

In this chapter, several structural, organizational and interpersonal problems come together to remind us that horizontality is a dynamic process that does not work in absolute terms. We cannot blame a particular faction of the *colectivos* either, as nobody is fully responsible for the difficulties experienced in the enactment of autonomous politics. The challenge, then, is to overcome the blame and to keep sailing towards horizontality in spite of the drawbacks.

CHAPTER NINE
CONCLUSIONS

Throughout the preceding eight chapters, I have sought to examine how the politics of autonomy is being brought to life by Latin American urban *colectivos*. This final chapter offers a summary of my main findings, clarifying how I have answered my research questions. It also outlines the main contributions of my thesis, its limitations and some recommendations for future research.

9.1 The Autonomous Politics of Urban *Colectivos*: Main Findings.

The main research question guiding my thesis was: what can we learn about the politics of autonomy from the study of urban *colectivos* in Chile and Mexico? This overarching question was answered through five auxiliary sub-questions based on a militant ethnographic approach that allowed me to develop a 'thick description' of the everyday politics enacted by Latin American autonomous activists.

Sub-question 1 (how is the politics of autonomy understood and enacted by urban *colectivos* in Chile and Mexico?) has been answered in **Ch4**, **Ch5** and **Ch6**. Drawing on these findings, I argue that urban *colectivos* from Chile and Mexico have a twofold understanding of autonomous politics. On the one hand, they understand it as a refusal of the main systems of domination, articulating a strong critique of capitalism, patriarchy and state-centred politics. On the other hand, the politics of autonomy is understood as a creative force able to challenge those hegemonic systems and to forge an alternative approach to social change. This politics is enacted through a number of intertwined dimensions, the most important ones being horizontality, affective politics, *autogestión*, popular education and political networks. Among these five dimensions, horizontality plays a pivotal role, as it serves as a flexible ethical framework that allows the *colectivos* to enact a deeply anti-authoritarian and radically democratic politics. Horizontality can, therefore, be considered the backbone of autonomy as it provides the organizational and strategic grounds for making autonomous politics a possible and tangible alternative to social change.

The second sub-question sought to explore how the *colectivos* challenge existing systems of domination. I answered this question in **Ch4**, by analysing the anti-capitalist, anti-patriarchal and non-state-centred definitions of my case studies and how these stances encourage an alternative praxis in the activists' collective spaces and personal lives. Capitalism is challenged through the participants' refusal to submissively accept the individualistic and consumerist values imposed by the neoliberal society. This refusal is expressed in the activists' life choices, but also in their relentless collective efforts to expose the devastating effects of capitalism. Likewise, patriarchy is challenged through the activists' commitment to unveil and avoid the reproduction of patriarchal discourses and behaviours in the multiple social spheres in which they operate. Although all the case studies claim to be anti-patriarchal, *El Rebrote* is undoubtedly the group that puts the anti-patriarchal struggle at the forefront, extending their critique to left-wing and anti-capitalist milieus. By questioning the reproduction of *machismo-leninismo* in the so-called progressive spaces, these activists also challenge a patriarchal Left that has not recognized the political character of the feminist struggle and its relevance for the radical transformation of society. Finally, the research participants challenge state-centred politics by refusing to engage with the electoral system and by zealously defending their independence from governments, political parties and other formal institutions. They stand against a paradigm that confines participation to the state, demonstrating with their own praxis that another politics is possible in the here and now. But this tripartite refusal is not made from an external or 'liberated' terrain. An important finding from my thesis refers to the reflexive and self-critical type of activism enacted by the case studies. Applied to the critique of domination, this reflexivity leads the activists to acknowledge both their embeddedness within the hegemonic system and the multiple contradictions that they face in their everyday lives.

Sub-question 3 asked for the dimensions, organizational structures and strategies shaping the 'doing' of autonomous politics. I answered this question in **Ch6** and **Ch7** by developing a thick description of the political praxis of autonomous activists. As stated earlier, there are five main dimensions by which autonomy is put into practice: affective politics, *autogestión*, popular education, political networks and horizontality. Affective politics emphasizes the creation of supportive, affective and loving relationships in the present. In this attempt, the *colectivos* foster interpersonal dynamics based on friendship, comradeship and sisterhood and the development of spaces of

dialogue where the activists can safely express their feelings and opinions. *Autogestión* refers to the *colectivos*' commitment to create and manage their own resources from an anti-capitalist and horizontal approach. Under this approach, the groups reject external funding coming from governments, political parties, corporations and supranational development organizations. Alternatively, they undertake various tactics and projects that enable them to bring in an income whilst honouring the political principles that they embrace. Popular education is another important dimension of autonomous politics. Against hierarchical pedagogical frameworks, *colectivos* create alternative educative spaces where the learners are considered the agents of their own process of enlightenment and knowledge production. The case studies use popular education both for their internal procedures and for projects targeted at external communities. In both cases, they engage with dialogical, experiential and contextual pedagogies and craft innovative participative techniques for collective learning. With these tools they seek to transcend the dualism between theoretical and practical knowledge and its intrinsic division of labour. *Colectivos* also highlight the importance of building political networks and engaging in solidarity with other groups, movements and struggles. Unlike the alliance-building approach advanced by political parties, they call for a horizontal, respectful and humble approach to networking, where they neither subsume other groups nor are subsumed by them. As my findings show, the case studies have defined different types of engagement in external spaces. On the one hand, they are willing to join broader spaces of protest and solidarity in cases of extreme repression, criminalization or emergency, but they do not develop further relations with other political actors unless they agree on an anti-authoritarian, democratic and horizontal approach to politics. On the other hand, they are very selective with the networks to which they devote full participation. In this case, strong political affinity, both in the thinking and in the doing, is pivotal for guaranteeing a sustainable political relationship with their allies. Finally we have horizontality. Horizontality is understood as a flexible and dynamic process that seeks to create flat planes of communication where non-hierarchical, decentralized and radically democratic projects can take place. Far from being an absolute, horizontality represents the constant struggle of *colectivos* against verticality, articulated in a number of organizational principles, structures and strategies. In their quest for horizontality, the groups have developed non-hierarchical structures seeking to foster flexible schemes of participation. The rotation of roles, positions, tasks and responsibilities is an important component of the structures deployed by autonomous groups. Particularly important is

the rotation of spokespersons or delegates, so centralization and fixed leadership can be prevented. Additionally, *colectivos* have committed to consensus-based decision making, attempting to weave together everyone's ideas and concerns. In order to reach consensus, they have created and/or adapted a number of methods and techniques useful for collective discussion, deliberation and decision-making. The groups' decision-making and other relevant organizational processes usually take place in the assembly. This is the social space where all the activists get together with the aim of discussing, deciding, planning and assessing various political, operational and organizational matters. I argue in this thesis that the assembly is the heart of *colectivos*, as it keeps them alive, active and loyal to the core values of autonomy and horizontality. Along with these elements, the groups also place special attention to the exchange of information, knowledge and experiences. By holding regular meetings, periodically circulating information, running internal training sessions and developing induction mechanisms for the newcomers, the case studies seek to neutralize uneven levels of political experience and imbalances in the amount of information held by the activists.

If my third sub-question focused on the dimensions, structures and strategies shaping the praxis of autonomous politics, my fourth sub-question explored the main problems and challenges in the enactment of this politics. Both **Ch6** and **Ch8** answered this question by analysing the main obstacles encountered by the *colectivos* in their quest for autonomy. The enactment of affective politics, for example, is hindered by the rise of interpersonal tensions and deterioration of the relationships between the activists, especially in the older groups. With regard to *autogestión*, the case studies acknowledge that the narrow scope of their self-managed practices is not enough for moving towards an integral *autogestión* of their lives. In fact, according to some former *ECP* members, this aspect can be seen as one of the key reasons explaining the dissolution of the group. The engagement with popular education has not been an easy task either, as the activists are constantly facing the challenge of unlearning the internalized vertical logic of formal education and replacing it with dialogical and horizontal approaches. Likewise, important issues were identified in the dimension of alliance-building. As my findings suggest, the high standards set by the *colectivos* lead them to refrain from participating in broader networks or simply withdrawing if hierarchical or vanguard-based politics is being enacted. As a consequence, this withdrawal could easily end in self-exclusion from experiences with political potential and national relevance. But some of the most

severe problems in the praxis of autonomous politics are found in the dimension of horizontality. The uneven levels of participation within the *colectivo*s is definitely a key issue, triggering a series of tensions and dilemmas that challenge the implementation of a horizontal agenda. A good example of this tension is found in the high involvement and over-concentration of tasks amongst some activists versus the low involvement and withdrawal from responsibilities of other members. These disparities inevitably affect how much the participants influence the collective processes of deliberation and decision-making. Furthermore, they trigger a number of emotional reactions in the activist community. Whilst the more active members may feel frustrated, stressed, angry and disappointed, the less active ones may feel judged, guilty, disempowered and excluded, withdrawing even more from the groups' activities. Coupled with this issue, the asymmetries regarding political experience, skills and knowledge also represent a major challenge to the enactment of horizontality. If these differences are not properly addressed, the *colectivos* face the risk of reproducing over-specialized senior activists, on the one hand; and newcomers feeling unable to cope with the tasks of the group, on the other. In line with this issue, the *colectivos* also deal with tacit and subtle forms of leadership that could reproduce de facto hierarchies and jeopardize the principle of horizontality. Finally, financial precariousness is considered another serious issue hindering the politics of *colectivos*. Here, the lack of material resources amongst some activists prevents them from participating as they would desire. In a way, the survival dimension reminds us of the difficulties of combining high levels of political commitment with the urgency of meeting basic needs in a world still dominated by the rules of the capitalist market. Overall, the findings from my research suggest an outstanding, awareness and self-critical capacity in the participants, who are able to identify the 'pros' but also the tensions, problems and contradictions of their own praxis. Nevertheless, this thesis also reveals that the activists' awareness regarding the 'cons' does not prevent them from setting high-reaching standards in relation to their political performance, triggering inevitable interpersonal tensions and burnout. The distinctive militant ethos internalized by Latin American movements could shed some light on this matter. As Latin American activists tend to understand militancy as a life priority and an urgent necessity for the region, they struggle to balance their high expectations with the actual conditions under which their politics take place.

Lastly, in sub-question five I asked: to what extent does autonomous politics challenge state-centred approaches to social change and prefigure a radical approach to social transformation? Each of the five empirical chapters of this thesis contribute to answering this question. In **Ch4** I explained how autonomous activists denounce the linkage between capitalism, patriarchy and the state. By unveiling this connection, they are suspicious of the possibilities of pursuing radical social change through a structure that is functional and deeply embedded into the hegemonic system. Additionally, the case studies develop a strong critique of Leninism, the best example of a state-centred approach to revolution. The groups consider Leninism a centralized, hierarchical and authoritarian type of politics, as it neglects peoples' own power for emancipation and reproduces the liberal separation between the rulers and the ruled. The questioning of state-centred paradigms of social change is only the beginning of a powerful creative process in which an alternative political approach is being forged, both discursively (**Ch5**) and practically (**Ch6**, **Ch7**, **Ch8**). In the definition and enactment of their politics, the *colectivos* join the wave of Latin American autonomous movements and draw on an amalgam of political traditions such as Zapatismo, Anarchism, Marxism and Feminism, among others. Although they acknowledge the importance of these experiences and knowledges, they do not see them as fixed programs to be copied. Conversely, the lessons from these experiences and approaches are reinterpreted and transformed into a unique and flexible set of political orientations and practices that work for their specific (urban) realities and organizing projects (small *colectivos*). A distinguishing feature of the politics enacted by the *colectivos* is the emphasis placed on processes over goals. As the activists understand autonomy both as a path and a constant struggle, they see their groups as dynamic experiences that are always in becoming. This is expressed in their flexibility and openness to recreate and adjust their practices and discourses according to the new contexts and challenges that they may encounter. This flexibility, however, operates within a broad frame of orientations that shape their autonomous approach to social change. The commitment to a politics from below is one of these orientations. This principle emphasizes the creation of radical political experiments at a local scale and the defence of a politics for and from the grassroots. Unlike traditional approaches to social transformation, *colectivos* are not waiting for a revolutionary vanguard that will implement changes from above. On the contrary, they embrace a prefigurative politics, believing that it is possible to plant the seeds of the desired society 'within the shell of the old'. Following this rationale, they strive for both collective and personal self-

determination, placing their efforts in the construction of alternative political projects and lifestyles in the here and now. As discussed throughout the thesis, five main dimensions put this autonomous political approach into motion: horizontality, affective politics, *autogestión*, popular education and political networks. These dimensions come to life through a number of practices, organizational structures and strategies devised by autonomous groups. Altogether, the sum of the *colectivos'* praxis (**Ch6**, **Ch7**, **Ch8**), coupled with a clear political standpoint (**Ch4**, **Ch5**), enable the prefiguration of a radical, organic and feasible approach to social change that challenges state-centred politics and envisions a new path towards emancipation.

9.2 Research Contributions

Through the analysis of Latin American *colectivos*, this thesis makes several noteworthy contributions to the field of social movement studies, in general; and to the study of Latin American autonomous politics, in particular. As stated in **Ch1**, important research has been produced about the 'big names' of Latin American social struggles. Holloway (1998) on Zapatismo; Garcés (2012) on the Chilean student movement; Motta (2017) on the *MST*; Zibechi (2011) and Gutiérrez (2009) on the Bolivian uprisings; Dinerstein (2003) and Sitrin (2012) on Argentinean autonomous movements. These are only a few authors who have enhanced our knowledge regarding some of the 'spectacular' contemporary Latin American social movements. My research adds to this literature by filling a gap in the study of 'less spectacular' although equally radical movements in Latin America. Contesting the scholarship (Boron, 2003; Sader, 2001; Robinson, 2007; Urra, 2012; Núñez, 2012) and political traditions (ranging from conservative and social democratic sectors to communist parties and Trotskyist factions, among others) that deem this politics unimportant, ineffective and naïve, I contend that the politics enacted by *colectivos* matters now more than ever. It matters because in a world consumed by hopelessness (Dinerstein, 2015) and despair, these micro-experiments of resistance have been able to cultivate hope and to prefigure a radical, organic and feasible approach to social change. This approach is not only a political statement, nor a romantic utopia. As this thesis has revealed, the case studies have managed to integrate a strong political stance and a living utopia with effective structures, practices and strategies, thus bringing to life a tangible political alternative in the here and now. Taken together, these

findings suggest that an autonomous path towards emancipation is being forged not only by the largest and most well-known movements in Latin America, but also by small experiments of radical democracy that relentlessly and anonymously seek to crack multiform structures of domination and create alternative social relations. Although fundamentally different in terms of size, context, impact and scope of their projects, all these autonomous experiences, from large movements to *colectivos*, seem to share an anti-hierarchical and anti-authoritarian ethos and a commitment to a politics from below. Nonetheless, unlike state-centred paradigms to social change, no 'recipe' for emancipation is proposed by this alternative approach. The results of this research indicate that *colectivos* do not passively reproduce fixed political frameworks given by the major political traditions of resistance or spectacular social movements. They do engage with these knowledges and experiences, but from a flexible and critical perspective, reinterpreting, actualizing and merging these political insights in light of their contexts and present challenges. As a consequence, they have developed rich and creative political amalgams, bringing together the best of Marxism, Anarchism, Feminism, *Zapatismo*, *Freirian* popular education and *Guevarism*, among other traditions.

A second important contribution made by this research refers to the thick description of Latin American autonomous politics accomplished in this thesis. Unravelling this politics through the experience of *colectivos* provided me the unique possibility to explore exhaustively the everyday life of autonomous groups. Unlike larger movements where the access to all members and actions would be difficult, and in some cases, impossible task, in the *colectivos* I had the chance to share with all the activists of the groups and participate in most of their political activities. The generous access granted by the groups, and to a great extent acquired due to my activist identity and politically-engaged methodology, enabled me to capture the human dimension of radical politics, both with its beauties and contradictions. Although emergent, the field of Latin American autonomous politics has been nourished by a number of critical scholars and/or activist-researchers that have provided a systematic analysis and characterization of autonomous movements in the region (see section 3.4, **Ch3**). Drawing on various global struggles but most importantly, on the rise of Zapatismo, John Holloway (1998, 2010a, 2010b) has placed the Zapatista idea of dignity at the centre of his well-known analysis of revolution, inspiring hundreds of scholars and activists in Latin America and

worldwide. Raúl Zibechi (2012) has explored the politics of autonomy in several autonomous movements, ranging from the Zapatistas in Mexico, the recuperated factories in Argentina, the indigenous struggles in Bolivia and the Mapuche resistance in Chile, among many others. Ana Dinerstein (2015) has the same merit, drawing on the experiences of Latin American autonomy to advance her innovative *Blochian* theory of hope. Hernán Ouviña (2004, 2011) has focused on the politics of autonomy in Argentina and in the Zapatista experience, highlighting the contrasts between autonomy in the countryside and in the city. Sara Motta (2014, 2017) has analysed the pedagogical turn of Latin American autonomous movements and has reflected on the epistemological challenges resulting from the engagement with this type of politics. Marina Sitrin (2011, 2012) has developed a thorough analysis of the politics of autonomy in Argentina and has become one of the key authors in the study of horizontality. Raquel Gutiérrez (2009) has inspired us with her research on the popular uprisings in El Alto, Bolivia between 2000 and 2005. By providing a thick description of the *colectivos'* political praxis, my research supports the aforementioned scholarship but it also adds a detailed ethnographic account of the everyday life of autonomous politics in urban cities of Mexico and Chile. Through this in-depth analysis, my thesis makes a significant contribution to the emergent field of Latin American autonomous politics, as it enhances our understanding of the day to day organizational methods and challenges, interpersonal dynamics and activists' emotional strains, providing a comprehensive exploration of this political approach.

A third contribution made by this research is the analysis of urban autonomy in Latin America. Unlike previous scholarship focused on indigenous and rural-based autonomous movements in the region (Esteva and Pérez, 2001; López Bárcenas, 2011; Esteva, 2011), this thesis has explored how the autonomous approach to social change is conceived and enacted in urban spaces. Although this research did not intend to compare the politics of autonomy in the cities and in the countryside, the empirical findings from this thesis reveal some unique features and challenges that differ from those discussed in the scholarship on rural and/or indigenous movements. If in the countryside the political actors usually share a territory and strong community traditions that support their praxis (Ouviña, 2011), in the case of the urban *colectivos* explored in this research, the activists do not share a specific geographical space, apart from belonging to the same conurbation. In these metropolitan centres, there can be observed

a decline of community ties, coupled with the growing individualization and fragmentation of social relations. Within this context, autonomous activists have found in the political affinity (both in the thinking and in the doing) the glue that brings them together. Despite the lack of a shared and collectively owned territory, these groups have been able to challenge the fragmented neoliberal city through innovative collective projects and the re-creation of community ties adapted to the urban reality. The affective dimension of *colectivos* (analysed in **Ch6**) is a good example of this creative re-construction of community ties taking place in Latin American cities. Another significant difference found between urban *colectivos* and rural movements, refers to the capacity of reproducing life and securing their everyday subsistence. As discussed in this thesis, the case studies are aware of the narrow scope of their self-managed practices. As opposed to communities in the countryside and some few spectacular struggles in the city (such as the workers-controlled factories in Argentina or the massive housing movement *Francisco Villa Independiente* in Mexico City, among others), most of them forging alternative economic relations, *colectivos* have not embarked on substantial productive or material projects. They strongly commit to *autogestión* (**Ch6**), but so far this approach has been used primarily for keeping their groups in operation, without moving towards an integral *autogestión* of life. Although they do envision the creation of greater productive initiatives, the context under which they manoeuvre makes this task a major challenge for the groups.

Fourth, my thesis contributes to the field of Latin American autonomous politics by adding new case studies that have not been noticed by previous research. Although the Zapatista process has had a huge impact both in the emergence of autonomous projects across Mexican cities and in the scholars' interest for exploring these experiences of resistance, the scholarship has still favoured the study of indigenous/rural struggles over urban mobilizations. My research, therefore, complements the works of Navarro (2015), Sandoval (2013), Zibechi (2014) and others, by providing an exhaustive analysis of original micro-experiences of urban autonomy in Mexico, and more specifically, in Mexico City. Furthermore, by adding two Chilean *colectivos* as case studies, this research is helping to shape a pioneer field in the study of autonomous politics in urban Chile. As mentioned in **Ch1**, since the Chilean students' uprisings (in 2006 and 2011) more scholarship has begun to acknowledge the autonomous format of political organizing in the country (Bro Khomasi, 2011; Bartoletti and Mangiantini, 2011; Silva

and Romero, 2013). Although some of these authors have understood the dimensions of autonomous politics (such as horizontality and assembly-based politics, for example) as novel repertoires of action, they do not challenge the state-centred analytical frameworks that have dominated the field of social movements' studies in the region and worldwide. Besides this, they have restricted their analysis to the student movement and have usually undertaken conventional approaches to research. By carrying out politically-engaged research beyond the student movement's field, I have explored an underground and understudied type of politics in Chile from an insider perspective. Moreover, I have explicitly rejected state-centred theoretical frameworks, committing to a ground-up process of knowledge production that challenges the role of movements as mere claim-makers or reform-seekers. Throughout my five empirical chapters, I have provided a different reading of Chilean political participation. Unlike previous scholarship, I have claimed that the politics enacted by *colectivos* is not a 'curious' set of practices used to influence government policies nor a romantic utopia. In the same way as the Mexican case studies, Chilean *colectivos* are shaping an organic and feasible approach to social change in the here and now. With this alternative understanding of non-formal participation in Chile, my thesis adds to the existing literature on Latin American autonomous politics, but it also cracks the conservative narrative of Chilean social sciences, opening up a new line of inquiry about the politics of autonomy in this country.

Addressing the anti-patriarchal character of the politics of autonomy is another contribution of this thesis. Most of the scholarship in the field has focused primarily on the critique of capitalism and state-centred structures (Dinerstein, 2015; Sitrin, 2012). Some have acknowledged the feminisation of resistance (Zibechi, 2012), but only a few (Motta, 2012; Gutiérrez, 2010) have developed a deeper critique of patriarchy when reflecting about autonomous movements. My research expands this nascent area of study by advancing a tripartite critique of domination, where capitalism, patriarchy and state-centred politics are understood as deeply intertwined hegemonic modes. Although all the case studies embrace an anti-patriarchal stance, *El Rebrote* is definitely the group that articulates a stronger theory and practice of anti-patriarchal politics. The incorporation of this *colectivo* enabled me to explore autonomous feminism as a specific strand of this emergent political approach and to acknowledge its powerful contributions to the thinking and doing of radical autonomous politics in Latin American urban settings. Likewise, by bringing together an overtly feminist group with sympathetic but

not explicitly feminist *colectivos*, this thesis has contributed to bridge the divide between the scholarship on Latin American autonomous politics (see **Ch3**, section 3.4) and the works focused on autonomous feminism (Curiel, 2005; Lamus, 2009; Aldunate, 2009). I strongly believe that bridging these approaches is pivotal not only for filling a gap in the literature, but for strengthening an alternative political approach able to acknowledge the merit and importance of feminism for the radical transformation of society.

Without a doubt, one of the key strengths of this study was the epistemological, methodological and ethical path adopted in the project. As outlined in **Ch1**, with this thesis I sought to develop a collaborative form of research carried out from within rather than outside autonomous groups. Changing the 'terms of the conversation' (Mignolo, 2009, p.162) proved to be a very difficult challenge as it demanded lots of energy, creativity, flexibility, commitment and resilience. Unlike traditional methodologies, militant ethnography does not encompass a set of standard procedures to apply. With only a few key principles guiding my research practice, I embarked on a beautiful journey of intuition, learning, collective and personal reflection, political action and attentive listening/observing. Through this embodied journey, I was able to experience how it is to conduct research beyond the boundaries established by mainstream academia and to propose an innovative form of politically-engaged research (see **Ch2**). As discussed in **Ch1** and **Ch2**, the works of Juris (2007, 2008), Juris and Khasnabish (2013), Casas-Cortés et al. (2008), and Russell (2014), among others, have made an important contribution to the field of militant research, providing a detailed account of the epistemological and methodological features and the practicalities of this type of inquiry. By combining feminist (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1987; Naples, 2003) and prefigurative (Motta, 2011, 2014; Casas Cortés, 2006, 2008) epistemologies; militant ethnography (Juris, 2007, 2008) and a feminist ethics of care (Noddings, 1984; Sevenhuijsen, 1998; Edwards and Mauthner, 2002), I have crafted an original methodological strategy, adding to the scholarship mentioned above and contributing significantly to the emergent field of militant research in Latin America. Additionally, with this thesis I have demonstrated that it is possible to challenge the division between researcher and researched and the privileged theoretical and epistemological role of the academic. As this study has revealed, forging collective knowledge is not an easy task and it is especially problematic when it is attempted through a doctoral research, which formally is an individual endeavour. Without neglecting the setbacks of this approach to

inquiry, my PhD journey was a constant push towards more equal, reciprocal and collaborative relationships between myself and the research participants. It is the insistence on more democratic research and the honest acknowledgment of its challenges what makes this militant ethnography a valuable and relevant approach that might be of use to qualitative researchers, social movements' scholars and politics of knowledge's theorists, among others. Revealing the challenges but also the possibilities of militant research, has been definitely one of the strongest contributions of this thesis, which will hopefully encourage future experiments of collective and radical knowledge production in Latin America.

In political terms, this thesis has significant implications for the activity and practise of the four autonomous *colectivos* explored in the research. In the final feedback meetings held with my case studies (via videoconference), they stressed the importance of this work as it tells the story of political experiences rendered invisible by a state-centred society. But most importantly, they appreciated the way in which this account was produced. The politically-engaged and collaborative nature of the study led to the development of a thorough, respectful and constructive critical analysis that certainly contributes to the strengthening of their political approach. Additionally, the examination of the main issues and challenges encountered by the *colectivos* and the strategies undertaken for dealing with them is another political contribution made by this thesis. By sharing which structures, procedures and methods have worked effectively and which ones have not, the activists have been able to compare their praxis with the other case studies, discovering incredible similarities but also fresh interpretations and alternative ways of 'doing' that could help them improve their own political performance. Finally, my thesis could also be of interest to other autonomous movements, groups and communities in struggle across Latin America and beyond. Although the findings of this study reveal a dynamic, always-in-becoming and the contextual nature of autonomous politics, important lessons can be drawn from the particular experiences of these four *colectivos* and their innovative political practices.

9.3 Limitations and Recommendations for Further Research

Having outlined the main contributions of this thesis, in what follows I will present the main limitations of this study and some recommendations for further research. As discussed in **Ch2**, conducting militant ethnography with Latin American movements whilst undertaking PhD studies in England was a limitation of my research. Although I secured on-line feedback procedures and managed to arrange videoconferences with the *colectivos* after my one-year fieldwork, the distance from the field definitely jeopardised the degree of collaboration that I was initially expecting. Likewise, as my thesis is written in English, only the research participants who have English proficiency have been able to read the full document. Despite my commitment to translate this thesis after submission and the oral presentations delivered to the groups, the fact that my thesis was not immediately available in Spanish hindered the chances to get detailed feedback from more research participants. Having acknowledged these limitations, I also contend that the epistemological and methodological path proposed in this research represents a significant contribution to the politics and scholarship of autonomy in Latin America. Although militant research is always a situated and contextual process, the methodological approach advanced in this thesis can serve as an example for further politically-engaged research in the region. Moreover, the lessons drawn from this thesis suggest the importance of moving towards co-authored and non-institutionalized projects of militant research, where the process of knowledge production is not prompted by individual degree's requirements but by the groups need to collectively, critically and systematically reflect about their own political praxis.

The analytical choices made in this research also left some unattended areas. In this thesis I opted for a thematic analysis, trying to interweave the stories of the four case studies according to a number of themes and categories. Within this analytical framework, I attempted to show the particularities of each *colectivo* and the nuances between the groups and the two countries under study. This structure was considered a key strength by the research participants, inasmuch as it provides an integrated analysis of urban autonomous politics both in Mexico and Chile. However, taking this option implied to discard case-based or cross-country comparative analyses, making it harder to develop the comparison between Chile and Mexico or the full examination of a single case study.

Content-wise, a limitation of this thesis is the insufficient attention placed to the critique of coloniality. Although pivotal for the characterization of Latin American movements, this dimension was not properly addressed in my thesis. As urban and/or non-indigenous *colectivos* are usually not as strong as indigenous movements in regard to the critique of coloniality, I relied on that assumption and did not test this dimension in my early data collection plan. However, soon after my fieldwork I realized this blank spot and noticed that, although not crucial, the critique of coloniality was more evident in the Mexican than in the Chilean activists, probably due to the greater quantitative and qualitative influence of indigenous peoples in this country and the stronger influence of Zapatismo. Although I had some hypothesis in mind and I was aware of the importance of understanding these differences, unfortunately, due to time constraints I was unable to arrange additional data-collection, therefore, I did not have enough information to include this topic in my analysis. Considering this blank spot, future research could usefully compare the politics of autonomy in urban/non-indigenous spaces and those taking place in rural/indigenous settings. By undertaking a comparative inquiry, we could examine more closely the differences and linkages between these political experiences and how they develop (or not) a critique of coloniality, capitalism, state-centred politics and patriarchy.

This research brought together four *colectivos*, one of them being an autonomous feminist group. Although this thesis prioritised the analysis of the common dimensions shaping the thinking and doing of autonomous politics in general, the findings also showed the nuances and particularities of each group, highlighting the uniqueness of the feminist politics enacted by the activists from *El Rebrote*. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, an important contribution made by this research is the acknowledgment of a feminist strand within the tradition of autonomous politics. This contribution could be moved forward through a new research agenda with an exclusive focus on autonomous feminists in the region. This work could add to the small existing literature in this area and could help to make visible the important role played by radical feminism in the shaping of an autonomous approach to social change.

The study of 'less spectacular' projects of urban autonomy in Latin America is also an underdeveloped field within social movements' studies. Drawing on the experience of Chilean and Mexican *colectivos*, this thesis enhances our knowledge of these collective processes, but further research is still required in these and other Latin American

countries. Considering that the study of autonomous politics in Mexico is far more advanced than in Chile, a future research agenda should prioritize the exploration of autonomous projects in Chilean cities from a politically-engaged approach. A greater focus on cities other than the capital and on those closer to indigenous towns could shed some light on how the politics of autonomy is being enacted in smaller cities and whether the groups that are based closer to indigenous territories receive more influence from indigenous traditions or not.

The study of *colectivos* in Latin American countries ruled by Pink Tide governments is another possible area of future research that could add to the field of autonomous politics. As my findings revealed, the *colectivos* from Chile and Mexico develop a strong critique of state-centred politics, questioning the role played by both conservative and left-wing governments in the region. Accordingly, it would be interesting to compare these findings with the viewpoints and practices developed by autonomous groups from Bolivia, Venezuela or Ecuador. More research in these countries would allow us to explore how autonomous projects interact with left-wing governments and to what extent their understanding of state-centred politics differs from those presented in this study.

As explained in **Ch1**, *ECP* was the only *colectivo* among the case studies that recently came to an end. In this research, I decided not to rush into early interpretations about this process, respecting the activists' time to develop their own collective reflections about their political experience. The dissolution of this group, however, opens new questions regarding the temporality and sustainability of urban *colectivos*. All the case studies in this research (being *JRA* the most remarkable example) demonstrate that urban autonomous projects can be sustainable over time and foster long-term engagement among their activist communities. Even *ECP* managed to be in operation for 6 years, a considerable amount of time for micro spaces of political organising. But, what are the reasons for the dissolution of *colectivos*? Is it desirable to seek for long-term autonomous projects? Is there a correlation between age and political organizing? In the case of *colectivos* composed by students, is it possible (and necessary) to foster political engagement beyond the student life? If so, what are the lessons to be learnt in order to develop sustainable political alternatives? Drawing on these questions, future research could explore the issues of temporality, sustainability and the generational dimension in the praxis of autonomous politics. This new knowledge could provide a greater

understanding of the field, but most importantly, it could inform future courses of action by autonomous groups and movements.

Finally, although the four case studies analysed in this thesis share a strong militant ethos, further research is needed to identify whether other ethical systems are coexisting within the field of Latin American autonomous politics. As discussed in **Ch8**, the final feedback meetings held with the *colectivos* proved to be a successful form of validating and enriching my findings. Here, my hypothesis about the Latin American militant ethos was confirmed but also enhanced by the research participants. Particularly interesting was *JRA*'s argument that the distinction between a contingent and fluid type of activism and a more militant one is not only found in the West versus Latin America but in the region itself. In the past years, these two ethoses are actually coexisting in countries like Mexico, creating more pronounced nuances and tensions between the political actors embracing a politics of autonomy. Further studies on *colectivos* and autonomous movements could provide more evidence to test this hypothesis, helping us to identify future challenges in the praxis of autonomous politics.

To conclude, what can we learn about the politics of autonomy from the study of urban *colectivos* in Chile and Mexico? This thesis has revealed that the politics of autonomy is a radical, organic and feasible approach to social change being shaped and enacted by larger social movements but also by micro-experiments of resistance spread throughout the Latin American region. This approach is not only a political statement nor a romantic utopia. The emancipatory horizons envisioned by autonomous activists are grounded in clear political principles and viewpoints activated through effective structures, practices and methods. By developing a strong critique of domination and embracing a politics of horizontality, *autogestión*, affectivity, popular education and alliance-building, autonomous groups are forging in the present and from below an alternative path towards emancipation. But this path is not free from challenges and hindrances. On the contrary, this is an intricate journey, full of obstacles, tensions and contradictions. This is one of the main lessons generously shared by my *compañeras* and *compañeros*. We are always striving towards emancipation. We know that we are not fully liberated, yet we struggle. We acknowledge the colossal magnitude of our enemies yet we continue fighting despite our fears. We refuse to accept this world of injustice, hopelessness and despair, so we channel our rage towards the creation of new possible worlds. It does not matter how small the crack is, they are multiplying and they will continue growing. We

do not give up because we have each other, and together we will continue building a world of dignity and justice, a colourful world in which many worlds fit.

I hope that the political insights presented in this thesis can inspire and enhance other radical projects, and can serve as an example that other worlds are not only possible but are being built today and from below.

Don't give up, you still have time
to reach up and start anew,
Accept your shadows,
Bury your fears,
Free your burdens,
Fly again.

Don't give up, that's what life is
Continue the journey,
Follow your dreams,
Unstuck time,
Move the rubble,
And uncover the sky.

Don't give up, please don't give way,
Even if the cold burns,
Even if fear bites,
Even if the sun sets,
And the wind goes silent,
There is still fire in your soul
There is still life in your dreams.

(Excerpt of Poem "No te Rindas" by Mario Benedetti)

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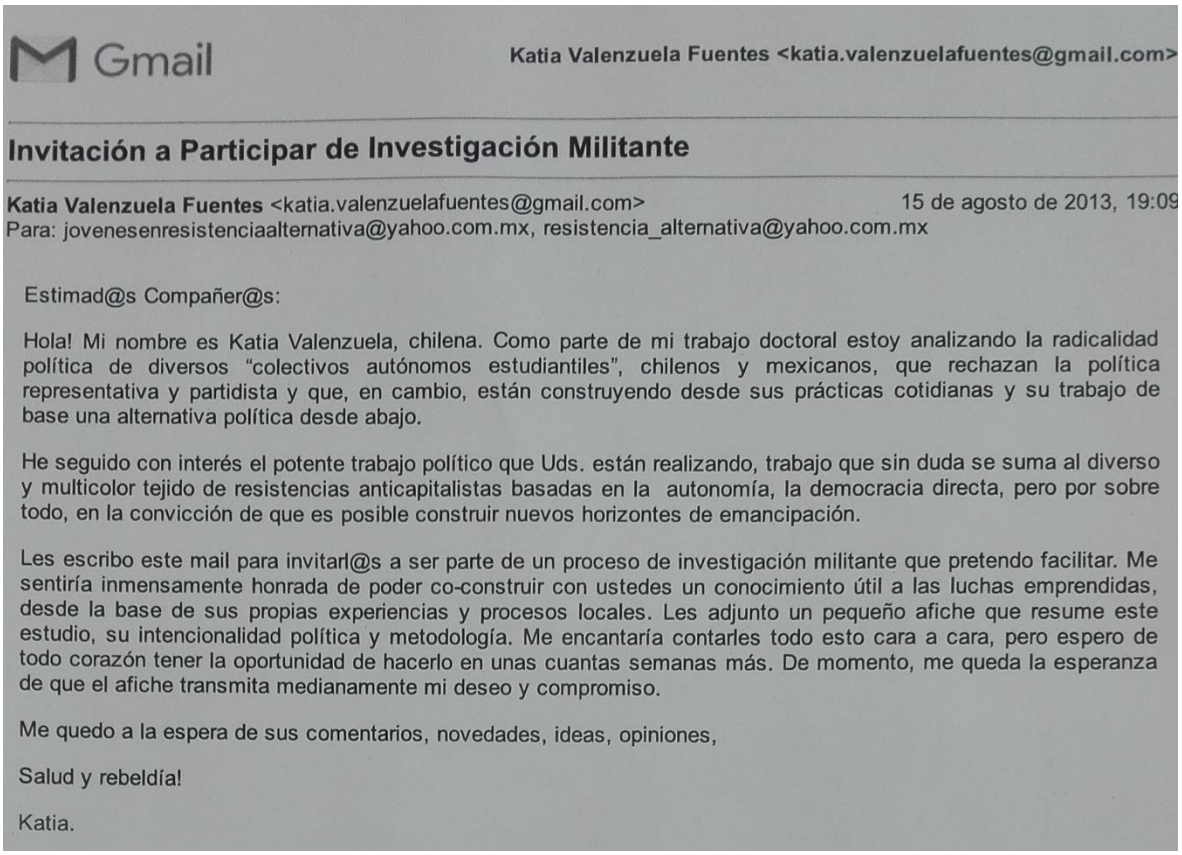
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Appendices

Appendix 1: Sample Recruitment Emails



Gmail — Katia Valenzuela Fuentes <katia.valenzuelafuentes@gmail.com>

Invitación a Participar de Investigación Militante

Katia Valenzuela Fuentes <katia.valenzuelafuentes@gmail.com> 15 de agosto de 2013, 19:09
Para: jovenesenresistenciaalternativa@yahoo.com.mx, resistencia_alternativa@yahoo.com.mx

Estimad@s Compañer@s:

Hola! Mi nombre es Katia Valenzuela, chilena. Como parte de mi trabajo doctoral estoy analizando la radicalidad política de diversos "colectivos autónomos estudiantiles", chilenos y mexicanos, que rechazan la política representativa y partidista y que, en cambio, están construyendo desde sus prácticas cotidianas y su trabajo de base una alternativa política desde abajo.

He seguido con interés el potente trabajo político que Uds. están realizando, trabajo que sin duda se suma al diverso y multicolor tejido de resistencias anticapitalistas basadas en la autonomía, la democracia directa, pero por sobre todo, en la convicción de que es posible construir nuevos horizontes de emancipación.

Les escribo este mail para invitarl@s a ser parte de un proceso de investigación militante que pretendo facilitar. Me sentiría inmensamente honrada de poder co-construir con ustedes un conocimiento útil a las luchas emprendidas, desde la base de sus propias experiencias y procesos locales. Les adjunto un pequeño afiche que resume este estudio, su intencionalidad política y metodología. Me encantaría contarles todo esto cara a cara, pero espero de todo corazón tener la oportunidad de hacerlo en unas cuantas semanas más. De momento, me queda la esperanza de que el afiche transmita medianamente mi deseo y compromiso.

Me quedo a la espera de sus comentarios, novedades, ideas, opiniones,

Salud y rebeldía!

Katia.

Appendix 2: Interviewees List

Country	Groups	Interviewee Name	Interview Date	Type of Interview
Mexico	*JRA*	Mina	4th April, 2014	Individual
			7th April, 2014	Individual
		Gizze	12th April, 2014	Individual
		Enrique	28th February, 2014	Individual
			3rd March, 2014	Individual
			6th April, 2014	Individual
		Abraham	4th April, 2014	Individual
			10th April, 2014	Individual
		Julia	5th March, 2014	Individual
		Centli	12th April, 2014	Individual
		Gaby	1st March, 2014	Individual
		Guadalupe	5th April, 2014	Individual
		Pablo	20th March, 2014	Individual
		David	11th April, 2014	Individual
		Perla	29th March, 2014	Group
		Gus	29th March, 2014	Group
		Quique	12th April, 2014	Group
		María	12th April, 2014	Group
		Berna	19th March, 2014	Group
		Cristian	19th March, 2014	Group
		Erick	19th March, 2014	Group
	Subversiones	Brenda	5th March, 2014	Individual
		Ita	10th March, 2014	Individual
		Lucero	3rd April, 2014	Individual
		Beto	6th March, 2014	Individual
		Samadhi	5th April, 2014	Individual
		Elis	2nd April, 2014	Individual
		Flux	2nd April, 2014	Individual
		Prime	27th March, 2014	Individual
		Amaranta	24th April, 2014	Individual
		Regina	20th March, 2014	Individual
		Anda	14th March, 2014	Individual
		Jero	2nd March, 2014	Individual
		Aldo	26th March, 2014	Individual
		Sari	7th March, 2014	Group
		Xilo	7th March, 2014	Group
Chile	*ECP*	Cami	3rd August, 2014	Individual
		Gaby	10th August, 2014	Individual
		Richi	11th August, 2014	Individual
		Erick	25th July, 2014	Individual
		Toti	25th July, 2014	Individual
		Rocío	10th August, 2014	Individual
		Manu	23rd July, 2014	Individual

		Nico	13th August, 2014	Individual
		Cony	14th August, 2014	Individual
	Rebrote	Paula	30th July, 2014	Individual
		Esperanza	1st September, 2014	Individual
		Pauli	8th August, 2014	Individual
		Lore	6th August, 2014	Individual
		Fabiola	1st August, 2014	Individual
		Nicole	8th August, 2014	Individual
		Andrea	7th August, 2014	Individual

Appendix 3: Interview Guide (Original Spanish Version)

1. ¿Cuánto tiempo llevas en el Colectivo? ¿Cómo llegaste a este espacio?

2. ¿Habías participado antes en otras organizaciones? (NO: ¿por qué crees tú que antes no surgió en ti la necesidad de organizarse?/ SI: ¿En cuáles? ¿Qué fue lo que te motivó a participar en un colectivo/organización?)

3. A lo largo de tu vida, ¿Quiénes consideras que han sido personas significativas, que han influenciado tu visión y práctica política? (personas cercanas) ¿Tu familia ha sido una influencia en tu compromiso político? (sondear afiliación política) ¿Amigos? O, ¿qué procesos, movimientos o grupos han sido significativos para ti en lo político?

4. ¿Conoces la historia del Colectivo? ¿Cómo fue formado?

5. ¿Podrías decirme cuáles son los principios, lineamientos políticos del colectivo? ¿Los compartes?

6. ¿Crees que el colectivo apuesta por una ideología o apuesta política específica?

7. ¿Qué crees que distingue al colectivo de otras organizaciones/apuestas políticas urbanas? (otros medios de contra-información en el caso de Subversiones)

8. ¿Qué significa la autonomía en su práctica política? ¿Qué distingue esta apuesta política de otras?

9. En lo interno, ¿cómo funciona el colectivo? ¿cómo se estructura? (división del trabajo, membrecías, áreas de trabajo, reclutamiento, financiamiento, difusión, evaluación, formación política)

10. ¿Cómo integras tu vida personal con tu trabajo político? (tiempos, formas de vida, etc.)

11. ¿Cómo son las relaciones personales entre los miembros del colectivo?

12. ¿Cómo se garantiza la horizontalidad al interior del colectivo?

13. ¿Cómo se toman las decisiones al interior del colectivo?

14. ¿Cómo se financia el colectivo? ¿Han considerado alguna vez apostar por recursos institucionales, como alternativas a la autogestión? (ONG's, donaciones, por ejemplo).

15. ¿Qué actividades ha realizado y realiza el colectivo?

16. ¿Cómo aborda el colectivo el ambiente de criminalización del movimiento social en México? (acciones concretas de seguridad/protección)

17. ¿Cuáles son las principales fortalezas del colectivo? ¿Y las debilidades?

18. ¿Cuáles son los principales problemas por los que está atravesando el colectivo en la actualidad? (sondear: relaciones de poder, división de tareas, género, creencias políticas, problemas de relaciones interpersonales, etc.)

19. ¿El colectivo se relaciona con instituciones gubernamentales? ¿Partidos políticos? ¿gobiernos locales? ¿Universidades?

20. ¿Cómo se vincula el colectivo con otros procesos? ¿Cuáles son sus estrategias de articulación? ¿Quiénes son sus aliados? ¿Pertenecen a alguna/s red/redes? ¿Cuáles son los principales problemas que se presentan en la generación de alianzas entre colectivos, grupos, movimientos?

21. ¿Cuál es el posicionamiento del colectivo frente a las luchas sociales más amplias (en el país, por ejemplo)? ¿Cómo determinan a cuáles luchas se suman y a cuáles no?

22. Muchas veces ocurre que se levantan demandas orientadas al Estado, para frenar proyectos de ley o presionar para la recuperación/mantención de derechos sociales básicos, ¿cómo evalúan ustedes esas luchas? ¿se suman? ¿de qué manera? ¿Han discutido sobre la posición del colectivo frente a este tipo de luchas macro? (los profesores, la reforma energética, por ejemplo)

23. ¿Cuál sería tu diagnóstico acerca de la situación política mexicana? ¿Funciona la democracia? ¿Y el modelo económico?

24. ¿Cuál ha sido el rol que han cumplido los partidos políticos en México/Chile?

25. ¿Y qué me podrías decir de la Izquierda Mexicana/Chilena? ¿Qué tendencias clave puedes identificar?

26. ¿Qué piensas de la izquierda partidista y/o tradicional en México/Chile? ¿Ves potencialidad en esas formas organizativas? ¿Por qué? / ¿Crees que es posible avanzar en justicia y dignidad a través de la vía eleccionaria?

27. ¿Cuál es el rol del Estado en el proceso de transformación radical de la sociedad?

28. ¿Cuál es la relación del colectivo con sectores de la izquierda no autónoma?

29. ¿Crees que a nivel macro existen alternativas a la política representativa?

30. ¿Cuál es el rol de las alianzas políticas en la construcción de estas alternativas? ¿Han evaluado la posibilidad de aliarse con fuerzas no autónomas?

31. ¿Cuáles son los horizontes emancipatorios que imaginas? ¿Cómo es esa sociedad otra que quieres/quieren construir?

32. ¿Crees que algo de esto que imaginas se está experimentando en tu trabajo en el colectivo?

Appendix 4: Informed Consent (Original Spanish Version)

The University of Nottingham

Consentimiento Informado para Participar en Proyecto de Investigación: "Hacia Nuevos Horizontes Emancipatorios: Análisis de Colectivos Urbanos Autónomos de Chile y México"

La presente investigación forma parte del trabajo doctoral de Katia Valenzuela Fuentes, estudiante de la Escuela de Política, Universidad de Nottingham, Reino Unido. El objetivo de este estudio es explorar las prácticas y discursos de colectivos urbanos autónomos en Chile y México y sus implicancias para la constitución de apuestas político-emancipatorias de nuevo tipo.

Si usted accede a participar en este estudio, se le pedirá responder preguntas en una entrevista. Esto tomará aproximadamente 1 hora, 15 minutos de su tiempo. Lo que se converse durante estas sesiones se grabará, de modo que la investigadora pueda transcribir después las ideas que usted haya expresado.

La participación en este estudio es estrictamente voluntaria. La información que se recoja será confidencial y no se usará para ningún otro propósito fuera de los de esta investigación y de la retroalimentación a los propios colectivos. Para el análisis de las entrevistas sólo se mencionará su nombre de pila, y si lo prefiere, dicho nombre puede ser reemplazado por un nombre ficticio.

Si tiene alguna duda sobre este proyecto, puede hacer preguntas en cualquier momento durante su participación en el. Igualmente, puede retirarse del proyecto en cualquier momento sin que eso lo perjudique en ninguna forma. Si alguna de las preguntas durante la entrevista le parecen incómodas, tiene usted el derecho de hacérselo saber a la investigadora o de no responderlas.

De tener preguntas sobre su participación en este estudio, puede contactar a Katia Valenzuela al teléfono 09-65807762 o al correo electrónico katia.valenzuelafuentes@gmail.com

Una copia de esta ficha de consentimiento le será entregada para su respaldo.

¡Muchas Gracias!

Nombre de la o el Participante **Firma** **Fecha**

Acepto el uso de mi nombre de pila: _____

Prefiero anonimato: _____

Appendix 5: Lay Summary of my Research (presented to all the case studies)



INVITACIÓN A PARTICIPAR EN INVESTIGACIÓN MILITANTE:

"Hacia Nuevos Horizontes Emancipatorios": Explorando Otras Políticas Posibles en Colectivos Urbanos Autónomos de Chile y México

"Conocer no es el acto a través del cual un sujeto transformado en objeto recibe dócil y pasivamente los contenidos que otro le regala o impone. El conocimiento, por el contrario, implica una presencia curiosa del sujeto frente al mundo. Implica su acción transformadora sobre la realidad, una búsqueda constante, invención y reinvención, la reflexión crítica de uno sobre el acto mismo de conocer."
(Paulo Freire, ¿Extensión o Comunicación?)

1.– ¿De qué trata esta investigación?

Esta investigación es parte de mi trabajo doctoral que busca explorar cómo diversos "colectivos urbanos autónomos", tanto en Chile como en México, están construyendo desde sus prácticas cotidianas y su trabajo de base una alternativa política desde abajo. Me interesa aprender más sobre esta creciente tendencia, latinoamericana y mundial, que cuestiona la mediación partidaria y la política representativa y que, en cambio, cree en la democracia directa y en nuevos caminos políticos que superen los modelos clásicos del cambio social.

2.– ¿De qué tipo de investigación estamos hablando?

La invitación es a co-construir un proceso autónomo e independiente de investigación militante, en donde se genere un conocimiento colectivo que permita interpretar críticamente las luchas sociales emprendidas. NO me interesa recopilar, catalogar, interpretar por mi cuenta y publicar información de los colectivos con el fin de "asesorarlos" o sólo "simpatizar" con su lucha desde la distancia. La investigación militante que aquí propongo aspira a ser un proceso colectivo de acción y reflexión, con fines políticos compartidos entre nosotr@s y basado en el compromiso a desafiar las injusticias sociales a través de la producción de saberes útiles a las luchas que ustedes batallan.

3.– ¿En qué consistirá esta investigación?

La forma de implementar esta investigación será discutida entre tod@s nosotr@s. Por ejemplo, las metas, objetivos y principios éticos que he ido pensado serán evaluados por ustedes mism@s, discutiéndose también el nivel de compromiso con el proyecto, las expectativas y los productos concretos que ustedes esperan de este trabajo. Entrevistas grupales con los colectivos, talleres participativos y discusiones grupales, entre otros; podrían ser algunas de las actividades a desarrollarse. Además, la idea es que tod@s en conjunto vayamos analizando la información, integrando las múltiples voces que hablarán en el estudio.



4.- ¿Quién convoca?

Mi nombre es Katia Valenzuela, chilena, 30 años. De adolescente simpaticé con las Juventudes Comunistas, aprendí bastante pero también viví en carne propia las jerarquías y restricciones impuestas por el partido, así que pronto escapé de aquel espacio. Luego me integré a un colectivo estudiantil, y fue allí donde me comprometí con otro tipo de acción política, basada en la autonomía, la autogestión, la acción directa, la horizontalidad y el trabajo territorial. Desde ese momento y hasta ahora, he tratado de integrar mi práctica política con mis estudios y oficio, porque creo que a nivel del conocimiento también debemos luchar contra las visiones políticas y teóricas tradicionales. Ya terminados mis estudios, y luego de casi 7 años de empleos precarios y de trabajo político en colectivos de trabajador@s y de mujeres revolucionarias, me decidí a postular a una beca para estudiar un doctorado. Finalmente lo conseguí, estoy haciendo mi doctorado en Ciencias Políticas en la Universidad de Nottingham, Reino Unido; y desde Octubre del año pasado comencé mi travesía por México, en donde tuve la increíble oportunidad de nutrirme y aprender muchísimo de dos experiencias urbanas de auto-organización. Mi desafío ahora es seguir aprendiendo de procesos autónomos de resistencia y creación, pero esta vez mapeando el trabajo emprendido por compañeras y compañeros chilenas/os.

5.- ¿Les interesa sumarse a esta iniciativa o saber más de ella?

Si les interesa sumarse a esta reflexión colectiva o tienen cualquier consulta, sugerencia, idea, etc., no duden en escribirme a katitaval@riseup.net

Salud y Rebeldía!

"Nadie educa a nadie, nadie se educa a sí mismo, los hombres [y mujeres] se educan entre sí mediatizados/as por el mundo. (...) No hay palabra verdadera que no sea unión inquebrantable entre acción y reflexión, y por ende, que no sea praxis. De ahí que decir la palabra verdadera sea transformar el mundo." (Paulo Freire, Pedagogía del Oprimido)