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# Peasant and indigenous autonomy before and after the pink tide in Latin America

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## Abstract

Autonomy should not be understood as an inherent quality of rural subjects but as fundamentally a political and cultural project. This paper will present an overview of the evolution of the idea, project, and practice of peasant and indigenous autonomy in Latin America from the 1990s to today. It will trace the origins of the process and examine how the different dimensions of the concept of autonomy (economic, political, ideological, and ethnic) came together in the early 1990s to form a coherent although contradictory political project, which attempted to present an alternative to neoliberalism and political paternalism. The paper will assess the extent to which this project addressed the main challenges that the different sectors of the peasantry faced with the neoliberal restructuring of the economy and the deployment of neoliberal multiculturalism in the region. Through the case studies of Brazil, Ecuador, Nicaragua, and Mexico, the paper will argue that the autonomy projects entailed serious contradictions since their inception because by wanting to solve some problems through certain mechanisms, rural

movements exacerbated other problems. The paper also highlights the difficulty that peasant and indigenous movements had through the years in maintaining a strong alliances with each other.

**KEYWORDS**
Brazil, Ecuador, Mexico, Nicaragua, rural movements

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

In the 1980s during the period of struggle for democracy in Latin America, the term autonomy was most commonly used by social movements from across the region to refer to their independence from political parties and the state (Calderón et al., 1992). Even to this day, that is how the term is most often used and for the sake of clarity, we will use the term *political autonomy* to refer to this meaning of autonomy. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, as the term was being used by political subjects as varied as the *Zapatistas* in Chiapas and the *Piqueteros* in Argentina, social movements that saw themselves as anticapitalist or antineoliberal also embraced the term. In all this, the specifically peasant and indigenous origins of the term in the Latin America of the late 1980s and early 1990s was somewhat lost.

In Latin America, peasant and indigenous autonomy have always had several dimensions that are tightly intertwined and find expression in many ideas and practices. It is understood as a political project, a practice and a utopian horizon of the agrarian subaltern classes and marginalized ethnic groups. First, in its strictly political dimension it means the control of the decision-making process and the active participation in the policy-making that affects the countryside and the nation. Second, in its "economic" dimension it refers to the control of means of production and natural resources (land, water, forests, mangroves, etc.) and markets, and in many cases the defence, recovery, and reinforcement of communitarian practices of solidarity, reciprocity, and redistribution. In this respect, movements sought autonomy through basically three strategies: market avoidance (autonomy from the market through non-capitalist forms of production and exchange), market creation (autonomy within the market) or market integration (Vergara-Camus, 2017, pp. 430–31; for a different framework, see van der Ploeg, 2010). Third, in its cultural/nationalist dimension, autonomy is gained by claiming and exercising collective rights to self-determination by indigenous peoples or afro-descendants over a particular territory. In Latin America, this search for autonomy has been carried out through mobilizations and negotiations to reform the nation-state and establish some form of cultural recognition and devolution of power towards indigenous peoples and afro-descendants. Fourthly, autonomy is also a social/political *praxis* of social movements that, although followed differently and unevenly depending on the organization, builds and relies on horizontal participatory decision-making, which seeks to transform the traditional hierarchical relationship between leaders and membership base that dominated the old left. Almost across all Latin America, this praxis translated into the adoption by movements of territorial or communal assemblies that had rotating leadership and arrived at decision through consensus-building, which sometimes conflicted with liberal representative institutions. This conception of autonomy is often conflated with direct democracy. Fifthly, symbolically and discursively, autonomy is presented as the political project that will address the grievances of the subaltern classes who have been marginalized by capitalism and the colonial and post-colonial state by regaining collective control of their lives and becoming historical subjects. The term autonomy is very often accompanied by a strong moral discourse vis-à-vis capitalism or neoliberalism. Hence, the process and goal of struggling for autonomy is presented as one of regaining dignity.

Because of this multifaceted character, studying peasant and indigenous autonomy is difficult. This is complicated even further because peasant autonomy and indigenous autonomy, though they can coincide in one

movement, as they did in the Zapatista movement in Chiapas, are not reducible to one another. Even though they have collaborated in many coalitions and campaigns, peasant and indigenous movements have often developed their own separate agendas and goals, and hence political strategies. In the academia, this has been translated by the adoption of different disciplinary or theoretical lens. Peasant autonomy is more strictly a response to neoliberal restructuring while indigenous autonomy links back to historical processes of marginalization and exclusion during colonial and post-colonial times. The literature on these subjects is thus split, the former is studied from a political economy approach and takes a class perspective (Rubio, 2017; Vergara-Camus, 2014) while the latter is studied through anthropological and political lenses that focus on identity formations and cultural politics (Martínez Novo, 2006; Martínez Valle, 2002).

Our contribution to this special issue aims to draw from these two sets of literatures and critically analyse what the struggles for peasant and indigenous autonomy have been about in Latin America and what have been their achievements, limitations, and contradictions during these four decades of neoliberalism. We begin our enquiry with an observation: The idea and practice of autonomy have remained central to peasant and indigenous movements' resistance to neoliberalism throughout Latin America since the 1990s. However, in very few places, even where important victories were achieved, it fulfilled the promises of social transformation that it carried. Why is this?

To answer this question, we will trace the emergence and development of the idea, project and practice of peasant and indigenous autonomy in Latin America from the 1990s to the present through the cases of Brazil, Ecuador, Nicaragua, and Mexico, from which broad trends will be extrapolated. In terms of geographic location, ethnic composition, size, and economy, the four countries provide a representative picture of the diversity of the region. Brazil was chosen because of the regional and global significance of its most well-known movement, the Landless Rural Workers Movement (MST, in Portuguese), its regional importance, and its most ambitious Pink Tide experience. Nicaragua was chosen because it represents the earliest and most institutionalized experience of regional ethnic autonomy in the continent, with significant territorial devolution of power. Ecuador was chosen because the demands of the indigenous movement included an important agrarian dimension and the movement was able to extract important concessions from the state, which allowed it to exercise significant territorial control but did not achieve much on the agrarian front. Finally, Mexico is one of the Latin American countries with the earliest discussion about peasant and indigenous autonomy, which reached a highpoint with the Zapatista rebellion, but the last one to join the Pink Tide with the election of Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador in 2018.

The paper will be organized in the following way. First, we will begin by setting out the historical context in which the concept and project of autonomy emerged by highlighting the transition from developmentalism to neoliberalism, which drastically modified the linkages between agriculture and industrialization, as well as the organization of the state. This will allow us to problematize the different meanings or dimensions (economic, political, cultural/territorial) of the concept of autonomy that peasant movements mobilized at the beginning of the neoliberal transformation. We begin with peasant autonomy in Mexico and Brazil, and follow with indigenous autonomy in Nicaragua, and Ecuador. We will the move to examining how the demand and practice of autonomy gradually changed in the heat of the struggles, concessions, and openings during the 1990s, and later with leftist populist governments in the mid-2000s. We end with an overview of what the government of Andres Manuel López Obrador has meant for the historical demands of autonomous peasant movements.

Our main argument is the following: The projects of peasant and indigenous autonomy were presented as an alternative to the neoliberal restructuring of the 1990s but since their inception entailed serious contradictions because by wanting to solve some problems through certain mechanisms, rural movements exacerbated other problems. For instance, by seeking to respond to economic marginalization of peasant producers due to the deregulation of markets through the creation of market organizations controlled by them, or support policies for landed members of the peasantry, the movements overestimated their ability to become successful market actors. Or by claiming and gaining political control over certain parts of the territory or certain decentralized state programmes, indigenous movements believed in their ability to mediate the impact of capitalist expansion without considering how this would weaken their ability to act as catalysts for radical social change. As far as ethnic autonomy is concerned, both in

practice and theory, autonomy has been sought by indigenous actors through the creation of separate spaces associated with demands for territorial control. This has sometimes weakened coalition building with other nonindigenous subaltern actors from rural and urban settings, whose livelihoods have also been pauperized by neoliberalism. We also note that in our four case studies uniting peasant and indigenous struggles has been a major challenge for rural movements. Struggles for peasant autonomy have not necessarily found strong solidarity from indigenous movements, while the opposite is also true.

We argue that these contradictions developed in three moments. The first moment comes around in the early 1990s, as a response to the neoliberal market and state restructuring. In several cases (Chiapas, Bolivia, Ecuador, Argentina, and Brazil), resistance movements managed to destabilize neoliberal regimes, sometimes even bringing them down, and new forms of organizing and producing emerged. According to several authors (Holloway, 2002; Zibechi, 2007), this is when autonomy as a project and a praxis of urban and rural movements arises and reaches its highest point. Peasant movements tried to face market liberalization, while indigenous movements attempted to take advantage of the deployment of neoliberal multiculturalism (Hale, 2002, 2005; Hale & Millaman, 2005). The second moment emerges in the 2000s when several of these movements embark on a politics of alliances with left-wing politicians and parties, who promise to implement policies in line with their historic demands, which leads to the pink tide governments. This time, the challenge revolves around guaranteeing that state policies allow them to improve the livelihoods of their members while maintaining their political independence. The third moment coincides with the fall of several of these left-wing governments triggered by the cycle of devalorization of commodities and is marked by a new dilemma in the movements' strategies made even more complicated because of the emergence of right-wing conservative forces.

## 2 | 1980S: THE EMERGENCE OF PEASANT AND INDIGENOUS AUTONOMY

The Import-Substitution Industrial model (ISI) that was followed by most Latin American countries sought to establish a "virtuous" circle between agriculture and industry centred on cheap food prices. The state took on the function of striking a balance between sufficiently high real wages for workers, to allow them to consume a certain amount of domestically produced manufactured goods, and profitable prices for agricultural products. By the 1970s, the ISI model was no longer serving the needs and goals of the dominant classes. They opted for the neoliberal regime of accumulation, in which productive industrial capital became subordinated to financial capital and the domestic economy was opened to international flows. The "virtuous circle" was definitively broken and replaced by a "vicious" one, where large sectors of labouring classes became redundant for the reproduction of capital. Latin America embarked on a process of deindustrialization and a return to export-led development, much of it through reprimarization of the economy in which agroexport played a prominent role (Cypher, 2010). The dominant forms of exploitation centred around precarization and the superexploitation of labour, often reproducing itself below subsistence levels. More importantly, neoliberalism transformed the articulation between agriculture and industry by promoting the import of highly subsidized grains. In the countryside, this led to the productive exclusion and crisis of reproduction of the peasantry and in the cities to precariousness and unemployment. In other words, if under the ISI model peasants were exploited as producers, under neoliberalism they were outright excluded (Rubio, 2012).

The restructuring of the market was imposed by the state but accompanied with the transformation of the state itself, which mirrored the good governance agenda of the World Bank. The corporatist or clientelist forms of social intermediation between the rural population and the state were criticized by neoliberal politicians. These top-down relations were to be replaced by decentralization and civil society participation, and in some countries with substantial indigenous groups and ethnic minorities by concessions on collective or cultural rights under a regime that many call neoliberal multiculturalism. This coincided with calls for autonomy (i.e., political independence) from political parties that social movements had been defending during the struggle against authoritarian rule throughout the 1980s (Calderón et al., 1992). Most rural movements distrusted the state but saw this state restructuring as an

opportunity. They negotiated with the state to retrieve some degree of political control over their productive activities, territories, or over the public policies directed at their members. This transformation however gave the state a new legitimacy that cleverly recovered and resignified the legitimate collective demands of popular sectors and indigenous peoples.

## 3 | PEASANT AUTONOMY: LAND, PRODUCTION, AND THE "APPROPRIATION OF THE PRODUCTIVE PROCESS"

Following years of state tutelage through corporatism or clientelism, rural movements were eager to exercise their *political autonomy* from the state, political parties, and traditional rural. They took advantage of the opening that the early years of the transition to liberal democracy provided by occupying the public space with land seizures, marches, rallies, blockades, and sit-ins to make their grievances heard. Although struggles for land were still crucial to the most marginalized sectors of the peasantry, in the initial stage of the emergence of autonomous peasant and indigenous movements land reform was not a key demand, with the exception of Brazil. It became so towards the end of the 1990s-early 2000s when the food sovereignty approach was adopted by most organizations (Martínez-Torres & Rosset, 2010). To a great extent, the outlook of a great portion of the peasant movements was a defensive one and gathered around demands to bring back price control, subsidies, debt relief or renegotiation, and some form of regulation of the market. In contrast to the earlier period, many of the new organizations that emerged during this period were sectoral, representing the producers of a specific crop (maize, coffee, cocoa, tomatoes, etc.). But they did not ask for a return of the interventionist state in the form of state-owned companies, boards, or agencies that tended to have the monopoly over agricultural inputs or commercialization of crops. They often demanded for that some of the control be handed over to them as producer organizations. In many cases, informing these demands was the quest to recover some degree of *economic autonomy*, which in Mexico came under the banner of the *apropiación del proceso productivo* (appropriation of the productive process) and in other countries of *autogestión* (self-management). The goal was to eliminate the upstream and downstream market intermediaries so that small-scale producers could keep a larger proportion of the revenues. The aim was thus to build "autonomy within the market." The most radical versions of this economic autonomy also included the creation of cooperatives or associations with elements of collective control of the means of production other than land, such as machinery, storage and processing facilities, as well as democratic management of the enterprise (Moguel et al., 1992; Otero, 1999, chap. 7). Regardless of the position vis-à-vis de market and the state, the most important and often insurmountable challenge of collective initiatives was to integrate the market in a way that allowed the members of the organization to improve their levels of income and well-being, that is, redistribute enough of the surplus to the members and not overrely on their unpaid labour, without decapitalizing and thus jeopardizing the survival of the enterprise in an open market where competition ruled.

As will be shown with the cases of Chiapas, Nicaragua, and Ecuador, in countries with substantial indigenous and afro-descendant population, leaders of these movements also took advantage of the decentralization and devolution of certain state functions to reinforce the territorial presence of their organizations and negotiate some degree of *indigenous territorial autonomy* (self-rule) over these. Hence, even if peasant and indigenous demands often came together within a movement or coalitions of organizations, their objectives and interests were not always the same. Nonetheless, the *practice of autonomy* was a common feature of the movements of the 1990s. Despite the democratic opening, all the movements faced significant levels of state and nonstate violence. As the movements needed to constantly display their mobilizing capacity in the face of repression, these frontal confrontations with the state triggered broader participation and increased politicization of the grassroots membership. This saw the adoption by several movements of participatory decision-taking practices through successive series of nested assemblies, involving constant back and forth between the membership base and the leadership, as well as the rotation of leaders, and the training of new cadres whereby militants learned how to become leaders. Traditional gender roles were also

challenged through increased, and sometimes autonomous, participation of women who created their own organization within or outside the movements (Starr et al., 2011). Hence, in the 1990s, peasant and indigenous movements more than political parties were playing the role of what Gramsci called the "modern prince" (Vergara-Camus & Kay, 2017). Of course, these democratic practices coexisted with more traditional top-down forms of leadership in an uneasy balance corresponding to the ebbs and flows of different moments, requirements of the struggle, and the personal ambitions of specific leaders.

### 3.1 | Mexico: Political Independence, co-optation, and radical autonomy against the state

In Mexico, the rural movement with national projection that really first took on the flag of peasant autonomy was the *Unión Nacional de Organizaciones Campesinas Autónomas* (UNORCA). It began in 1984 as a coalition of regional peasant organizations of successful small and medium size ejido producers of maize from several states of the centre and north of Mexico, who had been involved in the struggle for land and had become a producers' association. The target of the UNORCA was the state itself, both its state enterprise that controlled the agricultural market (*Compañía Nacional de Subsistencias Populares*, CONASUPO) and its corporatist organization (the *Confederación Nacional Campesina*, CNC) that had the monopoly over the political representation of the peasantry within the ruling party (*Partido Revolucionario Institucional*, PRI).

UNORCA brought together a peculiar mix of peasant organizations, militants from revolutionary organizations, and activist academics from a wide variety of ideological influences but notably Maoism. Behind the call for economic autonomy was the idea of "appropriation of the productive process." The tool for this would be the Ejido Unions or the *Asociación Rural de Interés Colectivo* (ARIC) that would function as a social enterprise, would be democratically self-managed, and would redistribute the income among members. The main objective consisted in the appropriation of the surplus, which was being lost to intermediaries. Economic autonomy was pursued in different ways and fronts. First, productive projects started from the needs and strengths of the community and then articulated themselves with the region level, which was meant to serve the local level. Second, the development outlook was one of defence of the peasant economy by reinforcing the productive practices that avoid the market. Third, a central objective was to keep a greater portion of the revenue by gaining more control over costs and prices. Fourth, the longer-term objective was to secure access to finance, green revolution technological packages, agroindustrial infrastructure, and managerial skills that allowed to struggle for the "appropriation of the productive process" (Hernández, 1992, p. 62). Economically, UNORCA's project sought to combine *autonomy from the market* and *autonomy within the market* in order to ultimately achieve more stable *market integration*.

Another important and contradictory characteristic of UNORCA was that it was very well-connected to state officials from different echelons. Under President Miguel de la Madrid (1982–1988), UNORCA managed to use its contacts to extract important concessions such as regional guarantee prices and the legal recognition of the unions of ejidos so they could receive credits from the state without going through the CNC or the PRI. Political autonomy translated into a "politics of two faces": on the outside it negotiated with the state and even extracted economic concessions from it whilst on the inside it aimed to radically affect the relations of production and exchange of the ejido and the region. When Carlos Salinas de Gortari became president in 1988, in search of a legitimacy that his fraudulent election did not give him, he incorporated some of the intellectuals allied to UNORCA into the state apparatus. The organization accepted what at that time was called *la política de concertación* (politics of conciliation) and thought that it could influence public policy (Mackinlay & de Grammont, 2009). But it was not possible, since Salinas negotiated a free trade agreement with the United States and Canada, in which most of the agricultural sector would be deregulated and open within 10 to 15 years. He also reformed Article 27 of the Constitution that opened the commodification of ejido lands and did away with the ceilings on the size of private rural property. The price that

UNORCA had to pay for this politics of two faces was its political and economic weakness once the reforms were launched (Rubio, 1996).

This failure of the most emblematic autonomous peasant movement in Mexico is shadowed by the slow clandestine development (1984–1994) and abrupt rise of the Zapatista rebels in the Southernmost state of Chiapas on January 1, 1994, the day of implementation of the NAFTA. The guerrilla movement was made of semi-prolerarianized indigenous subsistence peasants, who represent the poorest and most marginalized sectors of the Mexican peasantry. One of the EZLN incubators was the ARIC-Unión de Uniones (Leyva Solano, 2001; Vos, 2002) that participated in a front called *Coordinadora Nacional Plan de Ayala* (CNPA) that had emerged in 1970, which commanded the most important struggle for the land of the period. The struggle against the historical marginalization of indigenous subsistence peasants from national society added an indigenous dimension to the call for autonomy. All these experiences of struggle, along with very peculiar local circumstances, particularly the threat of their recently acquired land rights being withdrawn by the state, converged in the clandestine development of the EZLN and produced the most radical version of peasant and indigenous autonomy of the continent. Indeed, for the Zapatistas, autonomy included economic, political, indigenous, and territorial autonomy, as well as the internal practice of autonomy. Autonomy began with gaining and protecting access to land, continued with reorganizing the community by democratizing the ejido structure by giving voice and vote to non-title holders and women in the ejido assembly. It also sought to introduce some elements of collective work and cooperation oriented at securing food self-sufficiency and community self-reliance. Economically, by reinforcing noncapitalist relations of production and exchange the Zapatista approach sought *autonomy from the market*. The EZLN covered all this with an actual territorial control exercised through a multilevel (community, regional, supraregional) structure of popular power where decisions are taking in assembly and by consensus. This structure replaced the state by taking up some of its functions like education, health, conflict-resolution and security. This way of territorialising their struggle was formalized by the EZLN in late 1994 when they took over official municipalities and established the "autonomous municipalities in rebellion" and later reorganized them into *Juntas de Buen Gobierno* (Good Government Councils, JBG) in 2003, where representatives of the different Zapatista communities making up a municipality sit on the JBG on a rotating basis to hear and decide on matters presented to them by members of the public (Burguete Cal y Mayor 2003; Vergara-Camus, 2014, chap.3).

In their negotiations with the Mexican state that culminated in the signing of the San Andres Accords on Indigenous Rights and Culture in 1996, the Zapatistas attempted to seek an official recognition of indigenous autonomy. However, understanding that political autonomy would be dwarfed without economic pillars, the EZLN also sought some degree of control by indigenous peoples over the natural resources on these territories. The state was not willing to concede that control, and it ended up withdrawing its approval of the Accords. In response, the Zapatistas adopted the position of resistance and called on their social bases to refuse to collaborate or accept any funding from the state. This policy has led to a fragmentation of their territorial presence in Chiapas. In April 2001, the Mexican Congress passed a Law on Indigenous Rights drafted by the Right-Wing President Vicente Fox that recognized cultural rights and allowed for the exercise of "traditional and customary" forms of taking decision but not much more. By then, the state had managed to isolate the Zapatistas through a clever divide and conquer strategy that included granting land to Chiapan peasant and indigenous organizations who had joined the Zapatista camp in 1994 and a democratic opening on the electoral front at the national level.

From the mid-1990s until the mid-2000s, the Zapatistas tried on numerous occasions to create a national autonomous front or organization but have repeatedly failed to. Although they counted on significant support from civil society organizations until the early 2000s, their rejection of elections, political parties and any collaboration with the state has inhibited them from finding significant allies. Their most important and faithful allies have not been peasant movements but independent indigenous organizations from across Mexico gathered in the *Congreso Nacional Indígena* (National Indigenous Congress, CNI) who see in the ratification of the San Andres Accords a way of exercising real autonomy and defending their territory.

### 3.2 | Brazil: The MST de facto autonomy through land occupation and family farming

As previously mentioned, Brazil is the Latin American country where neoliberal restructuring was preceded by a capitalist transformation of agriculture in the 1960s that produced a fully internationalized agribusiness sector around large and medium capitalist farmers. The MST took the lead in resisting this restructuring when it was created in 1984 by organizing displaced peasant families and landless rural workers. Like most social movements in Latin America, autonomy for the MST meant first and foremost political independence. However, given the peculiarity of the Brazilian transition from authoritarian rule, in which the *Partido dos Trabalhadores* (Workers Party, PT)—originally a party of social movements—played a key role, political independence for the MST meant that even though MST members and leaders could be members of the PT, the organization should not subordinate its goals to those of the PT. In truth this separation was not simple and participation in electoral politics generated all kinds of tensions within the MST.

The term peasant autonomy was not part of the MST vocabulary. However, in the 1990s the organization and MST communities de facto exercised a degree of autonomy that rivalled, and in some respects even surpassed, that of the Zapatistas because it effectively controlled part of the territory. The space of the encampment that the MST set-up in regions where land had the potential of being occupied and expropriated followed a specific activist methodology and culture developed by the MST over the years. Members, often complete families, had to live most of the week in the encampment in the fringes of highways or within the property they were occupying. They were organized in small groups called *nucleos*, participated in the different chores and tasks of the encampment allocated to different "sector" (security, basic health, education, production) and in the decision-making process within encampment that culminated in the encampment assembly. An encampment was in turn connected to the territorial structure of the MST at the municipal, state and national level, where delegates met to discuss decisions following the same kind of political practice. The second territorial space was the settlement, which is the agrarian reform community that is granted land rights by the Brazilian state. An MST-affiliated settlement reproduced the same form of internal organization and participated in the multilevel structure of power of the movement. Fernandes (2005) speaks of "social-territorial movement" to grasp this ability to move beyond its specific locality and consolidate a territorial presence that a rural movement can adopt in the course of its struggle. Thus, one of the most important strengths of the MST was that representatives of encampments (landless) and settlements (landed) came together within the organization and in social mobilizations to pressure the state (occupations of land or government buildings, marches, gatherings, demonstrations, etc.). Over this, the MST built an activist apparatus that included technical (in agronomy, agroecology, education, health) and political training for its landless and landed members in two state of the art education centres in the state of Sao Paulo and Parana. Hence, within the MST, the practice of autonomy also includes the formulation and application of technical knowledge in accordance with the movements' objective. While not a movement that openly calls for territorial autonomy like indigenous or afro-descendant movements, by the early 2000s the MST had achieved to garner a significant degree of territorial autonomy.

The way landed settlers met the challenges of starting up farming and improving their livelihood was closely linked to accessing state funds. Once the settlement is created, the settlers can access the different programmes and funding that the state allocates to agrarian reform and family farmers. The MST encouraged its affiliated settlers to apply for these, negotiated with the state over these and other services like education, but also pushed its own model peasant agriculture (Wolford, 2010). The *economic autonomy* of MST settlers relies on the funding of the state and is sometimes constrained by the requirements of these programmes. The challenge of the MST is to strike a balance between the constraints of the programmes and the collective objectives of the movement. If the movement does not want to lose members, it has also to appropriately interpret the individual preferences of the settlers. After many failed attempts at collective farming, the MST came to the realization that family farming was what settlers were demanding and had been fighting for. In terms of orientation, many settlers in the first few years of settlement to focus on food production for self-consumption as a starting ground to reintegrate themselves into a commercial crop with green revolution technology. Some strategies like the "appropriation of the process of production" in

Mexico were also attempted within the MST in the 1990s, as settlements set up cooperatives and associations to venture in a commercial activity, share machinery and infrastructure, buy inputs, commercialize products, and access and administer credit. In the 2000s, the movement also adopted agroecological approaches to farming and a minority of settlers practiced it with different degrees of success. The peasant economic autonomy of the MST was thus varied and involved some mechanisms that sought *autonomy from the market* (control of noncommodified land, production of food for self-consumption, self-procurement, the use of unpaid family labour) and others that sought *market integration* (focus on several crops or activities, such as combining cash crop and milk cattle, which will secure a diversified source of income). The experiences of cooperatives within the MST are however very diverse and inconclusive. Most of the settlement-level cooperative did not last more than a few years, as many decapitalized as its members withdrew to concentrate on family farming. Those that persisted became smaller and oriented at generating extra-income and benefits in kind, as some of MST's cooperatives, like their Mexican counterparts, oriented some of their effort to "import-substitution" such as providing meat or dairy products for the daily diet of its members. They often suffered from the problem of decapitalization mentioned before. The regional cooperatives are the ones that have managed to survive, although not thrive, because they provide valuable services and representation for family producers (Zamberlam, 1994). The way the MST territorialized its struggle for land indicates an ability to maintain a certain political autonomy from the state, by confronting and replacing it on some issues but also by extracting and negotiating funding, programmes and services from it. At the source of this dynamism was the ability to constantly recruit, politicize, and train new generations of members that had gone through the process of land occupation and internalized the MST ideology. In turn, these members participated in broader mobilizations and activist gatherings throughout Brazil alongside other civil society organizations. The MST however, though extremely important as a movement, was never able to become hegemonic, not within Brazilian society, not even within rural movements (Vergara-Camus, 2014, chap.5).

## 4 | INDIGENOUS AUTONOMY: STATES, NEOLIBERAL MULTICULTURALISM, AND COLLECTIVE RIGHTS

From 1990 onwards, as a result of the consolidation of indigenous organizations and their capacity for mobilization, the World Bank and the whole international cooperation apparatus paid more and more attention to ethnic demands. In parallel, national states began to be more receptive to the claims raised by indigenous organizations, because these had acquired an enormous capacity for mobilization through the unification of large segments of the discontent generated by the unpopular economic adjustment policies (Bengoa, 2000; Brysk, 2000; Madrid, 2012; Postero & Zamosc, 2004; Yashar, 2005). This context created a broad consensus among state officials and politicians around the desirability of implementing recognition-driven policies. This consensus crystallized in what has been described as regimes of neoliberal multiculturalism (Bretón, 2008; Díaz-Polanco, 2006; Hale, 2004; Martínez Novo, 2006), a political and economic strategy that has operated along three political positions. The first position encourages states to endorse and support certain demands of a cultural nature (the rights of indigenous population to be officially recognized as peoples with their cultural distinctiveness, for example). The second position seeks to isolate indigenous movements that question the logic of the neoliberal regime of accumulation and seek to protect and develop community institutions, which regulate economic relations. The third position acts as a centrifugal force on indigenous movements, as it deepens the assistance-oriented microdevelopment interventions (*proyectismo*) on communities, peoples and indigenous nationalities, something that NGOs had been doing since the very beginning of the neoliberal era. This *proyectismo* had the virtue of buffering the social cost of macroeconomic policies, while facilitating the channelling the expectations of ethnic leaders (and their bases) towards the only *possible* negotiation space: the number and monetary weight of projects to be implemented in their communities. In summary, multicultural neoliberalism responded to indigenous-peasant demands, but above all it limited and encapsulated them in a field of action perfectly compatible with their logic of micro-accumulation, thus undermining the capacity of

indigenous organizations for the reappropriation and control of the productive processes. Multicultural policies never threatened the restructuring and development of agribusiness, nor did they modify the inability of the peasantry to redirect neoliberal forces towards "progressive goals." The cases of Nicaragua and Ecuador, each with their respective particularities, show how the struggles for indigenous autonomy were expressed in a scenario of greater public visibility made possible through the spaces opened by neoliberal multiculturalism. But along the way, theses struggles faced formidable obstacles to achieve the transformations that the movements envisioned.

## 4.1 | Indigenous and regional autonomy in the Nicaraguan Caribbean coast

The emergence of the claim for autonomy in the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua and its formalization in an administrative regime emanated from a negotiation to end an armed conflict between indigenous rebels, mostly Miskitu, and the revolutionary government of the Sandinista Front of National Liberation (FSLN), which had defeated the dictatorship of the Somoza family in 1979. During the first years of the revolution, the FSLN tried to impose in the entire country a national-developmental model that was based on three pillars. First, the redistribution of agricultural property, prioritizing state-owned agricultural enterprises, along with an intermediate sector of peasant cooperatives. Second, the articulation of a "masses" model of political and social representation grounded on class identity criteria. Third, the nationalization of the country's natural resources (Puig & Baumeister, 2017; Bourgois, 1981, p. 25). The three pillars of the revolution's ambitious transformation met strong opposition and suspicion in the Caribbean region, given the late (and forced) nature of the integration process of this region to the rest of the country. The Caribbean Coast, which occupies about half of the Nicaragua's land mass and accounts for 12% of the total population, is inhabited by indigenous Miskitu, Mayangna and Rama peoples, Creole and Garifuna Afro-descendant communities, in addition to a mestizo majority population today. The great majority of the indigenous population lives off the land and coastal resources, based on a subsistence economy that combines agriculture and seasonal employment in fisheries, forestry and plantation industries. Occasional, unskilled employment is also sought in urban areas. Nonindigenous mestizo colonists are mostly dedicated to small-scale subsistence agriculture and livestock, which at times is also combined with waged work in medium-size farms along the agricultural frontier.

The FSLN development project was rejected on the Coast because it promoted a two-prong model of land ownership (agrarian-collectivist and individualist), as well as the expansion of state rural property. This threatened cultural conceptions of collective land tenure, the traditional (community-based) social organization, and the survival of cultural identities. In 1981, the armed conflict erupted and pitted the FSLN government against an indigenous and Afro-descendant insurgency operating under two political leaderships. In 1983 the severe effects of the war on human lives and the unbearable material destruction, in addition to a reconsideration by the FSLN government of its errors of interpretation and action on the Coast, created political conditions for the initiation of peace dialogues. Two different conceptions of autonomy emerged. The first was the community-based indigenous autonomy formulated by the insurgent indigenous movement. The second was the multiethnic regional autonomy proposed by the government and influenced by the conceptualizations of the anthropologist Díaz-Polanco (1997, p. 151), who understood autonomy as legally granted powers of self-government, applying only to a certain group within the community and to limited number of issues. For the indigenous movement, autonomy represented a political-cultural project, aimed at creating decision-making spaces for the social and political affairs of the Coast, which would ensure the recognition and collective ownership of land and territory and protect their forms of social and cultural organization (MISURASATA, 1985). For the FSLN, autonomy was to be fostered under an ethnically pluralistic scheme, which would avoid the Miskitu indigenous "hegemony," through an administratively decentralized system of regional governments under state tutelage (Comisión Nacional de Autonomía, 1985). The later *state-centric* vision ended up winning the day against an insurgent movement that was pressed by communities decimated by war and the division within its leadership to negotiate peace with the Sandinistas. For the indigenous insurgency, the economic goal was limited to preserve the productive base of a community subsistence model of collective property by protecting it

through officially recognized territorial rights and titled by the state. For the FSLN government, the goal was to retain adequate power within the autonomous institutions to lead national policies for the redistribution of agrarian property and to preserve unilateral decisions on the use of natural resources in the regions.

In 1987, the Statute of Autonomy of the Communities of the Atlantic Coast was approved. It recognized the cultural, economic, social, and political rights of coastal inhabitants. In particular, the Statute enshrined substantive provisions with regards to the protection of collective ownership to land, the promotion of bilingual education, and the sharing of benefits on the use of natural resources. Autonomy would be exercised from 1990 on at the regional level, through Regional Councils of multiethnic composition—one in each autonomous region, North and South, elected for a period of 4 years and supported by an executive apparatus. Along with autonomy provisions, Regional Councils and their executives were assigned annual budgetary allocations for their operations along with variable amounts for capital investment. They also included devolution of educational and health programs to regional jurisdictions. In this way indigenous autonomy was de facto confined to the community and its internal processes of governance were constantly overshadowed by the interference of regional "excess of self-governance" (Hale, 2015, p. 307). The inauguration of the first Regional Councils in 1990 coincided with the electoral defeat of the FSLN by a right-wing coalition led by the National Opposition Union.

After the war and in the face of a neoliberal government, autonomy was adrift, in practice with almost nonexistent mechanisms of coordination or support by the administration of President Violeta Chamorro (1990–1996). In fact, until the beginning of 2000, the Regional Councils had precarious budgets, did not have in place the necessary enabling legislation (of the Statute), and were the centre of frequent and prolonged factious struggles between national hegemonic parties. Despite all this, not all the regional exercise of autonomy has been wet paper. In 2003, the Autonomous Councils approved the Law of Territorial Demarcation, which resulted in 23 indigenous and Afro-descendant titled territories, a total of 37,252 $km^2$, comprising 31% of the country's landmass. The law also granted legal status to territorial-communal authorities and therefore the recognition of their autonomy within the regional autonomous regime. The law mandates that 25% of the taxes collected by national authorities for the rights to use the natural resources had to directly benefit the indigenous communities where natural resources were located. It also gave local authorities the power to decide on the administration of communal lands, to participate in joint-ventures with national or foreign companies, and to grant permits to third parties over the use of natural resources. For the indigenous authorities, the economic goal is to preserve the productive base of a community subsistence model of collective property grounded in officially recognized territories and titled by the state. The law also included a mechanism—*saneamiento*—through which nonindigenous small producers who had acquired rights to use the land "in good faith" would be able to retain these rights through a renewed negotiation process with indigenous communities. Land tenure provisions for producer associations or cooperatives were not included in the law.

## 4.2 | The winding path to autonomy in Ecuador

The Ecuadorian indigenous movement is ethnically and regionally heterogeneous, which explains the uneven evolution of its claims: the agrarian-peasant experiences of struggle that Andean organizations have inherited is very different to the emphasis on territoriality of the indigenous peoples of the tropical and subtropical lowlands of the Pacific Coast and the Amazon of Ecuador. The secular processes of the integration of each collective into the state have informed the substantial differences in the type and modulation of their demands.

In the Andes, indigenous demands were historically around the improvement of the working and living conditions of the peasantry (between 1930 and 1960), agrarian reform (from 1960 onwards), and state programs for health and education. The majority of the Quichua-speaking indigenous-peasant population (highly concentrated in the provinces of the central-northern highlands of the country) was subordinated to landowners or *hacendados*. In 1964 and 1973, Ecuador passed agrarian reform laws that inaugurated the (uneven) abolishment of this exploitative regime (Barsky, 1988). With the effervescence around the agrarian reform, indigenous peoples strengthened their

organizations and were able to incorporate references to identity in their demands towards the state (Zamosc, 1994). However, beyond the local level of the peasant community it was difficult to scale up to anything resembling autonomous ethnic territories because indigenous and nonindigenous were (and still are) spatially very intermingled. References to the notion of autonomy in the Ecuadorian Andes, though infrequent, were mainly associated with the community. The ECUARUNARI (an Andean subsidiary of CONAIE)[1] articulated a discourse of autonomy from the state by demanding collective rights, including in the 1990s the exercise of indigenous justice systems. Since its foundation in 1972, one of the objectives of ECUARUNARI had been to facilitate the formation of communes to access land titling and its allocation to community members (Sánchez-Parga, 2010). The state recognition of a commune put the territory in the hands of the community members and protected it from the expansionist ambitions of the surrounding landowners. It also endowed the community with legal status, making it a subject of rights before the State, such as access to services like rural education and primary health care but also during the agrarian reform era the transfer of privately owned land by the State to the commune.

The ensuing problem of this community model in the 1990s is complex and contradictory. While the progress in the commodification of peasant farming was deepening individualization and affecting the ability of the community to manage resources such as land (Martínez Valle, 2002), the community was contradictorily becoming a holder and vehicle of identity of great symbolic force (Guerrero & Ospina, 2003). The massive influx in the 1990 of NGOs who concentrated their interventions specifically on indigenous populations radically transformed the political landscape. There were all kinds of projects with strong and varied peasant components, be it in the conventional developmentalist sense (i.e., the transfer of green revolution technology) or in the alternative development sense (i.e., agroecology), but all with the same goal of contributing to the *market integration*, that is, the adaptation to neoliberal globalization (Bretón, 2004). The frenzy to access these projects led to two phenomena: the *ethnitization* of the movements' discourse (Bretón, 2008) and the subordination of the community initially to second-degree organizations (SDOs), who articulated several communities into a region and with whom NGOs preferred to collaborate. The SDOs would later be displaced by the parish boards, which the 1998 Constitution converted into the smallest political and administrative level endowed with a budget.

In Ecuador, demands for indigenous autonomy similar to those of other regions of Latin America first developed in the Amazon. But it is the convergence in the CONAIE of Amazonian organizations through the COFENIAE with Andean ones that led to the idea of self-determination. This idea was more linked to the territory, in a broad and culturally defined sense, than to land or agricultural production. A remarkable event was the march of indigenous Amazonian peoples of 1991, which on April 23 arrived in Quito to demand the legalization of their territories, marking the beginning of a period of negotiations that culminated in the state recognition of that right through which 1,159.525 hectares were titled. The state reserved for itself the ownership of the subsoil, avoiding claims over the control of natural resources, mainly oil (Cordero, 2018, p. 138). After that titling, and with the imprint of Díaz-Polanco and the influence of a conception of autonomy inspired by the Zapatista experience (Illaquiche, 2001), the issue of autonomy was explicitly placed in the political platform of the indigenous elites of the CONAIE. In 1998, the indigenous movement won the constitutional recognition of the Indigenous Territorial Circumscriptions (ITCs), spaces on which indigenous peoples can in theory exercise a remarkable degree of autonomy in respect to the forms of organization and customary authorities. However, an enabling law that would regulate its operational powers was never enacted. This led the indigenous movement to operate within the existing conventional structures of territorial power (parish boards, municipalities and even provincial prefectures), run in and win elections, and gain control of local-regional administrations (Cameron, 2009). Two of the major conquests of the period were the National

[1]The base of the indigenous movement is made up of local organizations (communities, cooperatives, producer associations) scattered throughout the territory. Hence, second-degree organizations and provincial federations are formed from this amalgamation. From their union, the platforms corresponding to the natural regions of the country materialized: ECUARUNARI in the Andes (Kichwa Confederation of Ecuador), CONFENIAE (Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of the Ecuadorian Amazon) and CONAICE (Confederation of Nationalities and Indigenous Peoples of the Coast Ecuadorian). With its alliance, CONAIE (Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador) was born in 1986, the most important coordinator at the national level, although it coexists with FENOCIN (National Federation of Peasant, Indian and Black Organizations of Ecuador), and FEINE (National Federation of Evangelical Indigenous), among others.

Directorate of Bilingual Intercultural Education (DINEIB) and the Development Council of the Nationalities and Peoples of Ecuador (CODENPE). The DINEIB was created in 1988 as the body in charge of planning and executing bilingual intercultural education programs. It represented the power of the indigenous movement in educational matters and was under the control of CONAIE. CODENPE was founded in 1998 as a response to the constitutional changes that established the participation of indigenous peoples and nationalities in state planning and decision-making.

In Ecuador, the Andean experience shows a great convergence of the agrarian question with the ethnic question between the 1980s and 1990s. This was a consequence of the great demographic weight that the Quechua-speaking peasant population had in the rural areas (Zamosc, 1995). In the Amazon, however, with a smaller indigenous population in relative numbers (migratory flows and colonization of part of the territory were very intense since the 1970s), the weight of the demands of indigenous organizations was more on the side of the recognition of "ancestral" territories and the projects linked to them (ethnodevelopment, community-based tourism, sustainability) than a classic peasant agenda. However, it is important to point out the ethnicization of the discourses of the indigenous movement as a whole, particularly by the CONAIE, as the practice of neoliberal multiculturalism in the country was consolidated.

### 4.3 | Autonomy, the economic, the territorial, the political, and electoral politics

There were three major achievements of peasants and indigenous movements in the 1990s. First, they had been to politically unite and autonomously organize the rural subaltern classes, which were going through a process of depeasantization and internal social differentiation. Second, they managed to territorialise their organizations and communities in a way that fostered the practice of autonomy through politicization and participation of the grassroots membership. Third, especially in the case of indigenous movements, they managed to extract institutional recognition of some degree of self-government. Nonetheless, demands for autonomy were also for political autonomy from parties and the state and were accompanied by the enactment of alternative (communal) forms of decision-making within movements and within the territories that they were able to hold or conquer. The movements like the UNORCA and the MST that were more preoccupied with developing economic autonomy, be it *vis-à-vis or within the market*, quickly realized that they needed to mobilize their political power and find political allies to protect and scale up the economic achievements of their organizations. Indigenous movements like the Zapatistas, the indigenous and Afro-descendants in Nicaragua, and the CONAIE in Ecuador were also under the same imperative, but with respect to indigenous territorial autonomy. Movements were thus constantly interacting with political parties and state institutions and sometimes their participation in electoral politics created tensions and divisions within and across organizations. In Ecuador, the peasant and indigenous movements created their own political party in 1995, in alliance with left-wing intellectuals and activists: the Pachakutic National Unity Movement (Becker, 2015). In Brazil, the MST participated in electoral politics through the PT. In Mexico, the UNORCA was politically discredited because of its closeness to President Salinas, the majority of peasant movements allied themselves with the emerging *Partido de la Revolución Democrática* (PRD) but were sometimes drawn back into the tentacle of the PRI. The Zapatista by rejecting electoral politics stayed away from this political whirlpool but could not influence it either. In Nicaragua, the indigenous and afro-descendant movements were not able to present a united front vis-à-vis the Nicaraguan political parties.

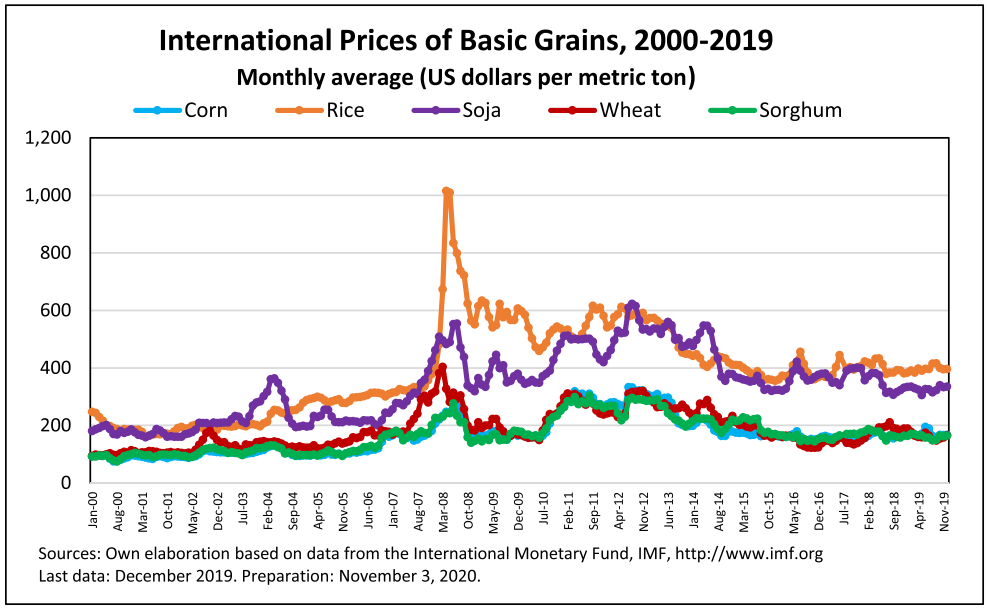
Hence, the term co-optation of movements or leaders does not fully grasp what was really going on, as rural movements sought autonomy as much from outside institutional politics as from within it. Many movement leaders directly participated in local municipal elections, and when they were elected used their office to mediate between the movements and the state or even to channel resources to the movements. While such participation in electoral politics generated all kinds of tensions, including splits within organizations and conflicts between leaders, these seemed to be kept under control when the electoral field was at the municipal or regional level. It was when the battle jumped to the national scene that the ruptures and conflicts became much more acute—and sometimes fatal—for

political unity, as it was for CONAIE after it participated in Lucio Gutiérrez's short-lived national government in 2003. Although the peasant and indigenous movements showed an unusually high degree of cohesion in comparison to other popular sectors, nowhere was a single organization able to impose the direction to the struggle, and in many cases, they were already in decline. The arrival of left-wing forces in government and their seemingly openness to some of the demands of peasant and indigenous movements was seen as an opportunity for them. Each organization attempted to find political space within the new configuration and maintain their political autonomy to secure economic and/or indigenous autonomy for their members. We will review this period in the next section.

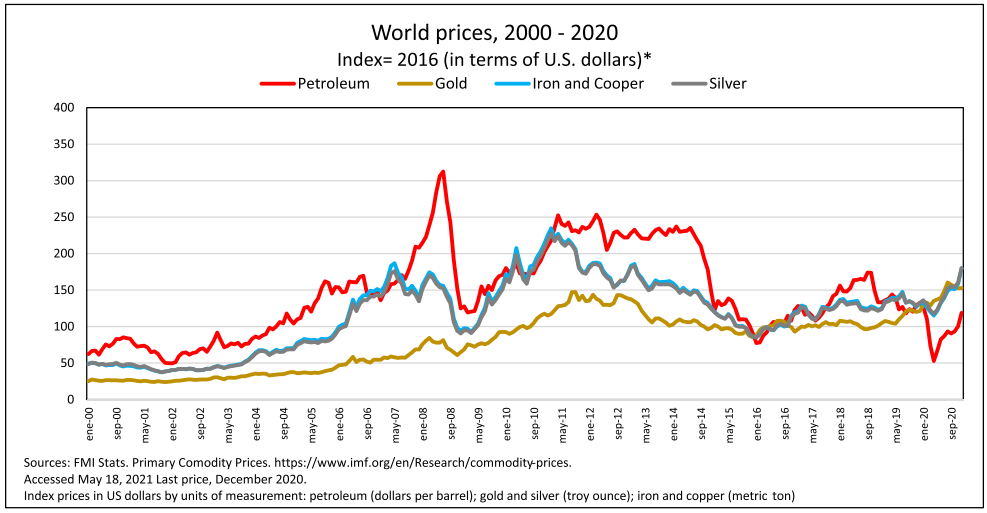
## 5 | CRISIS OF NEOLIBERALISM, THE PINK TIDE, AND THE WITHERING AWAY OF AUTONOMY (2003–2019)

From 2003 onward, neoliberalism began to show signs of exhaustion while there was not a complete loss of hegemony or the emergence of a clear alternative to it. Two important processes affected Latin America and developing countries in general during this period: the food crisis and the run of capital on natural resources. The food crisis was a global phenomenon that was in part triggered by the fact that the financial crisis 2008 created conditions in which commodities were used as refuge by threatened investors. This led to an important increase in the price of oil and natural resources, including agricultural products, and in turn to rising food prices with dire consequences for the poor of the world. The large agribusiness transnationals benefited from this conjuncture and increased their profits thanks to this rise in prices (see Graph 1).

Within the agricultural sector, producers saw their production costs rise due to an increase in the price of oil (see Graph 2) and the fossil-fuel-based inputs such as fertilizers. While the food price index (cereals, oil, meat, sugar, and milk) increased by 53% from April 2007 to April 2008, the increase of the input price index reached 99% (Soto, 2008, p. 5). This negatively affected the income of peasant producers and deepened poverty within labouring classes. In Latin America and the Caribbean in 2009, 52 million people went hungry, which represented an increase of 12.8% compared with the previous year (IICA and SELA, 2009, p. 3).




**GRAPH 1** The international prices of basic grains




**GRAPH 2** World prices of petroleum and minerals

Capital investment in natural resources, as a response to the fall of the rate of profit in developed countries, expressed itself in a spatial expansion that could be seen as a new "gold and green rush." As a result, land acquisition, concentration, and grabbing increased during this period, especially in the global South where the price of land, natural resources, and labour is cheaper. In Latin America, 2.1 million hectares were acquired by foreign investors for agricultural purposes between 2000 and 2012. This represented a third of all the land purchased in the region (CEPAL, FAO and IICA, 2015, p. 57). This process was accompanied by land dispossession of peasant and indigenous communities, and the environmental degradation of their territories due to the mining expansion triggered by a rise in the price of precious minerals such as gold and silver.

This economic conjuncture was however turned into a commercial opportunity for Latin American states because of several geopolitical realignments. First, the United States' invasion of Iraq in 2003 to control the price of oil, and its focus on the Middle East, allowed breathing room to Latin America. Second, the rise of China, which grew at yearly rates of 10%, generated a large market for the Latin American agriculture, mainly for products such as soybean and oilseed pulp. Indeed, while in 2000 17.2% of the region's exports went to Asia, by 2013 they had risen to 34.2% (CEPAL, 2016, p. 49). Chinese surplus capital during these years also made its way into the region, with large investments in mining, oil, gas, and infrastructure. All this, coupled with the increase in the prices of raw materials, greatly benefited Latin American countries, as it allowed states to increase their revenues. Where left-wing forces had been able to mount a serious challenge, this new room for manoeuvre was used to implement neodevelopmentalist policies, strongly geared at encouraging extractivism.

## 5.1 | The two phases of the commodity boom: The valorization and the devalorization of primary goods

Not all Latin American countries benefited equally from this socio-economic conjuncture because the nature of their economies is different. But two common features distinguish left-leaning populist governments from right-wing ones: First, the type of policies they implemented and the political coalitions they were able to sustain depended excessively on the cycle of the commodity boom (the phase of valorization of primary goods from 2003 to 2013 and the phase of devalorization of primary goods from 2014 to 2019). Second, even during the first favourable phase

their policies did not challenge the interests of the dominant classes but rather supported their fields of activities. Left-leaning populist governments used the first phase of commodity boom to deploy a kind of "progressive extractivism" or "social rentierism" by redistribute part of the revenues of agroexport and extractive industries through conditional or unconditional cash transfer payments to combat extreme poverty, increases in minimum wages, and extension of pension coverage to labourers that had worked most of their lives in the informal sector, including the rural poor. In Brazil between 2003 and 2010, the minimum wage increased by 81% even after inflation, and levels of labour formalization in agriculture rose from 33% of rural workers in 2004 to 50% in 2013 (da Silveira et al., 2016; Sauer & Mészáros, 2017). In Ecuador under the Correa government the minimum wage doubled, and the subcontracting of labour, which allowed employers to avoid their legal obligations to workers, was made illegal. During this period, the incidence of rural poverty between 2000 and 2012 declined by 49% in Ecuador, by 44% followed in Brazil, by 15% in Nicaragua (CEPAL, FAO, IICA, 2015, p. 108).

In 2014 however, the conditions that allowed left-wing political forces to rise to power and even consolidate their hold on power through the agroexport boom and extractivism began to dwindle. This was in the first place due to the fall of oil prices. The West Texas Intermediate (WTI) collapsed from 110 dollars a barrel to 45 dollars. It later registered a slight recovery and reached 60 dollars to only fall back again in July 2015 (see Graph 2). The Chinese demand had also shrunk because of the slower growth rate of its economy and the sluggish recovery in the United State was not enough to sustain the export of primary products.

During the phase of revalorization of primary products, the high prices of food allowed left-wing governments in Latin America and international organization like the FAO to argue in favour of family farming as a necessary (and alternative) component of any model of agricultural development. However, the linkages between agriculture and industry, and especially the role of peasants as producers of affordable food and consumers of industrial good that had been the basis of the ISI model was not restored. Neither did the cash transfer payments and the increases in minimum wages realigned real salaries with food and consumer prices, perpetuating the dearticulated nature of the Latin American economies. The lower prices of food compared with the early aftermath of the 2008 crisis opened the door again to the argument in favour of free-trade and the pragmatic option of importing cheap food instead of producing it domestically. The deceleration of the Chinese locomotive also meant that the agricultural commodity export pie was shrinking, and so were the state funds to support the agricultural sector shared between agribusiness and family producers. The contradictory governmental coalitions between left-wing forces and conservative sectors, the latter more linked to agribusiness, began to fracture. Right-wing forces regain the political momentum and mount a vehement opposition to their former allies, either electorally or through the manipulation of the parliamentary and judiciary system, as in Brazil, or by taking control of the clientelist apparatus of the party and the state, as in Ecuador under Lenin Moreno.

## 5.2 | Brazil: The limits of peasant autonomy under the shadow of agribusiness

In Brazil between 2003 and 2016, the four presidential administrations of the PT are said to have 'distributed' over 51.2 million hectares to 721,442 families (da Silveira et al., 2016, pp. 11–12). But in a shorter period, between 2003 and 2010, large properties (including public land) increased their coverage by 104 million hectares. By 2010, large private owners controlled 244 million hectares (Farah, 2015). Moreover, most of the agrarian reform land was not distributed; instead, the status of small-scale producers already in possession of land was merely regularized by extending them titles. In the end, only between 120,000 to 250,000 families benefited from agrarian reform (Sauer & Mészáros, 2017). Regardless of the appearance, this period was not as favourable as it would seem for the landless members of the MST, because the bulk of the land regularized was not in regions where the MST has a strong presence.

The MST settlers (those already benefited by the agrarian reform) fared much better though. During its time in power, the PT substantially increased the size and scope of the programmes to support family producers, reaching

$US 7.2 billion in 2015. However, this amount represented only 15.5% of what was distributed to agribusiness that same year (Sauer & Mészáros, 2017), and not much in these programmes focused on developing peasant economic autonomy. The support was more about permitting family-producers to link-up to agribusiness-controlled commodity chains, as 80% of the government loans to family-producers went to the richer strata and promoted their insertion into the soybean or sugarcane complexes (da Silveira et al., 2016, p. 4). The *Programa Nacional de Produção e Uso de Biodiesel* (the National Programme of Production and Use of Biodiesel, PNPB), was another example of this goal. It provided credits to family-producers and federal taxes reduction for up to 68% to biodiesel plans that bought a minimum amount of the agricultural input from scale producers. Initially, the project aimed at buying production of peasant crops such as castor seeds, but the bulk of the purchases ended up being soybean.

The most original attempt to support family producers, albeit through *market integration* was PT's experimentation with public procurement programs through which the federal government required municipalities to buy food from family producers. The two largest of these programmes were the National School Feeding Program (PNAE) with a budget of $US 1.15 billion in 2014, of which $340 million was reserved for the direct purchase of family farming products, and the Food Procurement Programme, PAA), which followed the same objective but through local public schools, feeding programmes, food banks, community kitchens, charitable associations, and community centres (Schneider et al., 2016; van der Ploeg et al., 2012). More research is required on these policies, notably on the extent to which they generated some form of peasant autonomy. But one thing that seems evident is that, although they strengthened local cooperatives who supplied the public entities with food, they depended heavily on who controlled the federal state. Most probably a constant concern for the PT operatives must have therefore been securing the willingness of agribusiness to tolerate these nested-market policies for small producers in exchange for receiving the bulk of the financial and institutional resources. But agribusiness did not only receive 85% of the funding for agriculture, but it was also turned into the darling of the PT governments. The federal state mobilized all its powers, including diplomacy abroad to support it (Vergara-Camus, 2015; Welch, 2017), and always named agribusiness representatives as the head of the ministry of agriculture, as the former head of the Brazilian Agribusiness Association (ABAG) Roberto Rodrigues and Katia Abreu, the former president of National Agriculture and Livestock Confederation (CNA). In states with indigenous populations, such as the Guarani-Kaiowa in Mato Grosso do Sul, the PT even turned a blind eye to expansion of large capitalist farmers on demarcated land, making indigenous autonomy impossible.

The passage to the second phase of fall of the price of agriculture products led to the collapse of this quid pro quo. After 3 years of downturn, the right-wings allies of the PT within the government impeached Dilma Rousseff in mid-2016 through highly suspicious judicial procedures, and replaced her by her Vice-President, Michel Temer. The Big Farm Lobby within the Congress is said to have delivered half the super majority in the Chamber of Deputies and in the Senate to impeach Rousseff (Welch, 2017, p. 19). As soon as Temer took power, he named the biggest producer of soybean in the world, Blairo Maggi, to the Ministry of Agriculture, he abolished the Ministry of Agrarian Development in charge of agrarian reform and family farming and put it under control of the executive, eliminated the bulk of the support policies for family farmers, including the PNAE and PAA mentioned above, and allowed for the privatization of agrarian reform land titles. The following target of the right was former President Lula because of his populist appeal posed an electoral threat (see Andrade, 2020, for a critical analysis of *Lulism*). With similar judicial tactics that had been used to criminalise the MST already under PT administrations (Sauer & Mészáros, 2017), Lula was investigated by the federal Judge Sergio Moro[2] for money laundering related to the *Operação Lava Jato*, the scandal around the use of PETROBRAS to funnel money to politicians. Lula was finally imprisoned and impeded from being the PT candidate to the Presidency. Temer, himself under investigation for corruption but protected by the Big Farm Lobby within Congress, could not be the one taking the elected Presidency. Until then almost unknown retired army captain and Rio's representative to the Chamber of Deputies since 1991, Jair Bolsonaro took on this task and beat the PT candidate Fernando Haddad. On the second day of his Presidency through a decree he transferred the

[2]He would later become Jair Bolsonaro's first Minister of Justice.

responsibility of deciding on indigenous land claims to the Ministry of Agriculture. He has kept Temer's antipeasant measures and has shown his unwavering support for agribusiness and has treated the MST as a "terrorist" organization (Welch, 2017).

Already since Lula's second mandate (2006–2010), land occupations were falling, and the MST was finding it difficult to continue to grow and maintain its dynamism of the past. It seemed that its equilibrium between its landless and the landed sectors broke and had an impact on activism, mobilization, and autonomy. With the turn of the right on the PT, Dilma's impeachment and Lula's imprisonment, the MST turned all its effort to defending Lula. It faced a renewed wave of violent repression during the Temer and the Bolsonaro administrations that have seen the death of more than 100 rural movements activists, 300 receiving death threats, and another 700 being physically assaulted (Welch, 2017, p. 23). The economic autonomy of MST settlers, if we can call it that, depended much more on the state through market integration and nested market than on its own autonomous control of its own alternative networks. It had no other choice than defending the PT.

### 5.3 | Ecuador: *Correismo* and the limits of indigenous and peasant autonomy

During Rafael Correa's time in office (2007–2017), peasant and indigenous movements went through a process of fragmentation, loss of political autonomy, and the shrinking of the spaces to exercise territorial autonomy. The discursive ethnic drift of both the CONAIE and the FENOCIN, the two major peasant-indigenous organizations of the country, impeded them from being the voice of transversal demands that could have brought together indigenous and nonindigenous sectors (Bretón, 2008; Henderson, 2017). Their inability to force Correa to even pass an agrarian reform law in Parliament or develop a coherent set of policies for small-scale producers are blatant illustrations of this. In the Andes, alarming situation of exhaustion of natural resources like soil degradation or loss of arable land, desertification of the ecological system of high altitude, as well as the semi-proletarianization of the labour force, have made this population incapable of carving out a livelihood. These indigenous peasant populations were the ones upon which Correa tested his *assistantialista* antipoverty policies, such as his *bono al desarrollo humano* (grant for human development) of 50 dollars. Correa developed a political project with national ambitions and with the tendency to occupy all the spaces that had been relatively autonomous from the state, which collided directly with the history and the interests of the CONAIE and the FENOCIN. Correa's government was also able to divide the movement, by establishing temporary alliances with smaller federations. Eventually, Correa co-opted the leadership of the FENOCIN, isolating even more the CONAIE. His administration was also able to build direct links with rural communities and producer associations to carry out concrete social projects like the programme of access to housing and those of distribution of food. This in turn strengthened the parish councils and weakened even more the historic role of mediator of the indigenous SDOs, which had been so crucial for NGOs' development projects. On the agricultural front, policies were piece-meal in nature, like the ethanol programme ECOPAIS, which requires ethanol plants to buy sugarcane alcohol from a few thousands artisanal producers at set prices. The fact that Correa was not pushed to develop any agricultural programme for small-scale peasant producers should be seen as partly due to the fact that the indigenous movement, beyond the fact that it argued for food sovereignty, did not have an agricultural project (Henderson, 2017). They focused on either retaining or extending indigenous autonomy.

In terms of collective rights, the new Constitution of 2008 recognized the state's plurinational nature and confirmed the possibility of instituting Indigenous Territorial Circumscriptions (ITCs). But in practice, Correa recovered for the state the autonomous spaces conquered by ethnic organizations during the previous two decades. He disbanded the autonomy of the Development Council of the Nationalities and Peoples of Ecuador (CODENPE) and the National Directorate of Bilingual Intercultural Education (DINEIB), two of the icon-institutions perceived as "conquests" by Indigenous organizations and controlled by them since their creation (Martínez Novo, 2014). However, in 2010 the Organic Code of Territorial Planning, Autonomy and

Decentralization (COOTAD) was approved. I established a regime of Decentralized Autonomous Governments (DAG)—designed for parish boards or municipal councils—which also included the possibility of creating ITCs. COOTAD limited however the potential of ITCs because these could only be formed in existing territorial units with a majority of indigenous population or through unification and merger of several units to form a new constituency. Both requirements have been very difficult to meet in many regions of Ecuador. Progress has been made in the delimitation of Amazonian collective territories (7,473,500 hectares accumulated from 1992 to 2017) and the coastal region (247,087 hectares), but without modifying the current territorial and jurisdictional structure.

The real impossibility of constituting a single ITC to date has generated, particularly in the Amazon, all kinds of territorial strategies. We have seen demands for the recognition of "new" indigenous nationalities (usually detached from the great Quichua-Amazonian common branch such as the Zápara, Shiwiar, and the Andoa). There have even been colonization processes of new territorial spaces by indigenous populations in a strategy of planned occupation in pursuit of their subsequent recognition by the state or possible shares of oil royalties or revenues. There are such cases in Pastaza of the Andoa People (Caballero, 2014) and of the Quichuas in the lower basin of the Curaray River adjacent to the Yasuni National Park. In this latter case, a fringe was left out of the package of transferred lands in the 1990s. From that moment on, a hegemonic sector of the Quichua elites from the province of Pastaza created a network of small communities ex novo and had them inhabited by native families from a completely different region (upland jungle), who managed resources from environmental development projects, financed by the World Bank. They successfully wielded speeches anchored in the ancestrality of their relationship with the territory, managed to obtain their legal status as SDO in 2008. They finally achieved the transfer of almost 200,000 hectares in property in 2011, the largest concession made by the state to indigenous peoples since 1992 (Martínez Sastre, 2015). Ironically, the strategy, made de facto invisible the legitimate users of that territory: the Tagaere and Taromenane, hunter-gatherer groups who are secluded in that area.

The Ecuadorian experience shows how in reality neoliberal multiculturalism is a phenomenon that transversely bridges the public management of "the ethnic" from the times of "the long neoliberal night"—as Correa called it—and the period of Correa himself. Indigenous peasant organizations have not been able to develop any proposal of economic autonomy for themselves. Food sovereignty has been more rhetorical and referential, but in the absence of a significant political autonomy and real influence on the state, it was not more than that (Henderson, 2017). Either in the hands of NGOs, international financial institutions or the state, *projectism* has been the only centrifugal arena left for indigenous and peasant movements to negotiate. As for territorial indigenous autonomy in Ecuador, the constitutional figure of the ITC has still to bare fruits. In the best case, informal forms of exercising autonomy (justice, customary authorities, management of a territory outside the subsurface control, etc.) have been tolerated but are still challenged or made invisible by the state.

Until the 2017 elections, the state benefitted partly from Chinese loans to maintained the economy going through overindebtedness. With the collapse of the price of commodities, the correista model entered in crisis. Correa's chosen successor Lenín Moreno renegotiated agreements with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), initiated an economic adjustment programme, and aligned Ecuador with the United States on the diplomatic front. The economic crisis hit rural and urban popular sectors in a way that had not been experienced since the 1990s and triggered a wave of discontent. In October 2019, following an attempt by the government to lift gas and gasoline subsidies, a massive popular uprising led by the CONAIE took place in Quito. It forced Moreno to leave the city and temporary move the siege of the executive power to Guayaquil. This apparent "resurgence" of the indigenous movement as a political actor can be explained by the accumulation of resentments and unclosed wounds due to the unrest in the impoverished world of communities and peri-urban neighbourhoods. Despite its long-established malaise and the crisis of representation outlined above, the CONAIE recovered some of its power (Ramírez, 2020). These events show how, under certain circumstances and in the face of certain stimuli, ethnic identity may not be sufficient to build autonomy but can be activated and articulated, like a protective shield, to defend a wide spectrum of subaltern demands.

### 5.4 | Nicaragua: The return of Ortega and the *costeño* autonomy

In 2006 a new administration of the FSLN returned to the government, with new promises to "restitute" the rights denied to indigenous and afro-descendant peoples by the neoliberal governments that presided over national government since 1990. On the way to the election, the FSLN struck political alliances, among them with the indigenous movement convened around YATAMA,[3] an inheriting organization of the indigenous Miskitu movement. The FSLN pledged to continue the titling process, to support indigenous self-government, and to promote an "effective and sustained effort to contain the advance of the agricultural frontier" (YATAMA-FSLN, 2006).

Although the FSLN gave its initial support to the titling process, in practice it was setting up an autocratic and centralist system of governance that substituted the autonomous operation of the Regional Councils and their executive offices. The FSLN subverted their autonomous forms of election and imposed politically friendly representatives, often members of an indigenous/afro-descendant elite who also serve as local political operators in the highly centralized power system controlled by the FSLN nationwide. Puig and Baumeister (2017, p. 394) had warned that the social intermediation policy of the FSLN in rural areas weakened peasant autonomy by promoting clientelist mechanisms to the detriment of the autonomous organization of the *comarcas* (rural districts) and communities. The most paradigmatic case was the government manoeuvre to force the approval of a "consent" agreement on the Rama indigenous people and the Kriol communities allowing their ancestral territories to be leased "in perpetuity" as part of a concession to a Chinese consortium to build an interoceanic canal (González, 2018a). The concession, in addition to being unconstitutional because it indirectly privatized communal land, also threatened to displace hundreds of precarious peasant families on the projected route of the canal, in the Southeast of the country, an area under the jurisdiction of the South Caribbean autonomous region. These subsistence peasant families had been displaced there from other regions of the coast, central and northern Nicaragua due to new forms of land concentration linked to the expansion of an export-led monocropping agricultural and extensive livestock production (Ruiz & López, 2017). In response, these communities organized what quickly became the largest "anticanal" resistance movement that adopted a discourse of "defence of the country's sovereignty" (Serra, 2016). The attempt of the Ortega administration to deprive the Rama people of their ancestral lands and the threat of displacing peasant families from the prospective Canal route, brought together peasant and indigenous movements into a common battle. They converged around the defence of regional ethnic autonomy and the protection of access to land and livelihoods for indigenous peoples and black communities, small agricultural producers and precarious settlers alike. This collective action was violently repressed by the Ortega government and main peasant leaders were arrested and persecuted (Miranda, 2019).

More generally, the FSLN did not distinguish itself from the governments that preceded it, but rather it deepened neoliberal integration by promoting a model of accumulation that combined extractive industries, such as mining, with monoculture plantation systems, especially oil palm. The areas of cultivation of the oil palm grew from around 7000 hectares in 1990 to 30,000 in 2019 (López, 2019). These two modalities have been accompanied by greater economic and productive integration, and the expansion of logging and agricultural industry into the autonomous regions and the southeast of the country. The hybrid model of accumulation has generated new dynamics of land concentration, displacing hundreds of peasant families towards the "community frontier' of indigenous and afro-descendant's territories. The result has been an increase in illegal occupations of communal property by nonindigenous small family producers and poor peasant settlers, creating conflicts with indigenous people over land tenure and the use of natural resources. In some of these cases, it is the local indigenous elite in positions of authority, with the support of regional authorities, that have illegally sold the rights to occupy the land and to develop agricultural activities to these families (Miranda, 2019). That is, in addition to the dispossession produced by the model of accumulation based on export-oriented agriculture and plantation, there are also conflicts between the rural poor

[3]Yapti Tasba Masraka Nanih Asla Takanka—the organization of the children of Mother Earth—formed in 1988 through the union of various insurgent political leaders.

and indigenous peoples, who are unable to ensure effective control and protection of collective property. These conflicts have been extended to coastal maritime areas due to the use of fishing resources in areas defined as communal property and where communities carry out small-scale fishing activities, critical to their subsistence and wellbeing. With varying degrees of intensity, illegal fishing activities and threats to displace coastal communities through infrastructure projects, such as the interoceanic canal, have been registered in the maritime territories along the coast (González, 2018b). Instances of unity among peasant families and indigenous peoples such as the anticanal movement is thus not the norm unfortunately, as the struggle for survival pits them against each other. Moreover, no organization seemed to have taken the goal of seriously weaving together the ethnic and the peasant agendas.

The phase devalorization of primary goods in Nicaragua coincided with the significant reduction of the generous but ultimately privately captured Venezuelan aid and privileged commercial ties (Chamorro, 2016; Puig & Baumeister, 2017). The Sandinista government had to substantially reduced social spending, in particular in social assistance programs and productive infrastructure. More importantly, Ortega passed a legislation (later suspended) to reduce old age pensions, which produced a wave of social mobilizations not seen since the mid-1990s. What began as a demonstration of solidarity of university students with the plight of the elderly, later shifted into a civic insurrection which was confronted by lethal force by the Ortega government. Over the last 4 years Ortega has faced a profound political crisis, an international condemnation for human rights abuses committed against civic protestors in the 2018 demonstrations, and a declining economy—the GDP has contracted 8.8% cumulatively between 2017 and 2020 (World Bank, 2022). Ortega has shifted more and more towards authoritarian rule to remain in power at a very high cost for his political legitimacy—in fact, in 2021 he won a new term in office through elections that lacked the minimal credibility. While the political crisis remained unresolved and repression became the norm, the public activism of indigenous and peasant organizations has subsided to local spaces of community organizing and territorial defence. Additionally, some leaders seeking to protect their lives and to avoid bogus prosecutions by a judiciary that is controlled by Ortega, had to flee into exile in neighbouring countries.

In short, autonomy on the Coast was (and remains) at an intermediate point between a *statist* conception of a regionalist/multiethnic administrative regime and the political and cultural aspirations of indigenous and afro-descendant peoples, who have fought for a form of ethnic-based *territorial* autonomy. The "second era of the revolution," as Ortega called his second administration, gradually moved away from its once self-celebrated commitments to the indigenous movement, to arrive at a point in which Ortega endorsed and further solidified the neoliberal path of the right-wing governments that preceded him. In a sense, autonomy as a political and cultural project of ethnic affirmation for indigenous and afro-descendant peoples on the Coast has been a complex process seeking to secure sustainable livelihoods, and at the same time trying to address deep-seated inequalities between the rural poor, both indigenous and nonindigenous.

## 6 | MEXICO: WILL THE LAST WAVE OF THE PINK TIDE BE DIFFERENT?

Even if it has been going through one of the deepest and longest economic crises of the continent, Mexico did not see the victory of a candidate of the left until 2018. In 2006 Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) as candidate of the main left-populist opposition party, PRD, was defeated by Felipe Calderon, the candidate of the conservative right-wing National Action Party (PAN) in elections that many consider fraudulent. In 2012, he ran again but lost to Enrique Peña Nieto of the PRI. During most of the 2000s and 2010s, Mexico followed a radically neoliberal path, strongly aligned with the United States, and continued to open up its economy to transnational capital, especially in the mining sector and the agroindustrial and food sector. During the 2000s, Mexican peasant movements continued to be characterized by its diversity and fragmentation, within which the Zapatistas represented a very unusual case of radical autonomy. Throughout this period, several organizations have managed to remain autonomous from the state and the main political parties, even though they have established alliances with them. While the Zapatistas

managed to maintain their fragmented control of their territory and pursued their project of autonomy based on reinforcing subsistence production and indigenous self-government, autonomous peasant movements waged two important campaigns: *El Campo No Aguanta Más* (The Countryside Cannot Take It Anymore) in 2006 and *Sin Maíz No Hay País* (Without Maize There is No Country) in 2008.

In 2003 in the eve of the 10 years since the ratification of NAFTA, Mexico liberalized a vast array of agricultural products. Facing this prospect, 12 producer organizations, including UNORCA, issued a declaration entitled "The Countryside Cannot Take It Anymore: Six Proposals for the Salvation and Revalorization of the Mexican Countryside," among them a moratorium on the agricultural section of NAFTA. The declaration had an enormous impact and lead to numerous mobilizations in the first days of January 2003: marches, occupation of the Congress, occupation of the international bridge of Ciudad Juarez to the USA, hunger strike of 20 peasants in an emblematic monument in Mexico City, demonstrations in 15 states, occupation of the port of Veracruz, and closure of the border with Guatemala. The signing organizations decided to follow with the creation of a formal front (*Frente el Campo no Aguanta Más*) and called on a protest in the *Zocalo*, the central plaza of Mexico City, in which more than 100,000 people participated under the demand of renegotiating the agricultural section of NAFTA. The government of President Vicente Fox, from the conservative right-wing PAN, tried to ignore the movement but finally offered 12 roundtables of dialogue, thinking that these fora, with no real ability to solve anything, would see the movement die out. But the rural organizations used the fora to make their difficulties and grievances public. Five months later the 12 organizations of the *Frente El Campo no Aguanta Más*, the Barzón (an independent organization represented indebted family farmers), the *Congreso Agrario Permanente* (Permanent Agrarian Congress) and the corporatist *Confederación Nacional Campesina (*National Peasant Confederation*)*, then in opposition to the PAN, began to negotiation an agreement with the government. For the first time since the late 1980s, peasant organizations presented a common front, articulated around a unitary proposal that included the principles of food sovereignty, the renegotiation of NAFTA, the revision of article 27 of the Constitution, moratorium on genetically modified seeds, and the rights of indigenous peoples (Bartra, 2004). This process culminated in the signing of the *Acuerdo Nacional para el Campo: por el Desarrollo de la Sociedad rural, la Soberanía y la Seguridad Alimentaria* (The National Agreement for the Countryside: for the Development of Rural Society, Food Sovereignty and Security). However, the government did not grant much, especially not with respect to NAFTA. It accepted to release emergency funds of 2800 million pesos (259.50 million 2003 dollars), which were later distributed in a classically clientelist fashion to the organizations that decided to sign the agreement and not to those, like UNORCA, who decided not to. The Front fractured a year later without achieving the most important objectives. The EZLN, which repudiated NAFTA in its first Declaration of the Selva Lacandona was completely silent about this new movement due to its distrust of some leaders of the organizations it identified with the PRD (Bartra & Otero, 2005). This position accentuated the division between the peasant and indigenous movements in Mexico, and though not all indigenous organisations follow the Zapatistas, it seems that to some extent they have been working in parallel. In June 2005 after more than 4 years without significant public presence, the EZLN issued the Sixth Declaration of the Lacandona Jungle and called a series of meetings with Mexican civil society organizations to set the groundwork for a new national movement, as it had done several times in the past. *La Otra Campaña* began in January 2006 and were meant to be a sort of "reconnaissance" tour across Mexico. Subcomandante Marcos toured the country to meet face-to-face with organizations interested in joining a national Zapatista movement. Because of the timing in which the Other Campaign was launched—in the midst of the presidential electoral campaign of 2006—it did not get the attention that the previous caravan of 2001 had received (Vergara-Camus, 2014, pp. 272–284).

In 2008, the most sensitive agricultural products that still benefited from some protections under NAFTA were liberalized. On August 6, 2007, another peasant front was created with the name of *Campaña Sin Maíz No Hay País*. Very similar forms of mobilization to those of *El Campo no Aguanta Más* were organized. Halting the authorization of the commercial use of genetically modified maize in Mexico has been the most impressive achievement of the campaign. More interestingly this time, the movement was not split up or leaders co-opted through the granting of resources. Peasant organizations, to some extent, managed to keep their political autonomy.

In August 2013, the EZLN organized what it called the "*Escuelita Zapatista*" (the small Zapatista school) and invited over 2000 supporters from Mexico and abroad to visit Zapatista communities in their different regions of influence and directly learn from these communities how they have been organizing their responses to the problems generated by neoliberalism. The objective behind this new move was to attempt once again to reinvigorate its relationship with activist groups within civil society. In 2017, again during the last presidential campaign, the Zapatistas attempted to use the political moment to bring attention to their struggle for indigenous autonomy by putting forward an indigenous woman, María de Jesús Patricio Martínez (Marichuy) as presidential candidate for the National Indigenous Congress. The movement failed to gather the more than 866,000 signatures she required to be on the ballot.

## 6.1 | The difficult relation of AMLO with peasant organizations

In 2018, after years of not being heard by the two parties that have governed Mexico, the independent peasant organizations decided to support AMLO during his presidential campaign. Only the indigenous organizations, following the EZLN, did not do so. But, unlike other presidents of the pink tide, AMLO came to power in the midst of the phase of devalorization of primary goods. Despite the Mexican economy having also been reoriented towards extractive industries, AMLO did not have the state income from mining royalties, oil rents or growth of agribusiness to spend. But he did what several Presidents of the pink tide had done: nominating a representative of agribusiness, Víctor Villalobos, to the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (SADER) and representatives of rural movements to less important state positions. Víctor Suárez, one of the leaders of *El Campo No Aguanta Más*, was given the Undersecretariat of Food Self-Sufficiency and Victor Toledo, a well-known scholar proponent of food sovereignty and agroecology, was named at the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources (SEMARNAT). Other leaders of independent peasant movements that had been involved in the mobilization campaigns mentioned above have also accepted positions within the state. However, López Obrador took the decision early on to distribute public funds directly to peasant producers instead of going through their organizations as in the past. This led to confrontations with various independent organizations, who felt unfairly accused of embezzling the funds. The policies directed at peasant producers are limited and cannot be said to significantly improve the economic autonomy of peasant producers through either market creation or market integration, not to mention strategies that would enhance autonomy from the market. The *Well-Being* Program (Producción para el Bienestar) assigns 1600 Mexican pesos ($76.22 usd) to small producers with plots of up to 5 hectares and 1000 pesos ($47.64 usd) to those possessing between 5 to 20 hectares of wheat, beans and maize. The *Sowing Life* (Sembrando Vida) programme encourages the diversified peasant plots (milpa) and afforestation in the countryside, and some guaranteed prices were also established for basic food products to ensure the income of small producers. These actions undoubtedly seek to redress the pauperization of the most marginalized peasants, but they are limited by the signing the new T-MEC with the United States and Canada, which prolongs the liberalization of import tariffs on agricultural good and includes clauses that make it difficult to achieve food sovereignty.

In December 2020, responding to a long-standing demand of peasant and environmental movements, President López Obrador declared that the highly toxic agrochemical glyphosate would not be used by any federal agency and its private use would be reduced annually until its elimination within 4 years. He also declared that planting transgenic maize would not be allowed in Mexico. The resolution on glyphosate generated a conflict with the agricultural entrepreneurs, which led to the resignation of the Secretary of the Environment, Víctor Toledo. Subsequently, the company Monsanto Bayer filed an appeal that did not prosper, in part due to the mobilizations of the *Sin Maíz no hay País* campaign, Greenpeace and others.

In summary, agricultural policies akin to the food sovereignty project are a part of the agricultural model of the AMLO administration. But as they did in many other pink tide governments, they face opposition from many fronts, starting from within the ministry of agriculture itself. AMLO also faces pressures from large national and North

American companies. What is surprising however, is that the signing of NAFTA and each of the liberalization stages triggered large mobilizations in the countryside. In 1994, when NAFTA was signed, the EZLN emerged. In 2003, in the first phase of agricultural liberalization, *El Campo No Aguanta Más* emerged, and so did the campaign *Sin Maíz no hay País* in 2008 during the final liberalization phase. In 2018, with the signing of the T-MEC by López Obrador, no peasant movement emerged to confront it, despite the serious effects it will bring to the countryside. Apart from declaring that AMLO was just a "new plantation foreman," the EZLN has remained rather silent on agrarian policies. This should tell us something about the state of fragmentation of the peasant movement in Mexico.

## 7 | CONCLUSION: WHERE DID PEASANT AND INDIGENOUS AUTONOMY GO?

Although some peasant and indigenous movements were themselves already in decline when the populist left reached government, as in Ecuador, peasant and indigenous movements faced the challenge of finding ways to critically supporting these governments while continuing to develop the capacities that gave them a certain degree of autonomy. None of them managed to successfully address this challenge under pink tide governments and their faith ended up depending on the will of populist presidents, which in the case of Ecuador and Nicaragua even turned against them during the phase of devalorization of primary goods. We believe this can be explained through three unresolved contradictions in the movements' strategies.

The first contradiction underlying this uneasy relationship between peasant and indigenous movements and left-leaning populist governments revolved around the need to politically maintain the subaltern historical rural bloc, while various elements were being pushed and pulled in different direction by different policies: cash transfer payments to the landless rural poor and credits to integrate agribusiness-dominated commodity chains, nested markets or special procurement programmes for agricultural producers in Brazil; the same type of transfers for the rural poor and renewed promises of territorial rights to the indigenous leadership attempting to find ways for their communities to cope the expansion of extractive industries in Nicaragua and Ecuador. It must be said also that if we take the longer historical view as we have in this article, what is striking is that all the more radical ideas that made up what we called economic autonomy in the 1990s, such as the appropriation of the productive process, *autogestión*, and import-substitution, were completely abandoned in the 2010s. The approach was simply one of *market integration* or at best (and only in few circumstances) of *autonomy through the market* via de creation of market organizations or nested markets dependant on state programmes. More importantly, these policies did not deal with the fundamental problem that under neoliberalism peasant producers and indigenous peoples are considered redundant by capital.

The second contradiction points to the fact that ethnic autonomy was sought by indigenous and afro-descendant actors as the creation of separate spaces within the language of territorial/political control, which assumed that economic marginalization would be dealt with through ethnic autonomy. This did not speak to nonindigenous subaltern actors both from rural and urban settings, whose livelihoods had also been pauperized by neoliberalism. In turn, a long history of racism and dispossession in the appropriation of rural space and the contradictory effect of capitalist exploitation on indigenous territories, disavowed strategies reminiscent of the idea of "appropriation of the productive process" across cultural lines between indigenous and nonindigenous peasants. In addition, new waves of colonization of the agricultural frontier by nonindigenous landless peasants have also been directly and indirectly promoted in Ecuador and Nicaragua, as a way of defusing demands for land by small agricultural producers. This wave has increased pressure over indigenous collective lands and has made it difficult for indigenous governance to exert political autonomy. Our article identified distinctive junctures at which indigenous movements converged with the peasant movements around common issues such as autonomy, the defence of the territory, and access to land—especially subsistence peasant families displaced by the privatization of land and agribusiness policies. In other circumstances, these struggles moved along parallel paths and, occasionally, one subordinated the other. As we have shown in the case of Mexico, the indigenous movements have been the Zapatista's main allies and their demands were more for defence of the territory. In contrast, the peasant mobilizations of *El*

*Campo No Aguanta Más* and *Sin Maís No Hay País* were organized around more typically peasant farmers demands and did not get significant support from the indigenous movements. In Brazil, although the MST supports indigenous struggles and demands, it is not their main struggle, and indigenous movements have sought their own ways to face their displacement by agribusiness. The case of Nicaragua also points to the fact that the regional autonomous authorities and their constituencies have not been able to establish common ground with frontier subsistence peasants in search for land. Finally, the case of Ecuador has shown that the indigenous movement's long-lasting focus on gaining and maintaining political control of their territory did have much to offer to its members and nonindigenous peasants in terms of agricultural development of their regions. An important line of research will be to better understand the social, organizational, and political conditions that lead the struggles for indigenous and peasant autonomy to different outcomes. Why these struggles at times supported each other, were carried out in parallel, and even in some conjunctures avoided or confronted each other?

The third contradiction was that while the political alliance that many movements struck with political parties and politicians in the early 1990s called for an interventionist state, these movements lost their ability to influence or pressure them during the first phase of valorization of primary goods. This contradiction derived in fact from the movements' inability to continue to sustain the politically active and cohesive rural communities that they had been developing through their struggles against neoliberalism once populist politicians established the classic direct connection with the people through social programmes.

In the last 40 years of struggles for autonomy, peasant movements, despite the advances of the privatization of the right to land and agriculture, have managed to protect their access to land, trying to develop the economic function of their organizations and had a moderate influence on the policies of left-wing populist governments. Indigenous movements have also learned how to use decentralization to take control of certain political and administrative spaces within the state (including at the subnational level), which have partially protected their collective access to the territory and have given them a certain control over some public policies. However, in the first case, no progress has been made in economic autonomy, either vis-à-vis the market or through the market. The neoliberal era has been marked by a continuous marginalization of peasant producers and a greater (adverse) integration into the market. For their part, indigenous movements, due to the narrow margins of neoliberal multiculturalism, could not translate their territorial control and collective rights into significant improvements to the livelihood prospects of their social bases. The first phase of valorization of primary products provided a favourable context for left-wing populist governments who implemented universalist social policies and attempted to integrate subaltern groups into agribusiness or neoliberal environmental conservation policies. These achievements were made possible through arduous struggles both national and global where the movements sought to practice autonomy by mobilizing and politicizing their members and communities. For instance, over the last two decades indigenous movements substantially expanded their activism and networking initiatives beyond their nation states and sought to critically engage with international actors and processes; they have managed to influence international norms on the rights of Indigenous Peoples within the Inter American Human Rights and the UN systems, thus adding their voice to decision-making within international organizations (Merino, 2018). In this sense, an understanding of their resilience and struggle for autonomy rights can no longer be contained within the framework of nation states, but at the same time this invites more research on how effective these international networks and gains have been for the movements.

Domestically, during these 40 years, the movements collaborated or established alliances with populist politicians and political parties. Their level of political autonomy towards them fluctuated. But by the end of the Pink Tide, during the phase of devalorization of primary commodities, it became evident that their faith was closely determined by the agenda of these populist figures. Correa in Ecuador and Ortega in Nicaragua undermined the autonomy of peasant and indigenous movements, and both allied themselves with some sectors of the regional indigenous elites. When Lula was replaced by Dilma, support for peasant movements dwindled, but when the PT was hoisted everything was dismantled. Currently, AMLO in Mexico is staying within the limits of his Pink Tide predecessors in the continent. Peasant and indigenous movements are also seeing openings within the state, but this has not translated into any significant policy change. Given that we are no longer in the climax of the commodity boom, the measures

are more symbolic than anything else. To be fair though, the struggles for peasant and indigenous autonomy ran up against a great limitation, which is not a limitation only of these movements: the inability to influence the correlations of social forces to develop and implement a model of national development that rearticulates the peasant economy with industrial objectives to meet the needs and aspirations of subordinate groups in an environmentally sustainable way. Peasant and indigenous movements find themselves in a very difficult situation, where right-wing forces have recovered the state and show signs of increased authoritarianism and on the other side the populist left, which dis-articulated them, does not seem to be an alternative either.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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