ABSTRACT

By way of a case study of CIPO-VAN, a Vancouver BC *comuna* within the Popular and Indigenous Council of Oaxaca – ‘Ricardo Flores Magón’, this thesis addresses two fundamental questions: First, what is the relationship between ideation – including theorizing, dreaming and searching – and organizational forms in contemporary radical social movements? Second, what is CIPO-VAN’s method of resistance, and how does it challenge power? In response to the first question, I argue that in CIPO-VAN, ideation and organizational form interact in a mutually constitutive cycle – that each informs the constant recreation of the other. Ultimately, a firm distinction between ideation and organizational form cannot be sustained, as both are integral to CIPO-VAN’s exploratory process. To address the second question, I develop the beginnings of a concept of creative resistance that I call ‘community conception’. Community conception is a form of resistance based equally in dreaming of another kind of world, or worlds, and establishing, in concrete everyday relations, the forms of communality that offer alternatives to capitalist and statist social relations. As such, this form of non-violent radical social change exists at the intersection of dreaming and creating, where people form community relations that undermine dominant systems and provide alternatives to them.
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GLOSSARY

Campesino: The Spanish term for 'farmer' or 'peasant'.

Comuna: The communal form of CIPO-VAN. 'Comuna' is the Spanish word for 'commune'. I use the Spanish term 'comuna' for two reasons: First, members of CIPO-VAN always use the Spanish term, even when speaking or writing in English. Second, I do not want to confuse the reader with the ideologically loaded term 'commune'.

Comunera/Comunero: Members of the comuna. In Spanish, the terms are gendered. Comunera is feminine while comunero is masculine.

Conviviendo: The Spanish term for 'living together'.

Guelaguetza: A Mixtec term for a communally organized party in which ties of community, culture and sometimes resistance are maintained and strengthened. See chapter 4.

Guetza: A Mixtec term for voluntary communal work or gift for the benefit of an individual, family or community. See chapter 4.

Pueblo: The Spanish term that means both 'small town' and 'people', as in 'the people'.

Telos: The Greek word meaning the ends, or the final goal. In the context of radical struggle, the telos is the better world toward which radicals work.

Tequio: A Mixtec term for obligatory communal work for the benefit of the community as a whole. See chapter 4.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to offer my warm thanks to the members of CIPO-VAN, who have taught me more than this thesis can tell. Thank you for your friendship, your inspiration, and for letting our dreams mingle and grow together. May they bloom as we move forward.

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And to my partner in this crazy life, Michelle, I offer my warmest and most loving gratitude. You enable more than just this project.
For Mich

who occupies my dreams
CHAPTER I

Introduction

Radicals of today do not have the confidence of their predecessors. They are less sure of themselves – less sure of how to proceed – and their uncertainty has radically altered their projects. Unlike the Marxists who came before them, they are moving forward without the reassurance of a program and without the leadership of a vanguard. Rather, their movements constitute a search for forms of resistance and creation, guided mostly by their imaginations and their hope for another way of living together. They are dreaming of another kind of world, and attempting to construct their dreams concretely in their everyday lives and in their methods of resistance. They are stumbling, slowly, toward what they want to create. In doing so, many of today’s radicals are leaving behind the arrogance of so many who came before them; those who thought they knew the way, and who tried to teach it to the world. These radicals do not pretend to know the way, or even exactly where they are going. They have instead taken up the task of

1 The term ‘radical’ is widely contested. It is often, for example, used by mass media to describe armed rebel groups or ‘extremists’. This is not how I use the term. By radical, I am referring to people and groups that seek to fundamentally change the social order. As the word implies, ‘radicalism’ is to address a problem at its roots. By ‘radical’, then, I mean ‘transformative’.
exploring and beginning to build another world, or other worlds. They explore and build new forms of social relations and communality. These radicals are dream walking.

CIPO-VAN

Who are these dream walkers? Many come to mind: the Zapatistas, Argentinean _piqueteros_, squatters, temporary autonomous zone gardeners and members of the Landless Movement in Brazil. The field of dream-based exploratory social movements has rapidly grown in the past decade (Day 2004; 2005; Escobar 2004; Esteva 2001; Graeber 2002; Holloway 2005; Holloway and Peláez 1998; Marcos 2001; Notes from Nowhere 2001; Olesen 2005a; Starr 2000). Here I am interested in just one such community: CIPO-VAN, a Vancouver BC _comuna_ within the Consejo Indígena Popular de Oaxaca – ‘Ricardo Flores Magón’ (the Popular and Indigenous Council of Oaxaca – ‘Ricardo Flores Magón’ or CIPO-RFM). CIPO-VAN, in its small sphere, has taken up this task; the task attributed only to the naïve. They are seeking out and trying to build another way of living together. As we will see, they often fail to live up to their ideals. But in the practice of trying, in the process, they are learning radical and transformative lessons; they are learning how to transform themselves and their community. They are

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2 The Spanish term ‘comuna’ translates into English as ‘commune’. I will use ‘comuna’ for two reasons: First, I am drawing on the discourse of CIPO-VAN, which always uses the Spanish term. Second, I wish to avoid any misleading ideological baggage that the term ‘commune’ carries.
beginning to discover communal formations that stand in opposition to the state and capitalism and that provide the beginnings of alternatives to them.

The story of CIPO-VAN begins with the story of CIPO-RFM, and with one of its founders, Raúl Gatica. CIPO-RFM is an organization of indigenous communities in the southern Mexican state of Oaxaca. Its struggles are many, including the reconstitution of free association of indigenous communities and the protection of indigenous lands and ecosystems (Consejo Indígena Popular de Oaxaca – ‘Ricardo Flores Magón’ N.d.a; N.d.b). All of its many struggles, however, grow out of one central project: to create forms of social organization that stand as alternatives to the state and capitalism (Gatica 2006; Kolhatkar 2006). In this sense, CIPO-RFM is very radical. It seeks the fundamental reconstruction of governing and market systems. In the place of capitalism and the state, they are attempting to create local communities based on principles of mutual aid and communal decision-making (Consejo Indígena Popular de Oaxaca – ‘Ricardo Flores Magón’ N.d.c; N.d.d). But in another sense, CIPO-RFM, at first glance, appears benign to dominant systems. It is a pacifist organization (Consejo Indígena Popular de Oaxaca – ‘Ricardo Flores Magón’ N.d.d). It refuses to take part in formal politics, and it has no interest in gaining political power (Consejo Indígena Popular de

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3 I researched only CIPO-VAN, not CIPO-RFM. Therefore, any information I present on CIPO-RFM must be qualified by stating that my only first-hand contact with CIPO-RFM was mediated through CIPO-VAN. Only in two cases did I meet members of CIPO-RFM when they traveled to Vancouver, BC. I did not travel to Oaxaca to perform any of my research.

4 See chapter 4.
Oaxaca – ‘Ricardo Flores Magón’ N.d.d). But because members of CIPO-RFM organize their communities in such a way that removes their dependence on the state and capital, the PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party)\(^5\) government of Oaxaca perceives them as a very real threat, and it acts accordingly – that is, violently (see, for example, Inter-American Commission on Human Rights 2006).

After being repeatedly targeted by state and paramilitary violence, Raúl Gatica was forced to flee Mexico in the fall of 2005.\(^6\) He traveled as a political refugee to Vancouver, Canada where he was granted refugee status. In Vancouver, Raúl met with two other young Mexicans – Rosalinda\(^7\), a young artist studying in Vancouver, and Juan, a recent university graduate. The three founded CIPO-VAN, a Vancouver *comuna* within CIPO-RFM.

\(^5\) The PRI, or the Institutional Revolutionary Party, is the political party in Mexico that ruled the country under one-party rule for more than 70 years, ending in 2000. However, the PRI still holds power in the state government of Oaxaca.

\(^6\) Raúl Gatica has been the victim of a long string of assassination attempts, illegal detentions without charge and torture. For this reason, international human rights organizations and authorities – including Amnesty International, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and the United Nations High Commission on Human Rights – have called upon the Mexican government to ensure his safety, with little result.

\(^7\) All participants who were interviewed for this study were given the option of being named or remaining anonymous. Any participants to whom I refer by only first name chose to remain anonymous. Their names and identifying information have been changed.
CIPO-VAN understands its project not as solidarity but as mutual struggle alongside Oaxacan communities. Like their companions in CIPO-RFM, CIPO-VAN comuneras and comuneros (members of the comuna) see their struggle, their project, as exploring and constructing communal relationships that begin to build the group’s dreams of another kind of community and another kind of world. They are engaged in a transformative process of searching for and creating alternative social relations and communal forms. As one CIPO-VAN pamphlet put it, they are building the Magónist utopia, and they are doing it with their own hands. (See Illustration 1.)

Illustration 1: Image from CIPO-VAN Pamphlet

Like CIPO-RFM, but perhaps to a lesser extent, CIPO-VAN draws on the ideas of Ricardo Flores Magón (Magón 2005, also see Morse N.d.), an indigenous Oaxacan anarchist who was a prominent organizer in the lead up to the 1910 Mexican Revolution. Magonismo, at least in the way that CIPO-VAN and CIPO-RFM construct it, is a
hybridization of European anarchism with Oaxacan indigenous thought and communal organizational forms.\textsuperscript{8} Informed by Magonismo, CIPO-VAN and CIPO-RFM take up the project of transforming themselves and their communities; seeking out and learning ways to live together peacefully, cooperatively and without power over one another. As one CIPO-VAN pamphlet described their project:

...[W]e strive to never base our work in hate, but in love and joy. We see humour, living together, caring for each other, and being like brothers [and sisters] as resistance, as a form of struggle in itself. (CIPO-VAN pamphlet)

And from the same pamphlet:

We believe that what matters most is the process, not necessarily the objective. We believe that the community is the one to decide what to do, not the leaders or spokespersons ... We are a little anarchist, a little socialist... fans of the music, food, and sayings of the communities, we are not at all square and, even more, we mock those who have all the answers! Us Comuner@s are, quite simply, magonistas. (CIPO-VAN pamphlet)

As I will argue, however, even Magonismo fails to capture CIPO-VAN's project. More than anything else, CIPO-VAN is an exploration of community in resistance - a searching and a building of other ways of living together. It is a project of dream-creation.

\textsuperscript{8} This point is taken from a series of conversations I had with Raúl Gatica, Juan and other CIPO-VAN members.
From its founding in November of 2005, the comuna has grown to roughly 20 active members, with a broad network of organizations in mutual struggle as well as individual supporters. Much of their work has been to raise awareness of the unarmed popular uprising in Oaxaca, which erupted out of a teachers’ strike in June 2006. But most fundamentally, the comuna’s project is not to organize educational events or demonstrations at the Mexican consulate. The comuna’s most important work is the process of exploring and constructing community within the group itself and between it and other organizations. Constructing community is CIPO-VAN’s project. This is its quiet radicalism.

MY RECOGNITION OF PROCESS

When I began this research project I wanted to know how CIPO-VAN comuneros and comuner as negotiated three concepts: solidarity, autonomy and the telos (or the better world they hope to create). Knowing the importance of means-ends continuity – and therefore the telos – in movements informed by anarchism (Day 2005; De Angelis 2001; Epstein 2001; Graeber 2002; Grave 1893; Kropotkin 1995; 2006; Landauer 1910; 1915; 1978; N.d.; Tolstoy 1900), I expected that the comuna acted out its telos within the form of its struggle. And knowing the importance of pluralism in so much of contemporary network-based movements (Ashman 2004; Escobar 2001; 2004; Esteva 2001; Langman 2005; McDonald 2002; Notes from Nowhere 2003; Olesen 2005a; 2005b; Pace and Panganiban 2002; Sassen 2004; Starr 2000), I expected that CIPO-VAN understood the telos to be plural. As such, I thought that the comuna was in some way
attempting to merge the concepts of autonomy and solidarity to create a movement based on plural, egalitarian and cooperative networks of communities that mimic the group’s *teloses*. As I posed the question from the outset: *What is the relationship between CIPO’s understanding of autonomy, solidarity and its telos(es)?*  

I was asking the wrong question. My flaw was in failing to see the constant flux and evolution within CIPO-VAN’s struggle. I failed to see the centrality of searching and exploring. In doing so, I had assumed that there were certain established ideas and structures that the group had settled upon.  

First, I failed to see that CIPO-VAN did not have a *telos*, at least not in any proper sense. Instead of ‘having’ a *telos*, CIPO-VAN dreams. Dreaming is a verb. It is something one *does*—something one *explores*. Unlike the *telos*, a concept implying stagnation and finality, dreaming must be understood to be a moving process. CIPO-VAN’s process of dreaming is constantly engaged and never finished. Indeed, the *comuna*’s project is, in part, to explore the collective dreams of the group, refining them as they attempt to build them. When I entered this project, I did not yet understand this central point: the *telos* is not the defining feature of many contemporary radical movements. Rather, what defines these movements, at least in part, is exploration and dreaming.  

Second, though I recognized that CIPO-VAN was calling into question the concept of solidarity, I assumed that the group was at least partly replacing it with autonomy. I had not yet realized that CIPO-VAN *comuneras* and *comuneros* critique both of these concepts, while at the same time using them to a limited degree. Both concepts, in fact, are points of debate within the group, as members disagree on their
meaning and their relation to the comuna’s project. Both ‘solidarity’ and ‘autonomy’ are contested within CIPO-VAN – they are debated and explored in a constant process of learning and building.

Most of all, however, my question missed the mark because CIPO-VAN comuneros and comuneritas attempt to build relations based on concepts other than solidarity and autonomy. Partly in their place, CIPO-VAN builds relations in struggle based on three principles of communality drawn from Oaxacan indigenous communities: tequio, goetzta and guelaguetza (see chapter 4). In CIPO-VAN, however, even these alternative concepts are constantly explored, never settled, and always existing in motion, in process.

Through my participant observation and interviews with CIPO-VAN, I came to realize that the three concepts with which I began – autonomy, solidarity and the telos – failed to explain CIPO-VAN’s project. The questions, then, had to change. First, realizing that CIPO-VAN engages each of these concepts within a larger exploratory process, I asked: How do ideas – or better, ideation, because it emphasizes motion – interact with CIPO-VAN’s organizational form? I tackle this question in chapter 3. Second, as I became more aware of CIPO-VAN’s unique perspective on political and social struggle, I asked: What is CIPO-VAN’s process of resistance, and how does it, or does it not, challenge power systems and provide alternatives to them? I provide the beginning sketches of an answer to these questions in chapter 4.
OVERVIEW

This thesis is composed of five chapters: this introduction, a review and reflection on my methodology, two core chapters and a conclusion. The two core chapters – chapters 3 and 4 – are designed to be autonomous papers, in preparation for publication. As such, they stand alone, meaning that they can be approached individually without reading the whole of the thesis. For this reason, some information in chapters 3 and 4 is repeated from earlier sections of the thesis, particularly the descriptions of CIPO-VAN and brief references to my methodology.

In chapter 2, I reflect on my ethnographic experience with CIPO-VAN, focusing especially on my integration into the group – my becoming a comunero. I also describe my methods of data collection and analysis, emphasizing how they interwove with one another. I discuss, too, my efforts to challenge the boundaries between myself, as a researcher, and members of the comuna, as research ‘subjects’. Particularly, I reflect on my efforts to maintain total openness with members of the comuna concerning my project. As I point out, this openness facilitated a parallel intellectual evolution between myself and my fellow comuneros and comuneras, which complimented CIPO-VAN’s exploratory process. I conclude the chapter by discussing the specificity and generalizability of my findings.

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9 Because of its length and breadth, chapter 4 will likely need significant alterations before publication. However, for the purposes of this thesis, I have chosen to provide a longer and more detailed discussion than is usually desirable for a journal article.
Chapter 3, the first of the core chapters, explores the relationship between ideation – including theories, ideologies and dreams – and organizational forms in CIPO-VAN. I argue that in CIPO-VAN, as in other contemporary radical movements that approach struggle as an open question or as a searching process, ideation and organizational form interact in a mutually constitutive cycle. CIPO-VAN intentionally creates its organizational forms – its forms of community within the comuna, between the comuna and other organizations, and between it and CIPO-RFM – in a way that explores and acts out the collective dreams of comuneras and comuneros. In turn, members of the comuna learn in their experiences in community and create new ideas, theories and dreams that inform the re-creation of the group’s organizational forms. I argue that this cyclical process constitutes a perpetual searching for new forms of resistance and creation. In conclusion, I suggest that as researchers, we cannot begin to understand contemporary radical social movements without accounting for this act of searching; this constant process of exploration and creation. I insist that at the root of this process is a mutually constitutive cycle of ideation and organizational form.

In chapter 4, I delve more deeply into the complexities of CIPO-VAN’s project, and ask how it attempts to challenge systems of power. Chapter 4 is therefore both theoretical and empirical in content. I attempt to deploy CIPO-VAN’s project as a critique of some prevailing theories of libratory struggle. In doing so, I develop the beginnings of a concept of resistance that I am calling ‘community conception’: a political project based equally in imagination (to conceive of a thought) and in creation (to conceive, for example, of a child). I suggest that this concept helps us understand CIPO-VAN’s form of struggle by emphasizing both the imaginary and the concrete act of
build community – and the inseparability of the two. After engaging with some theories of leftist struggle, I attempt to paint a picture of CIPO-VAN’s process in motion, including the group’s exploration and construction of alternative social relations. I first describe three principles of communality – tequio, guetza and guelaguetza – which CIPO-VAN comuneros and comuneras borrow from CIPO-RFM indigenous communities and adapt to their own context. With the backdrop of these principles of community relations, I then attempt to open a window to a typical comuna meeting, a concrete example of CIPO-VAN’s communal project. Having described some of CIPO-VAN’s community relations, I then outline how those relations challenge dominant power systems and begin to create alternative social formations. I argue that community conception, or the community based resistance and creation in which CIPO-VAN engages, challenges power in four ways. First, comuneras and comuneros seek out ways of stopping their own reproduction of statist and capitalist social relations. Second, by exploring and constructing alternative social relations, CIPO-VAN challenges the symbolic legitimacy and perceived inevitability of dominant social forms. Third, by exploring and beginning to establish autonomous community, CIPO-VAN undermines the power of the state and capitalism by simultaneously chipping away at their own dependence on those systems and providing alternatives to them. Finally, comuneros and comuneras begin a deep internal process of personal and collective transformation in which they attempt to reinvent themselves and their community. In conclusion, I return to a discussion of community conception as a constant and evolving process and explore its implications in constructing plural but not relativist communities in resistance.
In the concluding chapter, I reflect on the future of CIPO-VAN’s project, as well as the changes that it was facing as I finished my research with the group (yet another example of the *comuna*’s process of constant change). I review the major themes discussed in chapters 3 and 4, and I outline my contributions to understanding contemporary radical social movements. Finally, I discuss the need for further research, and I suggest that exploratory social movements, or organizations like CIPO-VAN, provide a particularly potent opportunity for movement-researcher collaboration and mutual theorization. I suggest a style of research – informed by the ideas emerging from pluralist non-hierarchical movements – that would engage in horizontal conversation with social movement actors. This, I believe, is one starting point for a responsible and collaborative form of social movement research.

CIPO-VAN, as I will show, can only be described as a process. It is an organization in constant exploration and constant change. My task, then, is to give the reader a glimpse of the *comuna*’s process in motion. This process, as I will try to make clear, is an attempt by CIPO-VAN *comuneros* and *comunerас* to build their collective dreams, and in the process of doing so, to discover what those dreams are.
CHAPTER II

Methodology:

Reflections on Becoming a Comunero

When, on February 23, 2006, I walked into Spartacus Books – the anarchist bookstore situated in the one-block borderland between the barred and boarded windows and open drug scene of Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside and the Chanel display window cases of Vancouver’s high-end shopping district – I had no idea of the significance of my visit. I had come to learn about *La Sexta*, the ‘Sixth Declaration of the Selva Lacandona’ (Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional 2005) and the Zapatista’s ‘Other Campaign’. The first time I went to Spartacus I had been surprised by how comfortable it was: The quiet of the space had been half filled with a soft, jazzy francophone hip-hop. My feet had clopped across the wood floors as I wandered isle to isle – Marxism, feminism, queer theory, cultural studies, anarchism, literature, magazines, a silk-screened patch with an image of two people dancing atop a record player marked ‘revolution’. This was my second time there, and I was happy to have an excuse to return. I had been following the

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10 The Other Campaign is a movement in Mexico, begun by the Zapatistas, which attempts to build a non-hierarchical and decentralized movement on the left. The Other Campaign rejects electoral politics, government power and neoliberalism, and engages in inter-movement and inter-community discussion in order plan paths to resistance and alternatives.
struggle of the Zapatistas for some time, inspired by the form of their resistance, its humility and its constructiveness. I didn’t expect to find a group in Vancouver that would inspire me more.

The room was packed when I arrived. There was a projector screen at the north end of the store, where someone had pushed bookshelves to the walls and made space for about fifty seats. They were all full, and people were standing along the walls and sitting cross-legged on the floor wherever they could find space. I found the only spot I could, and settled down on the floor right up front.

The event was organized by a few different groups – all linked to one struggle or another in Mexico. But one stood out to me. They had a keen insight into Zapatismo, and I was impressed by their insistence that the event turn into a discussion, a time to share each other’s struggles, a time to listen. Listening, in fact, is the entire point of the Other Campaign – the first step in building a broad and plural movement against neoliberalism and state power in Mexico. These groups, in the spirit of the Other Campaign, were bringing that project to Vancouver, which excited me.

After the event, I approached a young Canadian guy at the CIPO-VAN table – because unlike the woman at the table, he was speaking in English, and I was less than confident in my Spanish. Foolishly, I asked him to tell me about “kippo.” He smiled, and began to explain the struggle of indigenous Oaxacan communities in “seepo.”

This is how I first met CIPO-VAN, the *comuna.*
THE FIRST MEETING

The *comuna* is like no other organization that I have come across. ‘Organization’ isn’t even the right word. CIPO-VAN is a community – a community undergoing constant change and perpetual rebirth. It is a community exploring forms of resistance and creation. …I’ll get there, but not quite yet.

My first *comuna* meeting was in May of 2006, a couple of weeks after the event at Spartacus. I was told that it would start at 4:00pm, so in proper Canadian or American fashion I showed up on time. The meeting didn’t actually begin until 6:30 or 7:00. I didn’t know, at that time, that I was entering a communal space with a strong Mexican flavor and that time operated differently there. A lot of things, it turned out, operate differently in the *comuna*.

I had to duck when I entered the cramped kitchen of the CIPO-house – Raúl’s basement apartment, which is a communal space for the group. Raúl insists that it’s the home of all of us. Indeed, he insists that the CIPO-house in Oaxaca is our home; that both are places where we are always welcome to come and to stay; that they are *nuestros*. This made me uncomfortable at first. How do you respond to someone you don’t know telling you that his home is quite literally yours? I grinned, and said ‘thank you’, awkwardly.

I spent the next two hours clumsily making conversation with Raúl, as no other *comuneros* and *comuneras* had yet arrived. Between his English and my Spanish – both of which were pitiful at the time, though they have subsequently improved a bit – we were able to hold a choppy conversation. Our vocabularies dried up, however, and I
spent much of the time before the meeting quietly sifting through beans for pebbles, and chopping onions and garlic, preparing my first CIPO-VAN meal. I had no idea of the significance of food to CIPO-VAN’s struggle. But I would learn.

The meeting was held on the back deck of the CIPO-house – or more accurately, the house landlord’s back deck. It was a small meeting, with only about five other people attending, mostly Mexicans, with a couple Canadians in the mix. After eating the meal that we had prepared, the group asked me if I could facilitate the meeting; a gesture intended to let me know that I would participate as an equal. I was surprised, and a little uncomfortable. But I was also impressed by the gesture, and I agreed. Mostly the meeting revolved around reflection on recent events organized by the *comuna*: the public discussion sessions about the Sixth Declaration that I had attended and a massive first-annual party held the month before. They reflected on their decision-making practices, on finding ways to be more democratic, more non-hierarchical, and on negotiating varying levels of commitment between members. The group agreed that there were to be no expectations for member participation – rather, members would engage according to their desires and availability. Again, I was impressed. I didn’t have the context, at the time, to know that the discussion was a result of some members feeling over-worked and over-pressured. This was only the first of many reflections on the group’s processes in which I would participate.
NEGOCIATING MY ROLE AS THE COMUNERO-RESEARCHER

It was at some point in that first meeting that I decided that I wanted to research CIPO-VAN.

I participated in the group for the next eight months – always open about my research interests – before my formal research finally commenced. Huddled in the CIPO-house living room in an 11 July 2006 meeting with the comunas and four of the group’s friends from CIPO-RFM (in Vancouver for the World Peace Forum), I proposed my research project and outlined my plans and interests in detail. After questions from comuneros and comuneras and some discussion about how my research might contribute to the group and its struggle, it was unanimously approved. Members were excited that my project might contribute to the comunas’s process of constant self-exploration as well as its potential to publicize the group’s work.

From the beginning, then, I knew that this project must serve the needs of the comunas if it was to be legitimate in any way. My interest was not to mine data from the group, and use it for my own purposes, but rather to engage in a conversation, and to learn something that would benefit everyone involved. Since the group’s process so strongly emphasized inward reflection, I hoped my project would contribute some small insights to the comunas’s process. Drawing on the critiques emerging from the feminist methodological literature, which emphasizes political commitment in research and the need to challenge power disparities between researchers and subjects (see for example Sangster 1998; Kennedy and Davis 1996), I knew I held a responsibility to the group, but
at that stage I understood that responsibility as primarily ethical and political. It wasn’t yet personal.

My participant observation began in January of 2007, eight months after I started working within the *comuna*. At that time, I attained informed consent from members of the *comuna*, as well as a letter from the group as a whole consenting to the research project. I had long since become a *comunero*, a member of the community and a friend, not to mention an active participant in the organizing process. Drawing on the tradition of participant observation (see for example, Humphrey 1970; Whyte 1955), I had become deeply involved in the community of CIPO-VAN. I attended nearly every weekly meeting for over a year (though only those from January to mid-June 2007 were part of my research), each of which usually ran from early evening until the late night. I helped plan and organize events. I contributed to group decisions and engaged in the *comuna*’s constant self-critique and evolution. But most importantly – most crucially to this entire endeavor – I became intimately close to CIPO-VAN’s process and the people who embody it. I took it on as my own project.

The tradition of participant observation stresses this intimacy as a critical research tool. And indeed it is. But more than a tool, this intimacy enabled my project. My research with CIPO-VAN could never have been possible (nor ethical) without becoming intimately part of the *comuna*’s process – part of the community – and learning from its rich complexities and difficulties. Firstly, as the group emphasizes personal and communal relationships in struggle, a disconnected ‘objective’ researcher would have doubtlessly alienated the group, rendering research impossible. But secondly, and more importantly, a researcher could not begin to understand the deep meaning of interpersonal
ties and communality that the group forges without living them, without personally becoming part of the communal process. I could not, in any way, have conducted this research without submerging myself in the communality of the group.

Doing so, of course, raises serious ethical questions. I worried continually that by becoming close to the group – partly in an attempt to deconstruct the exploitative relationships between researchers and subjects that have so-often marred social science research – I might inadvertently create new exploitative relationships. I tried to avoid this dilemma by being fully open with the group at all times about my project. I attempted to maintain total transparency at all points in the research process.

In addition to my participant observation with the group, I conducted in-depth qualitative interviews with five comuneras and comuneros and one close friend of the comuna who does not identify as a member. I held the interviews in January and February, some in the CIPO-house, others in interviewee’s homes, one in my UBC office, and one in an East-side coffee shop frequented by some members. Interviews lasted between one and two hours in length, and covered a variety of themes, from the group’s process, to its principles, to its history. I went into each interview with a list of questions that acted as rough guides, but I did not stick to them closely (see appendix B). Based partly on my commitment to creating an open researcher-participant relationship and also on my interest in the ideas of comuneros and comuneras, I wanted interviewees to be able to discuss those themes that they felt warranted attention.

In an effort to both minimize the stress of the interview experience and help interviewees prepare, I provided each interviewee with my list of questions one week prior the interview (a technique borrowed from Matsumoto 1996). From the list,
participants could get an idea of what the interview would be like. I also gave each interviewee two informed consent forms, one to be filled out and returned to me and the other for their own record. On the form, I gave them the option to either remain anonymous or to be identified in research publications. Considering that I was exploring their ideas, I felt it was important to allow participants to own their words and thoughts. Three interviewees chose to remain anonymous – I will call them Juan, Rosalinda and Eric – and three chose to be named – Emilie Smith, Raúl Gatica and Pablo Alvarez. Following the interviews, I transcribed the recordings and presented the transcripts to interviewees so that they could make any changes they desired. I did this to give them maximum power over the representation of their own voice. Surprisingly, however, none of the interviewees requested changes.

Two of the interviews, Raúl’s and Rosalinda’s, were conducted in Spanish, through a translator. All consent forms and interview questions were therefore translated into Spanish, which made possible all the same processes as English language interviews. I asked Juan, a comunero, to translate all documents, orally translate during the interviews and transcribe and translate interview recordings. I chose to ask a comunero to play this role because it would facilitate a mood of privacy, comfort and trust within the interview environment, which an outside translator might have disrupted. By having a comunero translate, and not an outsider, I was able to maintain an intimate internal atmosphere. In transcribing both Spanish language interviews, Juan first produced a principle transcript in which my questions were written in English, as spoken, and the interviewee’s responses were written in Spanish, also as spoken. From this principle transcript he produced two others: one that was translated completely into Spanish, so
that Rosalinda and Raúl could review their interview transcripts, and one that was translated entirely into English, for my analysis.

I found the interview process to be deeply satisfying. The simple act of listening – of only asking, and then remaining silent and giving the interviewees space to explore their ideas – was fascinating. Their responses were rich and insightful, and I found myself not wanting to end the interviews. The feeling, I believe, was generally mutual. After his interview, Pablo said, with a grin and laugh, “that was fun” (interview with Pablo Alvarez, 01/29/07). Indeed, I agreed.

I tried to maintain an open process even as I wrote. I often bounced ideas off of comuneros and comuneras, describing a concept that I was grappling with and asking their opinion on what I was doing. At one point, while writing chapter 4, I emailed Raúl with a small question about the differences between tequio and guetza (see chapter 4). He responded by composing a two-page essay on tequio, guetza and guelaguetza and emailing it to the entire comuna. The following comuna meeting centered entirely on a two-and-a-half hour discussion of the concepts – how they operate in Oaxaca and how CIPO-VAN uses them in Vancouver. The exchange was enriching; not only for my analysis but also for the group as a whole.

Indeed, we have repeatedly explored the themes of my project together. In another example, two members of the comuna and the friend of a member attended a University of British Columbia conference in which I presented on this research project. They found the event to be stimulating, and talked a great deal about it throughout the next week. In the comuna meeting that followed the conference, the group spent an hour-and-a-half discussing what I had presented, and raising broader questions about the
comuna's identity, the relations that hold the group together and the methods by which the comuna attempts to challenge power. At least in these two instances, my research project was a catalyst of discussion and exploration within the group, complimenting the comuna's larger transformative project. That is, I hope it was.

I also presented a draft of this thesis to the group before submitting it to the university. I wanted comuneras and comuneros to have the opportunity to (1) review the draft and remove any information that they were uncomfortable making public and (2) offer feedback on the content of the thesis and my representation of the group's project and ideas. For the former, I removed any information that they requested without question. For the latter, however, I discussed the feedback with the group and individuals and integrated it into my thesis, though I retained ultimate editorial control of my work. The exchange both strengthened the quality of the thesis and provided an opportunity to explore larger ideas.

THE EMERGENCE OF CENTRAL THEMES

I entered CIPO-VAN with a number of expectations about what I would find, many of which proved to be inaccurate. As I discussed in the previous chapter, my basis in the literature led me to expect a stronger emphasis on solidarity, autonomy and the telos or teloses. However, as I became steeped in the life of the comuna I slowly began to realize the inadequacies of these concepts. Ever so slightly, new themes began to emerge as central to the comuna's project.
With regards to the themes of chapter 3, as I began to recognize the plasticity of CIPO-VAN’s ideas I began to diverge from an investigation of ‘ideology’ – the term more common to the literature – and moved toward an analysis of ‘ideation’ as process. And after observing the fluidity of the group’s organization formations, I came to question the relevance of the often-used term ‘structure’. In its place, I chose to focus on the less-reified concept, ‘form’.

I identified the many interwoven themes of chapter 4 partly by drawing on the literature and partly through my ethnographic experience. A small body of literature on contemporary radical movements has begun to explore the question, the dream and the establishment of alternative social relations in resistance (see especially Day 2005; Holloway 2005). Other central themes, however, such as resistance based in community building and organizational process, have rarely been discussed in the literature. It was through my ethnographic experience that these crucial themes emerged.

Generally speaking, the literature gave me a toolbox with which I could contextualize CIPO-VAN’s work as well as some key concepts. Yet the most important themes – the mutual constitution of ideation and organization form and the process of community conception – emerged from my experience within the group, not the literature. In the end, it was only by loosening my tight grip on the literature that I was able to grasp the themes most central to the *comuna*’s project.
ANALYSIS

Data analysis was a constant and evolving process. Indeed it was part of my own personal transformation within the group – reflecting on my experience of personal, political and theoretical growth. As such, I drew no firm distinction between collecting and analyzing data, or between lived experience in the *comuna* and theorizing about it.

In order to manage my observation data, I kept a research log in which I noted any moments or insights I felt were significant. I considered every observation to be data, including such things as events, protests, meetings, music, food, inter-organizational relationships, conversations between members, and even my emotions and those expressed by *comuneros* and *comuneras*. I attempted to track as much of this data as possible within my research log, prioritizing those observations that I deemed most relevant to the themes of my project. However, on reflecting on the research process, I believe I could have better documented the details of my observations and experiences by more consistently and comprehensively recording them in my research log.

Analyzing documentary data was somewhat more structured than analyzing observation data. I collected and analyzed documents – for example, CIPO-VAN pamphlets, emails, essays, flyers and posters – throughout the research process, taking notes in my research log and archiving the materials in a folder. I also analyzed both CIPO-VAN and CIPO-RFM website and printed pages that were especially significant to my project. As I developed my ideas throughout the research process I often returned to these documents for reference.
Perhaps most structured of all, I analyzed interview transcripts by constructing a series of documents that organized interview excerpts thematically – including themes such as solidarity, autonomy, community, CIPO-VAN’s process and dreams. I then created sub-classifications according to the central themes of the two core chapters of this thesis (chapters three and four). Throughout the process, I poured over the interview transcripts many times, exploring their rich complexities. Yet, like my analyses of observation and documentary data, I analyzed interviews always in conversation with other forms of data.

My research log, then, became a space in which I worked through all three forms of data as well as theories and working ideas. It contains everything from meeting notes to short phrases jotted down on the bus after a phone call – and from my reading notes on Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* to brainstorming notes in which I worked through my ideas before writing. Data collection, then, was in no way separate from data analysis, and analysis was not isolated from theorizing. Rather, they together constituted a continual process of reflection on my experience in the *comuna*, beginning when I commenced my research and continuing throughout the writing process.

**SPECIFICITY AND GENERALIZATION**

We’re dangerous because we’re different, and because we’re together. (Interview with Pablo Alvarez, 01/29/07)
Participant observation makes it possible for a researcher to delve deeply into the rich specificity of her or his case. CIPO-VAN is, indeed, a particularly rich case. In many ways (as I argue in chapter 4) the *comuna* is attempting to redefine the methods and goals of political and social struggle. In this sense, then, CIPO-VAN is a very unique case.\(^\text{11}\) Ironically though, in its specificity or its uniqueness CIPO-VAN represents a growing trend toward specificity within social movements. Within the expanding field of social movements that emphasize autonomy, decentralization and exploration – and reject vanguardism, power politics and homogenization (see chapters 3 and 4) – the *comuna*’s specificity becomes the mark of what might be called an emerging anti-paradigm, or what Day (2005) calls anti-hegemonic struggle. Paradoxically, then, CIPO-VAN’s uniqueness can offer us insights into the growing array of heterogeneous network-based social movements.

However, this paradoxical generalizability of specificity, though useful to recognize, is only partially helpful in understanding this project’s contribution.\(^\text{12}\) In the chapters that follow, I negotiate this generalization/specificity axis differently according to the goals of my analysis. In chapter 3, I attempt to explain the relationship between CIPO-VAN’s ideation and its organizational form. I suggest, drawing on the literature, that CIPO-VAN’s very specific project is part of a larger trend toward decentralized and exploratory social movements. Whether the cyclical relationship between ideation and

\(^{11}\) For a discussion of a taxonomy of case types, including unique cases, see Snow and Trom (2002:157) and Yin (1989)

\(^{12}\) For a discussion of alternatives to ‘generic’ generalizability in participant observation research, see Burawoy (1991).
organizational form is representative of many other contemporary radical social
movements, especially those movements that are influenced by anarchism and
Zapatismo, remains to be determined by future research, but I expect that it is. However,
in chapter 4, I abandon any interest in generalizability and delve deeply into the
specificity of CIPO-VAN's project. Because in that chapter I am attempting to explain
the *comuna*'s project and deploy it as a critique of major theories on the left, generalizing
makes little sense. Instead, I seek to explore the *comuna*'s complex and evolving form of
struggle. As the *comuna* is in a state of constant change and exploration, my goal in
chapter 4 is to catch a glimpse of CIPO-VAN's moving process; to explore CIPO-VAN’s
exploration and to learn from its learning process.
CHAPTER III

The Humble Search for Revolution:
On the Mutual Constitution of Ideation and Organizational Form in Contemporary Radical Movements

The humble search for revolution, not because they are inherently revolutionary – as Marx suggests – but rather because they are trying to find it. The paths to revolution, or perhaps more accurately, to radical social change, are illusive, uncharted and plural. The vanguards of the past, and their contemporary echoes, have been rejected by the vast majority of social movements the world over since the 1960s, and social movement actors have taken up a broad spectrum of new projects. Beginning with the ‘new social movements’ and developing further in the emerging global anti-corporate and anti-capitalist movements, social movement actors and organizations are increasingly rejecting prefabricated models of social change and taking up a more humble and realistic project. They explore. They create spaces of political and social experimentation (Day 2005; Eyerman and Jamison 1991; Melucci 1985). Most importantly, in these movements people approach social change as a question, not a prescribed answer. As the oft-repeated Zapatista mantra puts it, ‘preguntando caminamos,’ ‘asking, we walk.’ The central role of this ‘asking’ in contemporary radical projects reveals a fundamental gap in our understanding of social movements. It asserts the importance of learning, dreaming and theorizing – the role of ideas – in social movement organization.
Here, I explore the relationship between ideation and organizational form in radical social movements via a case study of CIPO-VAN, the Vancouver, British Columbia *comuna*\(^{13}\) within the Popular and Indigenous Council of Oaxaca – ‘Ricardo Flores Magón’ (CIPO-RFM in its Spanish acronym). I argue that in CIPO-VAN, as in many contemporary movements, ideas and forms of struggle cannot be isolated from one another. Ideation continually guides organizational form, and that form in turn operates as a creative social space that informs ideation within the group. What emerges, then, is a cyclical organizational process – a learning process, an ‘asking’ – in which ideation and form are mutually constitutive. Each informs the continual exploration and transformation of the other. This is the humility to which I refer. It is the *searching* for a path to radical social change: the theoretical, practical and embodied exploration of alternative worlds and of the paths to them. And it is this searching – this exploratory process – that we must understand if we are to begin to grasp radicalism today.

RETHINKING THOUGHT IN SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Only recently have scholars within the field of social movements begun to reexamine and debate the role of cognition in social movements (Aminzade and McAdam 2002; Diani 2000; Eyerman and Jamison 1991; Gould 2002; Klandermans 2000; Oliver and Johnston 2000a; 2000b; Perry 2002; Schurman and Munro 2006; Snow and Benford 2013). I use the Spanish term ‘*comuna*’ for two reasons. First, I am drawing on the discourse of the group. Second, I want to avoid any confusion with its loaded English equivalent, ‘commune’.

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\(^{13}\) I use the Spanish term ‘*comuna*’ for two reasons. First, I am drawing on the discourse of the group. Second, I want to avoid any confusion with its loaded English equivalent, ‘commune’.
This resurgence follows a long period of silence on the subject. In response to the early social movement and collective behavior literature’s pejorative use of ideology (Smelser 1962; Turner and Killian 1987; for a critique, see Oliver and Johnston 2000a; 2000b), sociologists in the 1970’s began to develop a series of theories that emphasized rationality and calculated political action within social movements. Resource mobilization theories (McCarthy and Zald 1977) made the crucial contribution of debunking the pathology ascribed to social movement actors by earlier theorists, as it focused rather on the calculated tasks of garnering and deploying resources to meet political ends. In doing so, however, the resource mobilization approach tends to treat social movements mechanistically, de-emphasizing or erasing the role of ideology, ideas, theories and emotions—that is, erasing all things non-material and cognitive (Oliver and Johnston 2000a). Ironically, the emphasis placed on rationality in resource mobilization theories divorced social movement actors’ theorizing, creativity and emotion from organizational forms—focusing on the latter to the erasure of the former.

When ideas have been the object of study in the social movements field, scholars tend to package them as frames (Oliver and Johnston 2000a; 2000b). Framing theory posits that social movement actors engage in “meaning work – the struggle over the production of mobilizing and countermobilizing ideas and meanings” (Snow and Benford 2000). Framing is described as a struggle in which social movement actors compete with other social actors to define reality and the terms of social conflict. Though it remains a powerful, indeed indispensable, analytical tool, framing theory fails to account for a great deal of thinking work within social movements. These theories tend to limit their discussion of ideas to the realm of political strategy, exploring the contest to proliferate
particular interpretive schemes throughout the larger society, but dealing less with the content of those ideas. As Oliver and Johnston put it: "Frame theory offers a relatively shallow conception of the transmission of political ideas as marketing and resonating..." (2000a:37). Ultimately, as embodied thinking beings, we certainly frame our world, but we do much more than this: We question, we dream, we feel and we search. Of these processes, framing theory tells us very little.

Perhaps most importantly in regard to radical or transformative movements, frame theory assumes a counter-hegemonic approach to power politics. As many of today's movements attempt to construct another kind of politics - an anti- hegemonic politics (Day 2005) - they reject the logic upon which framing is based. Those who do not know the way to change – but who search for it – have no interest in marketing their worldview. Framing, then, belongs to the realm of power politics, a paradigm against which many radical movements struggle. Though framing is a powerful analytical tool for analyzing conventional social and political movements, it is unable to explain movements based on exploration and creation. These ideas need to be addressed in their own right, in relation to forms of movement organization.

The budding return of the cognitive in social movement studies has emerged primarily by way of ideology. Both Oliver and Johnston (2000a) and Zald (2000a) call for new, non-pejorative concepts of ideology in the study of social movements. They suggest that understanding ideology makes possible further analyses of education, socialization, theories and values within movements. As such, Oliver and Johnston argue that the concept of ideology enables a discussion of movement content, moving the debate beyond its hitherto heavy emphasis on organizational process (2000:45). By
understanding ideology, then, we are able to look deeper into social movement goals, not just the mechanism by which movement actors struggle toward them.

As this suggests, the shift toward analyses of ideas constitutes a critique of the general positivism within the field and a need to engage more with discourse and deep content (Zald 2000b). Zald argues that our analyses of social movements can no longer be confined to mechanisms, structures and processes. By turning our attention to ideology we are able to access the culture, values and theories that motivate and guide structures. Zald even briefly suggests – though he does not develop the idea – that ideology and practice interact in a constitutive manner: “ideology both emerges from and manifests itself in practice” (2000a:4). This observation, I would suggest, points to a false dichotomy which Oliver and Johnston construct between ideology and practice: “Very roughly, framing points to process, while ideology points to content” (Oliver and Johnston 2000a:45). As I will argue with respect to CIPO-VAN, and radical movements in general, ideas and processes cannot be so easily separated.

Ideology, no matter how broadly defined, is not the only form of cognition important in social movements. Schurman and Munro (2006) suggest that all social movements, and particularly those movements taking up ‘quality of life’ issues, must actively construct and articulate grievance. The cognitive work of grievance construction, they argue, necessarily precedes mobilization, as it lays an intellectual foundation upon which later action will be based (2006:4). As they demonstrate in their analysis of the anti-genetic engineering movement, a small “critical community” of activist-thinkers developed a critique of genetic modification decades before the emergence of a large-scale movement addressing the issue. That later movement,
however, deployed the critiques constructed by earlier activists. In this way, Schurman and Munro emphasize the importance of intellectual work in the “proto-mobilization” phase of a movement, as it renders later mobilization imaginable and ultimately possible (2006:4). These authors, then, situate critical cognition at the birthing side of the movement lifecycle. They therefore isolate ideation from form by placing ideation long prior to mobilization.

The importance of cognition, however, endures throughout a movement’s development. Eyerman and Jamison’s (1991) work is perhaps most helpful in this regard. They suggest that intellectual work is indeed the defining characteristic of social movements (1991:54), which should be understood as processes of thought-based action, or “cognitive praxis.” Not only are movements guided by their cognition, they act as a kind of social incubator for new ideas. “Social movements are thus best conceived of as temporary public spaces, as moments of collective creation that provide societies with ideas, identities, and even ideals” (1991:4). Eyerman and Jamison’s argument has the great strength of recognizing that movements are sites of exploration, and that their organizational processes evolve alongside their cognitive exploration (1991:2, 59-60). Yet they tend to treat these processes as a long-term cycle—rather than a daily project (1991:57). Like Schurman and Munro, Eyerman and Jamison emphasize the significance of intellectual work in the long-term.

No matter the temporal scale, Eyerman and Jamison offer the great insight of seeing social movements as a creative space in which new ideas are born. In doing so they complement the work of new social movement theorists, particularly Alberto Melucci (1980; 1985). Melucci suggests that new social movements mount a symbolic
attack on prevailing power systems, calling into question the logic and values upon which those systems are based. This project is inherently cognitive, as it seeks new ways to challenge power, partly by creating alternatives to the status quo and making them visible to the general public. These alternatives, or experimental forms of social relations, manifest in the form of the social movements themselves — in their organizational processes — thereby eroding some of the distinction between ideation and form. As Melucci states:

The new organizational form of contemporary movements is not just ‘instrumental’ for their goals. It is a goal in itself. Since the action is focused on cultural codes, the form of the movement is the message, a symbolic challenge to the dominant patterns (Melucci 1985:801, emphasis in original).

Most importantly, the form of new social movements is a symbolic weapon in which actors prefigure the social order they want to create, and in doing so undermine the hegemony of the prevailing order. For this reason Melucci calls new social movements “prophets without enchantment” (1985:801).

By merging Melucci’s concept of what we might call the ‘prophetic challenge’ of new social movements with the emerging literature on ideation in social movements, the intimate interrelationship between (1) cognition and concepts of the telos (or the better society toward which social movements struggle) and (2) organizational form, begin to become clear. We see that cognition, theorizing and imagining guides a movement’s structure, as movement actors attempt to actualize their theories and their dreams within
the social space of the movement itself. In this light, the line between ideas and forms of organization begin to recede.

Two points, then, remain to be added to this discussion before fully formulating my argument: the centrality of embodied social practice and the question or the act of searching in resistance. As I will illustrate, the walls that have divided ideation and form, thought and structure, can no longer be maintained. The thought-structure dichotomy simply reproduces the Cartesian divide between mind and body that feminist scholars have compellingly debunked as a gendered dichotomy between masculine pure reason and feminine irrational corporeality (Alcoff 1996). In emphasizing the role of ideation in social movement organization, we need not reproduce dominant notions of the autonomous thinking subject, thereby prioritizing the mind over the body, or reason over lived experience. We need, rather, to understand how social movement actors engage in an embodied learning process in which ideation and form constantly interact and interplay; where the dichotomy between the two is broken down into a chaotic intermixture in exploratory resistance.

My second point, then, is to emphasize the prominence of the question within today’s radical movements – that humble asking, or searching, with which I began. Many contemporary radical social movements refuse any variant of vanguardism or ideological leadership; even the ‘prophetic’ type described by Melucci. As I will show in CIPO-VAN, these movements explore alternative social relations. But they are not imperialist explorers; they are certainly no Cortez (or Lenin). They are those who explore because they are trying to find their way.14

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14 For a more theoretical exploration of these themes, see chapter 4.
Many contemporary radical social movements engage in a process of exploration in resistance, in which ideation\textsuperscript{15} and organizational form\textsuperscript{16} guide and inform the continual reassessment and recreation of each. In other words, movement actors and organizations engage in a learning process that results from the constant interplay between ideation and organizational form. Their ideation – theories, ideologies, dreams, emotions – helps shape the organizational forms of their movements, while their experience within the movement demands that they rethink those ideas. Ideation and form, at least in many contemporary radical movements, are mutually constitutive. Combined, they form a process of exploration.

This cyclical process is constantly engaged, and as in all learning processes, all explorations, ideas and forms will shift, morph and evolve. Some will be abandoned and others deepened. In the case explored here, CIPO-VAN takes up this radically egalitarian project. Members of CIPO-VAN search for paths to change, neither leading the way nor following others. They think and feel their way toward a better world, unsure of how to get there. Indeed, they are trying to discover what ‘there’ is. Whatever it is, it begins to germinate within the social and communal space of their organization.

\textsuperscript{15} I use the term ‘ideation’ because it emphasizes that thinking is an ever-changing process. It should be broadly conceived, as encompassing ideology, theory, emotion, hopes and dreams.

\textsuperscript{16} Here I use the term ‘form’ rather than ‘structure’ to avoid the rigid imagery of the latter. CIPO-VAN’s organizational form exists in a state of constant change.
CONTEXTUALIZING CIPO-VAN’S IDEAS

The community of ideas in the radical left is in a process of fundamental change, which began on a large scale roughly a decade ago. Much of this shift is the result of the simultaneous decline of Marxist/Leninist concepts of political struggle and the growing prominence of anarchist ideas within many social movements (Day 2005; Epstein 2001; Graeber 2002). This shift constitutes a fundamental metamorphosis in values and methods of resistance in a great deal of contemporary movements. Though I will not discuss anarchist theories in detail here (see the following chapter for deeper exploration), their centrality to the cycle of ideation and form of CIPO-VAN does demand a brief review.

Two fundamental theoretical fissures have historically divided the Marxist and anarchist left. The first, and most fundamental, is the relationship between means and ends in political struggle. Marxists, and particularly Leninists, have historically separated means and ends, arguing that desirable ends justify the means of achieving them. Anarchists, on the other hand have historically rejected this argument on the grounds that means inevitably produce ends, and therefore the form of struggle must remain consistent with its goals. The first point, then, leads to the second, which is the anarchists’ tactical response to their stance on means-ends continuity. Classical anarchist theorists from William Godwin to Gustav Landauer developed a model of revolutionary change known as ‘structural renewal’ in which communities construct an alternative social order within the dominant order, building non-state structures that meet community needs. By developing self-sufficient communities, according to proponents of structural renewal,
the state would eventually be rendered redundant and ultimately unnecessary (Day 2005; Kropotkin 1995; Landauer 1978; 1910; 1915; N.d; De Angelis 2001). *The creation of alternative forms of social organization therefore became both the form of political struggle and its end.* As Landauer put it, the project was to “put our destination in our method” (1915:166).

But this project did not simply construct alternative institutions; rather it created new forms of social relationships. Landauer suggested that the state should be understood as one mode of relations among people – an insight upon which Holloway (2005) expands. As such, the means of challenging the state must be the creation of alternative social relationships; relations which reject hierarchy and authority and build egalitarian organizational forms. The destination, or the *telos*, is therefore central to this anarchist project, which attempts to challenge dominant social relations by producing alternatives to them. The centrality of the *telos* in this project directs our attention to the fundamental importance of ideas in such movements. As Charles Maurer summarized Landauer’s project, “socialism is an endeavor to create a new reality with the help of an ideal” (Maurer quoted in Berman and Luke’s introduction to Landauer, 1978:9).

This interplay between ideas and forms of struggle is manifested in many contemporary anarchist movements, including squats, temporary autonomous zones, Argentinean *piqueteros* and Food Not Bombs. But these ideas have also become prominent in many movements that do not identify as ‘anarchist’ (Day, 2004; 2005; Graeber, 2002; Epstein, 2001). We see this in the decentralized character of the global movement(s) against corporate globalization, in the growing prominence of affinity-based organizing and in the use of large ‘spokes councils’ as non-hierarchical decision-
making fora at mass demonstrations (Escobar, 2004; Langman. 2005; McDonald, 2002). Nowhere has this been more powerful and internationally salient than in the case of the Zapatistas and the international movement of Zapatismo.

The Zapatistas are not anarchists. But neither are they Marxists, nor even ‘Revolutionaries’ as such. The Zapatistas have developed a kind of open, exploratory revolutionary method (see Couch 2001; Holloway 2005; Holloway and Paláez 1998; Marcos 2001; Olesen 2005a). They take up the project of dissolving power itself, not just toppling power structures. Most importantly for purposes here, the Zapatistas’ method is a sort of exploration in creation. They explore new avenues to radical change while acknowledging that they do not know the way to such change. This is what they mean by “preguntando caminamos” – “asking, we walk.”17 As John Holloway put it, pointing out the keen anti-vanguardism, egalitarianism and humility of this novel approach to radical change: “We ask not only because we do not know the way (we do not), but also because asking the way is part of the revolutionary process itself” (2005:215). The question, then, has supplanted the confidence that had marked (and marred) radical movements for a century. Emilie Smith18, a long-time participant in political struggle and an Anglican

17 This slogan has taken particularly practical form in the 2006 “Other Campaign”, in which a Zapatista delegation traveled throughout Mexico visiting other organizations on the left, solely for the purpose of listening and learning.

18 All interviewees were given the option to either be identified or remain anonymous. Those to whom I refer with full first and last names chose to be identified. Those interviewees identified by only a first name chose to remain anonymous, and their names and identifying information have been changed.
Priest who has worked intimately with CIPO-VAN, described the egalitarianism of this project:

So autonomy is this utopia that we’re kind of working on, working towards. I guess what I appreciate about it is that it’s also not dependent on this small cavalcade of people that have it figured out, right. So there’s this understanding, and I really deeply believe this, and this is coming as a Christian too, that people have their own stories to tell, and their own authority, their own gifts, and it’s not really about any group who’s got it figured out — because they went to university, or they’re this or they’re that — that can go and educate the heathens. So there’s incredible wisdom in places that aren’t traditionally understood to be wise. And I think that the idea of autonomy is ultimately holding up that ideal; that authority doesn’t rest in the traditional places that Western democracy — whatever — has placed authority. So the whole idea of sidestepping political power, political party power..., the idea of not creating another political party that’s not going to be corrupt — which is the model of some — but the idea that another way of relating can be held up and honored. (Interview with Emilie Smith, 02/08/07)

In many of today’s radical social movements, actors are engaged in the search for “another way of relating”. As such, we cannot understand their projects without accounting for this question, as well as the social spaces in which answers are explored.

CIPO-VAN

Before examining the mutual constitution of ideation and organizational form in CIPO-VAN, it will be helpful to briefly describe the group. CIPO-VAN, as mentioned above, is the Vancouver, BC comuna of the Popular and Indigenous Council of Oaxaca — ‘Ricardo Flores Magón’ (CIPO-RFM). CIPO-RFM is an organization of mostly rural indigenous communities in the Mexican state of Oaxaca. These communities engage in
non-violent struggle for autonomy from the state and neoliberal economic policies – for
the ability to govern themselves according to their own radically democratic and
participatory methods. CIPO-RFM and CIPO-VAN are both adherents to the Zapatista
‘Other Campaign,’ rejecting party politics and calling for new forms of social
organization in Mexico. CIPO-RFM has also played a central role in the ongoing
unarmed popular uprising in Oaxaca that entered the global media spotlight in June, 2006
(see Esteva 2007).

CIPO-VAN was founded in November 2005 when Raúl Gatica, one of the
founders of CIPO-RFM, fled Mexico and traveled to Vancouver as a political refugee.
He and a small group of new friends formed the CIPO-VAN *comuna*, which operates as
one community within CIPO-RFM. CIPO-VAN (also referred to here as ‘the *comuna*’) engages in political struggle within both Vancouver and Oaxaca. They perceive their
work as part of the movement in Mexico, rather than as supporting it or acting in
solidarity with it. Ideologically, both CIPO-VAN and CIPO-RFM identify as *Magonista*,
borrowing the name of a prominent Oaxacan indigenous anarchist during the 1910
Mexican Revolution, Ricardo Flores Magón.¹⁹ *Magonismo* is a kind of mixture of
anarchism and communal indigenous social forms. As constructed by CIPO, *Magonismo*
is the fluid process of exploring and constructing community alternatives as the means
and ends to social change.

¹⁹ As I explore in the next chapter, *Magonismo* is loosely defined in CIPO-VAN, and
should not be understood as a coherent or static ideology. Rather, *Magonismo* is a set of
values and ideas that inform CIPO-VAN’s process. For Magón’s writings, see Magón
2005.
In the section that follows I will review CIPO-VAN’s ideas, in the context of political organization. I will not delve deeply into the complexity of CIPO-VAN’s ever-changing theory of social change (see chapter 4 for a more in depth discussion), but rather attempt to provide a basis upon which I can discuss the relationship between ideation and organizational form. Following that section, I will explore CIPO-VAN’s organizational form, which I will argue is a kind of constructive space guided by ideation. In the final section before concluding, I will explore the learning process within CIPO-VAN by examining the evolution of ideation as informed by organizational form. In each, the distinctions between ideation and form will dissolve into a process in which ideation and form constantly reconstitute one another.

IDEATION, EXPLORATION AND COMMUNITY IN CIPO-VAN’S PROCESS

For CIPO-VAN, both ideation and form are steeped in the concept of community construction. Community is both the ideal toward which the *comuna* struggles, and the form that that struggle takes. With respect to the anarchist-Marxist debate outlined above, one might say that CIPO-VAN builds community as both a means and an end to struggle. Below, I will explore ideation in CIPO-VAN, including the role of the question, dream building and community within the *comuna*.

At the broadest of levels, CIPO-VAN’s political project is a question, an ‘asking’. It is the collective pursuit of meaningful and egalitarian human relationships; the searching for forms of community that both challenge dominant social relations and provide an alternative to them. In this sense CIPO-VAN’s political process is based on
three interwoven questions: “How can we go about challenging the current system?”; “What is it that we are trying to create?”; and “How do we create it?” It is crucial to understand here that the point is not to answer these questions in any final sense, as there are likely a great many answers, none of which are perfect. The point is rather that CIPO-VAN engages in a process of organizing within which answers are explored, developed and refined, but are never ultimately finished. In the humble act of exploration, ideation must remain a process. The crystallization of ideation into a reified program or defined goal can only lead to the end of the search and the institutionalization of structure. Both would constitute a failure. Indeed, in this exploration of alternative social relations and community, the searching itself is part of the discovery.

Part of this search is to engage in the creative process of dreaming. Here, I use the word ‘dreaming’ for three reasons. Firstly, I am simply drawing on CIPO-VAN’s discourse, in which dreams are prominent. But secondly, the ‘dream’ implies human emotion and hope, which can be obscured by its rationalized cousin, the ‘telos.’ Thirdly, and most importantly, the ‘telos’ implies stagnation or reification, whereas ‘dreaming’ implies an organic and changing process of imagination; dreaming implies ideation as process. The comuna, then, is a social space in which new dreams are born and where they begin to materialize in the social relations of the group. As a sphere of social experimentation, CIPO-VAN constitutes a kind of “dream space,” to use one comunero’s phrase (interview with Eric 01/17/07). It is a space in which alternative ways of being are both imagined and practiced. According to Rosalinda:

CIPO-VAN is the most humble, honest, creative way of working, where it is possible to work together.... CIPO-VAN [established this way] which is
to become involved, to know, to get to know other ways of life, of struggle, of resistance, of, of all of that, right. It's a place where dreams—or my dreams—are being built; [where] they start taking shape. (Interview with Rosalinda, 2/12/07)

For CIPO-VAN these dreams are largely undefined, unclear. When asked to describe how he sees the better world that he would like to realize, Juan said:

I think, I can’t really see it. I can’t really say that I see a society, like the utopia that we’re going for. I think what I do see of that, the bits of it that I really, really see, would be the local communities that are well organized but different, and that are connected. So for example if a community in Oaxaca is autonomous and is working, and a community in Chiapas is autonomous and is working, they can somehow, if they were to meet, they would be able to talk about the same things in different ways. And in that sense you would have to be international, because we’re all aiming for the same sort of goals, which is to be able to lead a life of dignity, a life with respect to our minds, to be able to participate in all aspects of our lives…. The ideal world that I see would be that. It would still have all of these different ideas, and all of these different ways of organizing, because I think a world without differences would just be too boring [laughs], so I wouldn’t want to see a world society, just like that. I’d rather see a bunch of societies that coexist. (Interview with Juan, 01/31/07)

These dreams-in-creation develop in community alongside the organizational process. In this sense, collective organizing is simultaneously collective dreaming and dream building:

...In this process things begin to surface. Dreams begin to surface. (Interview with Rosalinda 02/12/07)

Dreaming must be understood as integral to CIPO-VAN’s organizational process, as comuneras and comuneros create the group’s communal form by acting out their dreams.
- pointing, of course, to the interaction between ideation and form in the *comuna*’s project.

In all of their internal diversity, one central theme runs throughout the dreams explored within CIPO-VAN: community. If on an abstract level CIPO-VAN is a space for exploring and creating dreams, on a more concrete level it is a space for building meaningful community relations. As Pablo Alvarez describes CIPO-VAN’s organizational process:

As I understand CIPO’s struggle, it’s that of community building, communality building, or *más bien* [better], building autonomy through communal practices. I think it’s a learning process. A learning process that is not only relevant to Mexico or Latin America, but I think, one that is very pertinent to North America. (Interview with Pablo Alvarez, 01/29/07)

Emilie put it this way:

In some ways it’s almost using the community model of the rural communities [in Oaxaca] up here. How do you construct relations? How do you construct things that really matter? (Interview with Emilie Smith, 02/08/07)

Notably, Emilie frames CIPO-VAN’s community building process as a question, and as she makes clear, members of the *comuna* look south – to the indigenous CIPO-RFM communities of Oaxaca – for the beginnings of an answer.

CIPO-VAN’s project exists where the question, the dream and community intersect. It is a searching for better forms of community, guided by their dreams. This
exploratory project is neither, on the one hand, backward looking, 'traditional' or reactionary (as Habermas suggests of new social movements; Habermas 1981:37) nor, on the other hand, progressive, in a positivist sense. It is the humble act of seeking out alternate forms of social organization. This continual interaction between searching, dreaming and community building makes up CIPO-VAN’s organizational process, and this process constitutes both means and ends to political struggle. It is the method of social change – the tool used to construct alternatives to the dominant order – as well as the goal itself.

FROM IDEATION TO ORGANIZATIONAL FORM

So the ideals of CIPO-VAN, are, you know, the ideals of any organization, are always different than what the reality is. I think those ideals are continually held up as places we’re moving towards, and principles we try to use to engage with one another. (Interview with Emilie, 02/08/07)

CIPO-VAN comuneras and comuneros attempt to construct their dreams within their organizational forms, including (1) the form of the comuna itself, (2) their relationship with CIPO-RFM in Oaxaca and (3) community building with outside organizations, individuals and communities.

Not surprisingly, considering CIPO-VAN’s emphasis on local community, the primary site of actualizing these dreams is within the comuna itself. CIPO-VAN’s members utilize the form of the comuna as a space to explore communal social relations. As such, the comuna bares little resemblance to many other social movement organizations. Rather than a formalized organization, CIPO-VAN is a community
composed of friendship relations. *Comuneras* and *comuneros* often meet many times throughout an average week, mingling social and political work together, often in any number of *comisiones* (or working groups). Members of the *comuna* constantly emphasize the importance of spending time together (or *conviviendo*, living together) – working in person, rather than always mediating their contact through technology. The *comuna*, then, should be understood as a group of friends in resistance – more of a community than an organization, and more of a friend group in movement than an activist movement group.

Community construction within CIPO-VAN may best be illustrated through the experience of weekly meetings. The *comuna* meets every week from roughly 6:00 pm until 11:00 pm. These meetings, like the *comuna* in general, bare little resemblance to those typical of most social movement organizations. In the early evening *comuneros* and *comuneras* gather in the CIPO-house – Raúl’s apartment, which acts as a communal space for the group – and collectively make a meal. The group continually emphasizes the importance of the process of preparing a meal as a form of community building; an activity in which people engage in creative and visceral interpersonal work. At a fundamental level, this is an embodied process.

After sharing a meal and chatting for roughly two hours – emphasizing communality and personal relations – the conversation flows into the meeting proper. The *comuna* intends meetings to be as informal and personal as possible. As such, decisions are made in a loose consensus model. When disagreements emerge, the topic is discussed at length, and if the group fails to reach consensus after discussion, the issue is

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20 *Comuna* meetings are discussed in greater detail in chapter 4.
put aside to be discussed further at another meeting. Most importantly, the *comuna*
struggles to maintain an environment of mutual respect at all times, creating a space for
disagreement while sustaining constructive community relations. As Juan put it,

> So I think everyone is learning.... So, that’s one of the first things that I noticed, right. When you speak in the *comuna* there’s no intimidation. You can’t fuck up. Either people will just make a joke, and tell you where you might be mistaken. Or it will lead to a discussion that’s really cool, because it will teach you, and it won’t scare you off for the next time.... I think you always learn something. (Interview with Juan, 01/31/07)

The CIPO-VAN meeting, then, is a social space in which the *comuna* lives out, in
embryonic form, the communality that the group imagines. *The organization of the
group itself is a manifestation of the theories and dreams of its members.* As such, CIPO-
VAN is a community in constant construction and exploration; it is a space for seeking
meaningful forms of human interaction. Emilie explains:

> I think that’s what makes CIPO-VAN attractive to so many, is that it’s inviting people into a relationship with one another of real love and compassion. I always tease you guys that the only other group that meets once a week is the Christians. I’m like, you guys meet once a week, are you nuts? You want to see each other every week? But honestly I don’t know of another group that meets with such regularity, with such joy and consistency. And sharing a meal is so critically important. Jesus knew that. And for me it’s interesting, Raúl has definitely tapped into something here in Canada (and he may not even be aware of it) that is a need, and that’s for relationship. Because we live in a culture that has shattered relationships, that has shattered communities, that has shattered families, that has not put these things up as primary. Raúl, in inviting people and then acting really consistently to create community, has invited people into, I would describe it as, almost like a church-like relationship. All the anarchists are running and screaming now [laughing]. To me it’s like this commitment that is much more than just this job that you’re all doing or
we’re all doing; it’s something about who we are. (Interview with Emilie Smith, 02/08/07)

But, I think that’s totally the brilliance of this model, is that it’s not – I mean, it’s not just [a model], to describe it as a model is to make it sound like its something being used for something else, rather than being something in and of itself – and I think that’s the beauty of this way of being, if you like. It’s the idea that, I think what people are looking for is in the construction of meaning, is in the place to participate in something greater than themselves, which is important. I could say the same thing about Christian seeking. There is something about this which is religious; and it is that deep human desire to give, and to love, and serve, and to be a part of something meaningful. (Interview with Emilie Smith, 02/08/07)

Emilie constructs CIPO-VAN’s project using religious metaphors – a construction with which many CIPO-VAN members may disagree. However, her points here are insightful on two levels. First, and most obviously, Emilie is pointing to the depth of meaning in the relationships built within the *comuna*. On a second level, she points to the diversity of ideas – even conflicting ones – that exist within the group. Many *comuneros* and *comunereras* would never compare CIPO-VAN’s community building process with religiosity, but they would agree that the process is one of deep human interaction. The *comuna*, then, as a space for dreaming and creation, is broad and open enough for many people with diverse perspectives to inhabit. It is that open social space in which *comuneros* and *comunereras* construct the social world of which they dream.

The dreams they construct, however, are much larger in scale than just internal group dynamics. The *comuna* engages in a transformative project, and members therefore dream of a fundamentally transformed social order, another kind of world. Within CIPO-VAN’s relationship with CIPO-RFM, the group begins to build the global intercommunity linkages that they dreams of. *Comuneras* and *comuneros* attempt to
construct meaningful and socially transformative relations on an international/intercultural level with their friends in CIPO-RFM, in Oaxaca, Mexico.

The interaction between theory and practice—ideation and form—becomes more complex here. As a heterogeneous community composed of Mexicans and non-Mexicans, CIPO-VAN attempts to build cooperative relationships with CIPO-RFM without reproducing the power dynamics that have plagued ‘solidarity’ work for decades. CIPO-VAN and CIPO-RFM attempt to break out of the discourse of solidarity altogether, critiquing its history of paternalism and north-south power inequality (for discussions of solidarity, see Callahan 2002; Olesen 2005a; 2005b). Raúl puts it this way:

I think that the concept of solidarity does not explain all of the relationships that are built among people, among communities, among organizations, among communities as they struggle. And from the beginning it reduces the possibilities of explaining and understanding all the social phenomena that occur in this relationship of people, organizations, and communities, in this process of building another world, other things, other lives. Therefore, I believe it’s important that we start making use of other concepts to enrich that concept that already exists, of solidarity. (Interview with Raúl Gatica, 02/05/07)

Rather than reproducing the prevailing solidarity model, CIPO-VAN and CIPO-RFM attempt to create a more equal relationship of mutual struggle. Together, they organize resistance to a shared set of antagonistic forces—laying somewhere at the intersection of neoliberal capitalism, state dominance and racial and gendered oppression. Both groups explore new forms of resistance based on equal and respectful cross-cultural relationships in shared struggle. Members of CIPO-VAN and CIPO-RFM frequently visit one another, learning from each other’s experiences. Though CIPO-VAN, as a
younger organization, tends to learn more in the exchange, the interaction is intended to be reciprocal. As such, the relationship itself between the groups becomes an experimental space for exploring autonomous, cross-cultural community interaction. Just as Juan described above as “a bunch of communities that coexist,” the relationship between CIPO-RFM and CIPO-VAN constitutes an exploration of intercommunity cooperation. This relationship attempts to “collapse the distance” (interview with Eric, 01/17/07) between Vancouverites and Oaxacans as well as construct relationships of mutual respect and cooperation between the two (albeit overlapping) communities.

What I envision, what I’m doing, is building relationships between north and south. Kind of stripping away the idea that there’s an ‘us’ and a ‘them,’ while at the same time remembering that there is a relationship, there is an exploitative nature of this relationship, whereas countries and people in the north and the west are exploiting those in the south. (Interview with Emilie, 02/08/07)

This relation, though, is also overtly political; it is a relation between people who, together, resist.

...we are both facing the same problem on different realities, at different levels. And so we have to work together against those forces.... Because its not that we’re saying “oh no, we’re better than solidarity”. Its simply pointing out, we have to shift from thinking that we’re disconnected, and say no, we’re struggling together. Its not like they’re fighting the Mexican government and we’re fighting the Canadian government. Its like we’re both fighting the system imposed through the state. (Interview with Juan, 01/31/07).
CIPO-VAN's relationship with CIPO-RFM is born out of the dreams of autonomous community cooperation. The relationship is simultaneously a method and goal in political struggle.

CIPO-VAN’s community construction process also extends to outside organizations, individuals and communities. Public events organized by the comuna are constantly attempting to build community relations with people throughout the local area, including both the social movement community and less-politicized individuals and groups. Eric makes this point in describing CIPO-VAN’s communications commission, a work group that attempts to sow connections with other groups and individuals:

The comision for communication is about the principle that the most radical thing we can do is open channels of contact in such a way that they persevere or remain well beyond an immediate action. (Interview with Eric, 01/17/07)

In the remainder of this section I will briefly discuss three examples of community building projects and the difficulties experienced in them.

The first and most consistent community building project is a weekly or semi-weekly event named — with tongue in cheek — “The Rebel Consulate of the Free State of Oaxaca,” or for short, the “Consulado Rebelde.” This is a small and intimate event hosted in the CIPO-house on Saturday evenings. The comuna extends an open invitation via email and leaflet to share a meal of homemade Oaxacan food, casually converse and build new relationships. The event creates a space for forging community ties, connected to political struggle but not defined by it. Ultimately, the goal is to construct a network of personal and intercommunal ties — on the one hand building movement, and on the
other, challenging the interpersonal alienation inherent to contemporary capitalism. As Raúl put it: “The territory of the Rebel Consulate is a territory for everyone; those who come and want to build things” (interview with Raúl Gatica, 02/05/07). It is a social space in which the collective dreams of comuneras and comuneros can mingle with those who attend. The following segment of a CIPO-VAN pamphlet makes just this point.

A space to build our dreams, the Consulado Rebelde is a concrete example of how we try to turn our ideas into reality and join many hands under the single heart that unites our work: A heart that seeks justice and autonomy with dignity and imagination.

This space is our attempt to bring together many hands and hearts (with their respective legs, heads, arms, etc.), open to everyone who wishes to join us - You do not have to be as crazy as a Comuner@ to share in this experience! At the Consulado Rebelde our dreams begin to take shape through our interaction with the dreams of others, and by sharing initiatives and putting them to practice together.

This is also a space where alternatives that already exist can expand and gain strength. The crafts, chocolate, mole, and other items we constantly use are part of the “Margarita Magón” Women’s Cooperative, where Oaxacan indigenous women trade their products at fair prices and under a communitary structure that they determine themselves. Mezcal [Oaxacan liquor], music, language, and echar desmadre (a fancy term in “Mexican” to denote “hanging out”... really!) are cultural traits that connect us to our roots as part of a community and help us understand how becoming involved in this process is an act of resistance to the individualism and isolation that neo-liberal capitalist society tries to impose on us.

The Consulado Rebelde is also a concrete territory, a free space in which to exercise our autonomy. Every Saturday we declare with joyful hearts and warm laughter that we resist, that we continue struggling, and that we are not alone. Across borders, communities are joining to walk beside each other to achieve justice, democracy, equality, peace.

Joins us at the Consulado Rebelde, help us build a community where all worlds can exist together and in peace, with the added bonus that you can have a Mezcal! (CIPO-VAN pamphlet).
The *Consulado Rebelde* is a concrete space for community building; an embodied interpersonal sphere in which *comuneros* and *comuneras* attempt to build their dreams of communality and share them with others.

In a second example, drawing on the insights of the Oaxacan indigenous *pueblos’* use of the fiesta as a community-building space\(^{21}\), CIPO-VAN organizes an annual fiesta that gathers 200-300 people in a celebration of resistance. In its parties, the *comuna* attempts to construct a kind of creative space of community. But even more than the party itself, the organizational method operates to garner community participation. Take for example the April 2007 fiesta\(^ {22}\)—called “Theatre of Reality, Theatre of Dreams: For Oaxaca and for Us”—a participatory community theatre event in which everyone attending acted out the events of 14 June 2006 in Oaxaca, a pivotal day in the movement (see Esteva 2007). Rather than simply organizing it internally, CIPO-VAN invited the outside community to participate in designing and throwing the party. To do so, CIPO-VAN held three events prior to the fiesta. The first was a stencil and street art workshop, in which participants learned to create stencils and graffiti art. The group produced a series of banners, wood panels and sheets of paper painted to mimic the graffiti of the movement in Oaxaca, which would decorate the party space. The second event was a paper maché and prop workshop in which participants created giant puppets, a cardboard school bus barricade, police and paramilitary gear and other items to be used in the theatre event. In the final workshop, the group discussed ‘theatre of the oppressed’—grassroots participatory theatre—and engaged in collective brainstorming to create the

\(^{21}\) See the discussion of *guelaguetza* in the next chapter.

\(^{22}\) I also discuss this event in chapter 4.
script. Each event drew more people into the organizational process, building community and establishing cooperative relations. Even before the party had occurred, new community linkages and relationships had been forged.

Constructing community, though, as CIPO-VAN has often experienced, is a process laden with uncertainty and conflict. Particularly when organizing with groups that operate with different goals, value systems and ideologies, community building is a project riddled with mistakes and letdowns. As I have argued above, this process is a question. After attending a particularly contentious meeting held by another movement organization, Eric described the difficulty of the process:

The reason that I’m a member of CIPO and other people become a member of CIPO is because the energy they feel from being in that community of people. To go beyond that, at times is a reaffirming thing. If we have a party and other people come and they’re enjoying themselves, you have moments of connection that are really valuable. But thinking about the meeting tonight [which was not a *comuna* meeting], there’s also a sense that those relationships have to be cultivated and worked on very hard to open and maintain. I think the struggle that we’ve had all along is that we have this ideal and we want to live up to it, but the cost, especially in terms of time, is so much. Tonight, I was thinking, this is the last time I come to this meeting, not because I disagree with what they’re doing in any way, and not because I don’t want to connect with them and make a community, but I’ve decided to invest a lot of time in the CIPO and the events of this spring, and I can’t see how I’ll have enough energy to participate in a meeting that (a) takes up a lot of time but (b) is so exhausting emotionally. I come out of a CIPO meeting energized and I came of this meeting with a whole number of questions, and just feeling really like I was part of a dead zone or something. I never felt that energy. (Interview with Eric, 01/17/07)

He concluded on the process of community building:
It’s an ideal that is very costly, but it’s an ideal that we need to pursue.
(Interview with Eric, 01/17/07)

FROM ORGANIZATIONAL FORM TO IDEATION: LEARNING IN RESISTANCE,
LEARNING AS RESISTANCE

To review the argument thus far, ideation and organizational form interact in a mutually constitutive cycle. Each guides and informs the continual (re)creation of the other. In the previous two sections, I briefly explored comuna members’ ideation – their theories, ideologies, values and dreams – and showed how their ideas guide their organizational form. CIPO-VAN’s ideas steer how the group constructs community relations (1) within the comuna, (2) between the comuna and CIPO-RFM, and (3) with outside organizations and individuals. Up to this point in the argument, then, I have explored the ideation-to-form side of this cyclical process. In this section I will examine the second half of the cycle: the form-to-ideation side. Here I argue that CIPO-VAN’s organizational form should be understood as a learning space for the group and the people who compose it. First I will briefly discuss both personal and group learning, and then turn to two examples that will help to illustrate collective learning in theory and practice.

Being a part of the comuna is personally transformative for many members. Personal learning in CIPO-VAN takes on two dimensions. First, comuneros and comuneras learn the skills of organizing. CIPO-VAN emphasizes decentralization in its organizational form partly so that every member can learn the skills of community organizing – for example making posters, speaking publicly or to media, the processes of
communal decision-making and building relationships with other organizations. Juan put it this way:

The comuna can’t exist if we’re not learning from it. And I’ve learned a shit-load from it, I think. When I started working with the comuna, I couldn’t tell you all the shit that I’m telling you right now.... Even to make food and stuff like that; How to make food. How to keep a record of things. How to even just make out a flier. How to approach people and stuff like that that nobody teaches you. You learn because you’re a part of this. (Interview with Juan, 01/31/07)

Pablo made the same point:

...its been a huge learning process. I think I’ve learned more in six months of CIPO than I have all throughout university. (Interview with Pablo Alvarez, 01/29/07)

The learning process in the comuna, of course, is without end. It is a constant evolution of personal growth informed the experience within the group.

Secondly, this process of individual learning is a deep personal transformation, as comuneras and comuneros begin to learn how to exist in community. A slow and unsteady change occurs in many, as they become more rooted in the ideals and processes of the comuna. As Rosalinda put it:

This is a very strong learning process. So the more you start entangling, weaving yourself in, the more you fall in love with it, [and] the less you can leave it.... You start becoming soaked with it. You start knowing more. You start walking, climbing, step by step. You start understanding the process. (Interview with Rosalinda, 02/12/07)
This deeper personal transformation – this “becoming soaked with it” – exists for many members as a slow transition from the individualism of dominant capitalist society to an exploratory communalism. It is the personal process of learning how to live and organize in community – or how to live one’s dreams.

Though this learning process is deeply personal and internal to members of the *comuna*, it is also by nature social and collective. CIPO-VAN develops ideas as a community. Indeed, the group itself is a social space in which members collectively explore, develop and act upon their ideas of communality and theories of social change. As such, members of the group cannot isolate their learning processes from that of their companions. Juan made just this point:

What we say is not, most of the time, what we come up with. It’s something that we somehow translate from our experience in the community. (Interview with Juan, 01/31/07)

The *comuna* is therefore a social space in which members share and collectively develop their ideas. CIPO-VAN’s ideation is a product of the communal environment that its members attempt to establish.

This is perhaps best illustrated by the *comuna’s* frequent reflection on its organizing processes and constant (re)development of its methods of resistance. A May 8th *comuna* meeting will serve as an instructive example. After finishing dinner, the group spent two hours beginning a process of reflection that would later culminate in a
comuna retreat.23 The discussion developed on two planes of abstraction. First, it was a reflection on recent events that the group had organized. “What did we learn from these events? How did we meet our goals, and how did we fail to do so? How can we change our processes to better meet our goals?” Second, and at a higher level of abstraction, comuneros and comuneras discussed ways that the group attempts to challenge power and create alternatives. “How do/can we create spaces or territories outside of capitalism and the state? How do we build other kinds of relationships? What is the identity of the comuna? What is the identity of the transnational community? What is the Magonista utopia?” None of these questions were answered in any concrete way. Rather, they were explored, and then left open for further exploration later. The most important point, however, is that the comuna’s experience in organizing the events of the spring – the workshops, the fiesta and the Connecting Communities event discussed below – informed how they developed their ideas; their theories, ideologies and dreams of communality.

CIPO-VAN’s community building work, then, is itself a learning arena – a space in which comuneros and comuneras alongside many of those with whom they work are able to learn new methods of community organizing.

Learning, however, often grows out of the mistakes made by both the comuna and other organizations. A February 2007 event entitled “Connecting Communities” will serve as an example of these complications, as well as how the people involved learned from their experience. It presents a concise example of community building as a learning process.

23 See the next chapter for a discussion of the retreat.
The “Connecting Communities” event grew out of collaboration between the comuna and Rachael, a social justice organizer. She had proposed the event at a January 2007 comuna meeting, and the group enthusiastically agreed to co-organize it. As a two part event – the first part being a panel discussion of neoliberalism’s effects on communities in Mexico, the United States and Canada, and the second part an open discussion and workshop about connecting communities in resistance – it complemented CIPO-VAN’s community building project by establishing new community linkages (1) as part of the event itself and (2) within the organizing process with Rachael.

Organizing the event constituted a learning process partly because of the difficulties that emerged within it. The organizing process was complicated primarily by a lack of communication between the comuna and Rachael. Neither side in this collaborative process adequately communicated their expectations for the methods of organizing, a breakdown in communication that was further complicated by linguistic barriers between some comuneras and comuneros and Rachael. Some members of the comuna – particularly Raúl and Juan – felt that CIPO-VAN’s organizing principles, especial consensus-based process-oriented organization, were being compromised in their collaboration with Rachael. Other members of the comuna, however, disagreed, and protested that the former were unfairly attacking Rachael’s work and organizing style. Through a series of meetings, both internally and with Rachael, the comuna developed a loose protocol for collaborating with other people and groups. They established that conflicting expectations in the relationship emerged from poor communication at the outset. At the conclusion of the event, both the comuna and Rachael had modified their methods of collaboration. In the future, they agreed, they will make personal
relationships with fellow organizers before engaging in larger projects with them, a solution which they will test in future organizing. Pointing again to the fluidity of CIPO-VAN’s project, this solution will likely continue to be developed and refined.

The conflict that emerged in organizing the ‘Connecting Communities’ workshop provides a succinct example of the fully cyclical process of form and ideation. Based on the *comuna*’s concept of community building in resistance and Rachael’s desire to connect communities struggling against neoliberalism, Rachael and members of the *comuna* entered the organizing process believing it was an opportunity to both build community within the collaborative process and with those who attended the workshop (ideation constituting form). When conflict arose, the group held a series of meetings and discussions to try to understand the nature of the conflict (form constituting ideation). Out of these meetings, the *comuna* (as well as Rachael) devised a method for organizing with outside groups that would respect the autonomy and method of both groups while facilitating cooperation between diverse communities in resistance (ideation again constituting form).

Here we see one example of the short-term interaction between organizational forms and theories of social change, values and ideologies. This process, of course, is constant, always shifting, and it is rarely this explicit. But, at least in contemporary radical social movements that emphasize exploration in resistance, the organizational process itself is defined by this mutual constitution of ideation and form.
CONCLUSION

The humble process of exploring is productive not only in that it discovers alternative social forms and new ideas, but the act of searching itself constitutes a major break with the prescribed revolutionary models of the past. The act of searching is part of the finding. It is part of that which is found. In searching, CIPO-VAN refuses to impose their models on others. They act out a kind of pluralism that enables both internal dignity (the refusal to follow) and intramovement respect (the refusal to lead). But most importantly for purposes here, they engage in the cognitive-formative work of exploring and attempting to construct (1) new forms of resistance and theories of social change and (2) alternative modes of social being, forms of community and ultimately dreams of a better world. Ideation and form cannot be isolated in such movements; rather they interact in a complex relationship of mutual constitution. As Raúl put it in a 2006 interview published in Z Magazine,

> With creativity, with ideas, we are building a future right now. We are making the transformations now and not just to overthrow, to win. No, what we want is to learn how to live peacefully. (Raúl Gatica quoted in Kolhatkar 2006:24)

Without grasping the centrality of ideation—and particularly searching and dreaming—in these movements, and its interaction with their forms of struggle, we cannot begin to understand radical struggle today. Indeed these movements are defined by the constant interplay between the idea and the organizational form—between dreams and embodied, lived experience. In analyzing such movements, we can no longer
separate ideation and form. Each continually guides and informs the recreation and refinement of the other. In the exploratory process of contemporary radical movements, ideation and form constitute one another in a perpetual cycle. Together, they are the means of addressing the question; the means by which answers (in the plural) are explored. Contemporary radical movements are a process in motion. They are the social space in which imagination and creation intersect and interact; where each constitutes the other.

This continual mutual constitution of ideation and form is itself a result of a shift in theories and ideologies of social change – a shift away from the political sphere and toward the social, and away from Marxist struggle and toward a broad array of struggles loosely informed by anarchism. As such, this mutually constitutive model is not generalizable to all movements – or even most – yet it may help us understand a rapidly growing and heterogeneous set of new struggles; those that explore; that humbly search.
CHAPTER IV

To Conceive of Community:
Dreaming and Creating as Resistance in CIPO-VAN

“The State is a condition, a certain relationship between human beings, a mode of behavior; we destroy it by contracting other relationships, by behaving differently toward one another—One day it will be realized that socialism is not the invention of anything new but the discovery of something actually present, of something that has grown... We are the state, and we shall continue to be the state until we have created the institutions that form a real community and society of men [sic].”

Gustav Landauer (N.d.:3)

Radical social change is born at the place where resistance and creation meet; where they become one project, one process. To create is to challenge dominant systems in the most radical – the most rooted – way. Where the Marxist revolutionary projects sought to destroy, to crush, and then to build from the rubble of the fallen order, community resistance begins the building process today, before the dominant order has ‘fallen’. Indeed, this other resistance, this newer (but also quite old) resistance, recognizes that toppling the state and capitalism is an impossible fantasy – at least when approached as such. The state and capitalisms, we will see, are best understood as reified social relationships, and understanding them in this way renders fanciful any notion of crushing or overthrowing them. The project is not to destroy, but to create, to build; and
that which we build is more threatening to the state and capital than any revolutionary army or saboteur. The project is to seek out and construct new social relationships and alternative forms of community that challenge the dominant form. It is to abandon the state and capital, not by flight—as Deleuze and Guatarri (1987) and Hardt and Negri (1994:267) instruct us—but by refusing to reproduce them, and most importantly, by trying to produce something better.

This paper is an exploration of a method of social change—a process of community building in resistance—based on the project of CIPO-VAN, a Vancouver BC comuna\(^\text{24}\) within the Popular and Indigenous Council of Oaxaca – ‘Ricardo Flores Magón’ (CIPO-RFM in its Spanish acronym). Here I explore the question that has confounded the left for centuries: How do we challenge institutions of power and create something better? I will not, however, take on the foolish task of answering this question. There is no answer, no program, and there should never be one. Instead, I respond to the question with a question of a different type: an exploration, a method, a process. This process is the merging of resistance and creation, the exploration and construction of alternative forms of human interaction. It is what I will call community conception.

\(^\text{24}\) I use the Spanish term comuna for two reasons. First, I am simply drawing from CIPO-Van’s discourse, as group members use the Spanish term even when speaking in English. Second, I do not want to confuse the concept of comuna with the ideologically loaded term ‘commune’. The comuna is a horizontally organized community of friends in struggle. This will become clearer, especially in my discussion of the comuna meeting below.
To conceive of community is, on the one hand, to conceptualize or to imagine. It is to dream and explore alternative possibilities of human relations and social organization. To dream, of course, is not to know; it is to not-know, and to imagine. This is the first useful sense of 'community conception': to pose community construction and resistance as an open question. On the other hand, to conceive of community is to create life, to engender the new. Conception is the intimate coming-together of people in genesis. This is the second useful sense of 'community conception': to pose community construction and resistance as an act of creation.

Community conception is not a program. It has no manifesto, no concrete ideology, and no ideal cases. It has only exploration and learning; only process. As such, this paper makes no claim to represent this process, nor even to describe it adequately. As a process undergoing constant change – perpetual reimagining and rebirth – it defies concrete explanation. However, in its plasticity, its continual metamorphosis, it stands as a cutting critique of structured, centralized and universalizing 'Leftist' political projects, even those of the most radical variety. Community conception offers a first step toward an alternative; not only an alternative to dominant social and political relations, but also to the dominant forms of resistance that mimic them. It rejects power-politics as such, abandons any notion of an 'ideal revolutionary subject', and therefore a vanguard. It rejects the Eurocentric universalism that has marred the left for most of its history. In their place, this process takes up the question and the dream. It seeks out ways to construct pluralist and decentralized movements and communities – pluralist and decentralized forms of resistance and forms of creation. This paper, then, describes a process and deploys it as a critique of dominant theories of struggle on the left. It
describes one starting point for another kind of resistance – one that, above all, creates. It points to the quiet radicalism that, in Oaxaca, grows not from the flames of the Molotov cocktail but from the community that is born behind the barricades. The heart of the struggle – in Oaxaca and in CIPO-VAN – is in the community, in the humble and transformative exploration that ruptures dominant social relations and plants the seeds of our dreams.

THEORIZING RADICAL SOCIAL CHANGE

Theorists on the radical left have in recent years abandoned many of the anti-democratic and universalizing trends in traditional or orthodox Marxism, and in their place have developed a series of revised radical and revolutionary projects. What has emerged is a revitalized debate over the nature and the methods of radical political struggle. In this section I will explore some of these changes, focusing particularly on anti-capitalist and anti-statist theories, broadly defined. Here, I meander through these theories, borrowing and summarizing insights in a pseudo-linear progression toward CIPO-VAN’s political perspective. My discussion moves on a path from universalism to particularism, from centralization to decentralization, from political struggle to social

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25 This is not to deemphasize anti-racist, anti-sexist and anti-heterosexist struggles – as I would suggest that each of these struggles are at least partly interwoven with the others – however many of the theorists I discuss have isolated anti-capitalist and anti-statist struggles. At the end of this section – as I draw closer to CIPO-Van’s perspective – I will begin to discuss the interplay between distinct political projects.
struggle and from programs to explorations. In doing so, I provide the theoretical backdrop for what I am calling community conception; outlining a few of the theories against which the concept clashes and others from which it borrows insights.

I will take as my starting point for this discussion Hardt and Negri’s (2000) *Empire*, a treatise on the emerging globalized system of power and the form of resistance that it engenders. Empire, as described by Hardt and Negri, is the social order under advanced capitalism. It is denationalized, decentered and globally eminent, meaning that it penetrates all areas of the globe universally, but centralizes its power in no particular locality (2000:xii). Under Empire, global economic organizations (e.g. the World Trade Organization) and financial institutions (e.g. the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank) subordinate nation-states, shifting governance away from the state form and into supranational juridical bodies. Most importantly, Hardt and Negri argue that by eroding national and cultural division through globalization, Empire creates the conditions for a novel global subjectivity: a universal proletariat called the multitude. This is what they describe as the ironic virtue of Empire: by erasing national and cultural divisions in the name of transnational capitalism, it unwittingly enables the unification of a global proletariat, no longer divided by national and cultural fissures. By deterritorializing and unifying the global subjectivity (the multitude), Empire accelerates the pace of its own destruction (2000:392). The revolution, according to Hardt and Negri, will inevitably come when the multitude – the source of creativity and productivity from which Empire draws its power – sheds the parasitic shell of Empire and reappropriates control of its own creative power and ultimately its own destiny (2000:361). The *telos* – or the post-Empire – is therefore a singular, global and stateless
communist society, in which the particularity of culture and national identity melts into a singular common subjectivity that Hardt and Negri celebrate as a “global citizenship” (2000:396). As they put it: “The postcolonial hero is the one who continually transgresses territorial and racial boundaries, who destroys particularism and points toward a common civilization” (2000:363, my emphasis).

Rooted in the Marxian tradition of universalism, many contemporary Marxist revolutionary theorists call for the unification of a single global subjectivity. In this tradition, another theorist, Giorgio Agamben (1993), suggests that the political project of the left is to forge a subject and a community that exists outside of the logic of identity. In The Coming Community, Agamben calls this a “whatever” subjectivity, or a subject that exists in the space between the ‘class’ and the ‘individual’. As such, this subject – the “whatever singularity” – is not simply a subject with no identity, but one that exists in the linguistic limbo realm outside of identity and in between the concepts of the ‘individual’ and the ‘group’ or the ‘species’ and the ‘genus’ (1993:5). Most importantly, this mode of existence divorces being and belonging from identity. It divorces being and belonging from, for example, being American, being Black, or being an anarchist, and creates a kind of being-without-qualification. The whatever singularity exists only in its existence, unattached to identity and classification. Agamben calls this form of being, “being such as it is” (1993:1).

When whatever singularities gather together, they form what Agamben calls the coming community. This community is based not on common identity (such as being Irish) but simply on existence itself. On the basis of “inessential communality” (1993:18,
emphasis in original) whatever singularities form a community “without presuppositions and without subjects” (1993:65).

For Agamben, the coming community is death for the dominant social order, and particularly the state. “What the state cannot tolerate in any way...is that the singularities form a community without affirming an identity, that humans co-belong without any representable condition of belonging” (1993:86). The project, then, is to accelerate the creation of whatever beings and construct a universal and global community based only on the condition of existence itself. Like Hardt and Negri, Agamben sees the path to liberation as that which leads to the creation of a single global society.

Constructing a unified global telos is deeply rooted in the Marxist tradition, which has been justly critiqued for erasing subaltern particularity or whitewashing it in the name of universal proletarianism (Day 2004; 2005; Escobar 2004; Mookerjea 2003). By constructing a universalist project for the left, these theories perpetuate the modernist Eurocentrism of liberal, neoliberal and Marxist thought. Hardt and Negri take their

Like Hardt and Negri who see Empire as a positive development, as it unifies the global proletariat, Agamben sees contemporary capitalism and particularly the spectacle as a catalyst to creating the coming community (Agamben 1993:50). “To appropriate the historic transformations of human nature that capitalism wants to limit to the spectacle, to link together image and body in a space where they can no longer be separated, and thus to forge the whatever body, whose physis is resemblance – this is the good that humanity must learn how to wrest from commodities in their decline. Advertising and pornography, which escort the commodity to the grave like hired mourners, are the unknowing midwives of this new body of humanity” (1993:50).
modernist assumptions still further by emphasizing the *inevitability* of the multitude’s liberation—drawing on orthodox Marxist notions of natural historical stages and the more general positivism of European enlightenment thought on the left and the right.

The universalizing tendencies in Marxist revolutionary thought, however, have come under sharp criticism in recent years by many Marxist and non-Marxist theorists on the left. Laclau and Mouffe’s (2001) *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Toward a Radical Democratic Politics* offers a starting point for this critique. The project for the left, in their analysis, is to infuse socialist notions of equality with liberal democratic notions of pluralism and liberty, creating what they call “radical democracy.” As opposed to the two theories described above, which, by way of a unified subjectivity, integrate all political conflict into a common global struggle, Laclau and Mouffe argue that socialism must be the product of a multiplicity of particular struggles (2001:192). By multiplying the field of conflict, and recognizing the legitimacy of disparate struggles, Laclau and Mouffe reject many assumptions of the Marxist orthodoxy. Most importantly for purposes here, they throw out the notion that (1) some subjects (the vanguard) are better suited to understand political reality than others, (2001:191) and (2) that others subjects (the proletariat) hold a privileged position as agents of historical change (2001:177). They suggest that such universalizing notions undermine the autonomy of a multiplicity of social and political actors.

However, for Laclau and Mouffe, the struggle for multiplicity is a hegemonic one. The political project for the left is the single universal struggle to connect particularities in resistance; providing room for autonomy but ultimately constructing a unitary project (2001:176). In specific terms, the project is to expand “the chain of equivalents”
(2001:176) – to construct mutuality in struggle – by linking, for example, anti-racist, anti-sexist and anti-capitalist movements. However, hegemonic struggle is by definition universalizing. Herein lies an inherent and acknowledged contradiction in Laclau and Mouffe’s political project: the conflict between equivalence and autonomy. On the one hand, they suggest that by linking equivalents, radical struggle can partly transcend particularity and become a single unified struggle for the right to be particular, even to the eventual point of erasing that very particularity. Yet on the other hand, Laclau and Mouffe emphasize libertarian notions of autonomy, in which particular struggles retain their specificity and identity (2001:182-183). Though the logics of equivalence and autonomy ultimately contradict, they provide the working principles for the hegemonic project of the left: building a plural but common movement toward radical democracy.

Perhaps the greatest insights in the debates over plurality in radical struggle have emerged from those theorists who attempt to redefine the nature of political and social struggle itself. In *Change the World without Taking Power: The Meaning of Revolution Today*, John Holloway (2005, also see Holloway and Peláez 1998) draws heavily on the discourse of the Zapatistas to construct of a theory of revolution that rejects the very notion of power politics. For Holloway, power lies not in state institutions, or even capitalism as such, but in the fracturing of social relations. Power-over – or the type of power we experience within capitalist society – derives from our continual alienation from what we produce, and its continual reification\(^\text{27}\) and fetishization\(^\text{28}\). In other words,

\(^\text{27}\) Reification could also be called ‘thingification.’ It is the transformation of a social phenomenon into an object or a thing. It is, for example, the transformation of the social
power-over is born out of the transformation of social relationships into things (the state, commodities, money), and by us forgetting their social constitution (2005:34). The relationship between the shoemaker and the shoe consumer, for example, is obscured or erased by the thingification of the shoe. In this analysis, all social phenomena – including capitalism and the state – are reified forms of social relations, or inter-human relationships that take on the façade of things. These social relations are constantly in process; always at issue; perpetually reconstituted and resisted (2005:92). Subjects themselves must continually reproduce capitalism and the state in their daily actions. “It appears that capitalism ‘is’: but capitalism never ‘is’, it is always a struggle to constitute itself” (2005:100).

Understanding capitalism and the state as social relationships, constantly reproduced by subjects, radically alters the revolutionary project. First, it points to the subjects’ power to constitute (or refuse to constitute) the system within which they suffer. By understanding power systems as processes, sites of constant reconstruction and constant resistance, we see that rulers always rely on the ruled to reconstitute the system itself, highlighting their dependency on those whom they rule (2005:35). Second, by relationship between cotton growers, sowing machine makers, needle workers and factory owners into a ‘tee-shirt’ (Holloway 2005:34).

28 Fetishization is the process of continually separating producers (broadly defined) from that which they produce (separating ‘doers’ from the ‘done’) as well as the effects of that separation on the producer (the doer). Fetishization alienates and objectifies subjects. However, fetishization should be understood as a process that is constantly reproduced; that is always resisted and always at issue (Holloway 2005:88).
understanding power systems as systems of relations that we reproduce, we see that capitalism and the state are internal to each of us, not external institutions. To struggle against capitalism and the state is to rebel against ourselves, or to rebel against what we have become (2005:69). Third, understanding ourselves as damaged subjects undermines any possibility of (scientific Marxist) objectivity – standing outside the system in order to understand its mechanism and devise ideal methods to resist it – rendering any concept of vanguardism or leadership naïve and destructive. It negates any possibility of knowing the way to liberation, and transforms the struggle into a more humble and realistic process of exploring methods of resistance (2005:123). Finally, by understanding power systems as constantly reconstituted by subjects and internal to them, we see that ‘taking power’ is an illusion, an impossible fiction. Power – as Foucault (1994), too, has shown us – can neither be ‘held’ nor ‘taken.’ For Holloway, power-over (dominant and dominating power) lies in the fracturing of social relations and the forgetting of social ties. As such, in resistance we cannot seize power, rather we must fight and transform power. In resistance, in searching for forms of struggle, our project is first to stop reconstituting capitalism and the state, and second to begin to reconstruct the social ties that are repeatedly fractured within those systems; to begin to construct another way of living. “In the process of struggling-against, relations are formed...: relations of comradeship, of solidarity, of love, relations which prefigure the sort of society we are struggling for” (2005:153, my emphasis).

The importance of these developments in theories of radical struggle cannot be overstated – and indeed they bring us a great deal closer to CIPO-VAN’s project; to community conception. However Holloway retains some of the universalizing currents
in other Marxist revolutionary theories, particularly the Marxist (and also liberal/neoliberal) emphasis on a single global *telos*. His description of the *telos* is vague, a consequence of posing the revolutionary project as an open question. Yet despite his emphasis on decentralized exploratory struggle, his construction of the *telos* is decidedly singular and universal. "The movement of dignity includes a huge diversity of struggles against oppression...but it does not imply a micro-political approach, simply because this chaotic richness of struggle is a *single struggle* to emancipate power-to, to liberate human doing from capital" (2005:213, my emphasis). "The only self-determination possible" he argues, "is the *one that involves all people in the world*" (2005:219, my emphasis).

Holloway stresses multiplicity in resistance to oppression, but he also calls for a single global post-capitalist and post-state society, contradicting his celebration of Zapatista discourse, which calls for "a world of many worlds" (2005:103). The Zapatistas emphasize multiplicity not only in the means of struggle, but also in the ends. In their often quoted mantra, "one 'no' and many 'yeses'", the one 'no' represents the universal rejection of oppression and the many 'yeses' represents the multiplicity of both forms of struggle and dreams of better worlds. Holloway calls for multiplicity in the resistance to the one 'no', and he does so skillfully, but he implies a singular and universal goal. He suggests that multiplicity in struggle will reap a singular global *telos*.

Many of Holloway's insights mirror anarchist theories of radical social change, and particularly those developed by a late 19th and early 20th century German anarchist named Gustav Landauer (1910; 1915; 1978; N.d.). Much like Holloway would theorize a century later, Landauer describes the state, capitalism and money as reified forms of human interaction or social relations (1978:10,43). As such, he suggests that we, as
subjects, constitute the state and capitalism – that indeed all of us are the state and capitalism – and therefore the movement toward socialism must be internal to each of us (1978:79; 1910:165). Like Holloway, Landauer concludes that the logic of internal struggle negates the notion of class-based political mobilization and opens spaces for

What Landauer calls ‘socialism’ bares little resemblance to the Marxist use of the term. For Landauer, socialism is a community of communities based on the rejuvenation of human spirit (what could be defined as the merging of creativity with a full consciousness of the inter-human connectivity that demands cooperative living), which he argues is stifled within capitalism and the state.

Landauer’s description of the state is at times contradictory. He suggests that on the one hand “we are the state” (1910:165; N.d.:3), and that the project toward socialism is to construct socialist rather than statist inter-human relations. Yet on the other hand he asserts that the state is never internal: “The state is never established inside the individual. It has never become an individual quality, never been voluntary. It resides rather in the centralism of command and discipline instead of in the center that rules the world of spirit: that is the heartbeat of the free, independent thinking in the living body of the person” (1978:43). In the first construction, the state is the product of human relations – an insight developed by later autonomous Marxists like Bonefeld (1992), Hardt and Negri (1994; 2000), and Holloway (2005) – while in the second construction the state is purely juridical and negative (a rather simplistic construction, particularly considering Foucault’s thesis on power). Here, I am more interested in the former construction, as it paves the way for an understanding of CIPO-Van’s project and community conception in general.
exploratory movements based on contracting alternative social relations (1978:16, 24). These relations are the seeds of an alternative social order, which weaken the symbolic and social-organizational power of the state (1978:93; 1910:164-165).

Three of Landauer’s central insights will serve to bring us still closer to understanding CIPO-VAN’s project. First, for Landauer, resistance is a positive and constructive project. To resist is to build alternative social formations that stand outside the state and provide alternatives to it; it is to construct islands of community within a sea of statism, and continue to build them until each island links up and the sea drains away.

The project, then, is to build in the present the future that we desire, and to let that new social reality stand in opposition to the state form (1978:21). “Let us destroy” Landauer suggests, “mainly by the gentle, permanent and binding reality that we build” (1978:93). This leads to Landauer’s second insight. The telos, he suggests, must be undefined but plural. We cannot see the better world toward which we struggle – and it must remain undefined – but we realize that it is composed of many. As Burman and Luke describe Landauer’s project, it “rescued the possibility of action in the present by lifting the weight of a rigid telos from the socialists’s [sic] shoulders” (Landauer 1978:11). Rather than attempting to mimic a hardened, reified utopia, the project is to explore socialist forms of organization, guided by a more-supple concept of dreams (1978:9,30).

Socialism, as Landauer describes it, is “a building and a making, a dream dreamed to its conclusion” (1978:53). Landauer’s third insight, then, is that these dreams are based on autonomous and plural communities of communities; that the radical project is to explore and construct novel communal societies that interact cooperatively (1978:2,32). To construct community is to establish alternative human relationships that meet community
needs; to build autonomy from the state form and in so doing redefine human interaction and social organization.

In recent years, projects similar to Landauer’s have proliferated in leftist struggles internationally, growing alongside the influence of anarchist or autonomous ideas in contemporary radical movements (Couch 2001; Day 2004; 2005; De Angelis 2001; Escobar 2001; 2004; Epstein 2001; Esteva 2001; Graeber 2002; McDonald 2002; Mittleman 2001; Notes from Nowhere 2003; Olesen 2005a; 2005b; Stephen 1997). Such ideas materialize in these movements’ decentralized organizing principles, their rejection of the state as an object of struggle, and their adoption of forms of resistance based on exploring and constructing alternatives. Such trends hold true even in a large number of movements that do not self-identify as exclusively ‘anarchist’: for example the Zapatista rebellion in Mexico, the *piquetero* movement in Argentina, squatter movements throughout the globe and many indigenous struggles for autonomy and self-determination. These movements operate outside the traditional reform-revolution dichotomy by moving the struggle outside of dominant institutions and engaging on their own terms. But more than rejecting the state as the field of political struggle, they explore and construct alternative forms of communal and economic organization that render the state and capitalism unnecessary (Day 2005:45). The exploratory and decentralized nature of these struggles opens a hitherto closed space for plurality in resistance and creation. Multiplicity in resistances, then, are matched with equally multiple forms of creation (Day 2005:178); not the static, unitary *telos* common to much of the history of the left, but rather a field of dynamic, loosely defined and constantly evolving dreams. At their best, these movements constitute a creative social space that
opens the possibility of imagining other worlds and beginning the exploratory process of building them (Day 2005:18; Escobar 2004:210).

Only now, within this context, can I begin to discuss CIPO-VAN’s political project, or what I am calling community conception. CIPO-VAN situates its projects here, at the intersection of dreaming and constitution. Above any other end, CIPO-VAN attempts to construct communal relations that challenge dominant forms of social relations – capitalism, the state, inter-personal and inter-communal alienation, sexual-, racial-, cultural-, and gendered oppression. Members of CIPO-VAN, of course, do not know what alternative relations should look like, or feel like, and even less do they know how to build them. Their project is to attempt, to explore, to build – out of the materials of their dreams – a first try. In the process, and in their shortcomings, they learn. This is what it is to conceive of community – to create human relationships that act as the seeds of an alternative social order, and to do so in the midst of the chaos of dominant society. In this act, communities are born and begin to develop. They start to establish linkages with each other, creating communities of communities that experiment with autonomous cross-communal relations and forms of cooperation. In so doing, CIPO-VAN begins to explore the possibilities of egalitarian pluralism. Of course they constantly fall short of this goal. But they are learning in their failures, and they are establishing relations that render those failures an unprecedented success.

WHAT IS CIPO-VAN?

The Comuna of CIPO in Vancouver (CIPO-VAN) was born out of the need of each Comuner@ of feeling as part of a community. This is a story
of many stories that little by little gathered together, leaving solitude alone. Gradually we have found each other out, not only among the Comuner@s, but also all the people of good heart that has given us their support, always working alongside indigenous communities in Oaxaca, Mexico. Our hope is to create spaces where many roads come together, and where the words of our communities become reality: we are many hands and one single heart in the struggle. (CIPO-VAN pamphlet)

CIPO-VAN is a relatively new organization, or rather, a relatively young community. It was established in November 2005 after Raúl Gatica, one of the founders of CIPO-RFM (the Popular and Indigenous Council of Oaxaca – ‘Ricardo Flores Magón’) fled from Oaxaca, Mexico to Vancouver, Canada as a political refugee. CIPO-RFM, an organization of Oaxacan indigenous communities, continues to play an active role in the popular movement that erupted in Oaxaca in June of 2006. It is a member of the APPO (the Popular Assembly of the Oaxacan Peoples, which is the movement’s decision-making forum) and an adherent organization to the Zapatista Other Campaign.31 After Raúl landed in Vancouver, he and two other Mexicans living in Vancouver – Juan and Rosalinda32 – founded the comuna of CIPO-VAN, a Vancouver community within CIPO-RFM. In the subsequent year-and-a-half, the comuna has grown to roughly 20

31 See the Sixth Declaration of the Selva Lacandona (2005).

32 Most members of the comuna are referred to by pseudonyms. However, as this project is exploring the ideas of CIPO-Van members, I felt it was important to offer comuneras and comuneros the opportunity to be identified by name. All participants referred to by first name only have been given pseudonyms, whereas those who are identified by full name have chosen to have their identity made public.
active members (comuneros and comuneras) and has engaged in political work both locally in Vancouver and with its companions in Oaxaca.

CIPO-VAN has no concrete ideology from which it draws its political project. However, it does draw ideas from the indigenous-anarchist perspective of Ricardo Flores Magón (see Magón 2005; Morse N.d.), a prominent figure in the 1910 Mexican Revolution. Magonismo, named for Magón, is a kind of hybrid of anarchism and Oaxacan indigenous ideas and organizing forms. In CIPO-VAN, it operates more as a guiding concept in the groups evolving process than as a firm ideology. As Juan put it:

I think it's hard for me to now think that CIPO is simply anarchist, or any other designation, even Magónist, Magonista. Because even though Magonismo does capture all of this, it doesn't necessarily explain how CIPO-VAN works. (Interview with Juan, 01/31/07)

If any concept can capture the project of CIPO-VAN, it is 'communality'. As Raúl describes communal relations in CIPO-VAN:

How would we call the relationship that exists? Just as we speak of socialism, of capitalism...: “what is the relationship [of] the cipoteros of CIPO-VAN...?” We have a relationship of communality. “And how is that relationship of communality expressed?” It is expressed in our fears, in our process... in our fights, in our differences. It is expressed in our personal problems that sometimes have occurred. It is expressed in that crazy caring for each other that we also have, right.... It is expressed in this possibility of also taking care of the things that are within the comuna, [and] the trust we have in each other. ...All of this relationship, we would call communality. (Interview with Raúl Gatica, 02/05/07)
Communality is the axis around which CIPO-VAN’s process – and community conception – revolves.

I began my work with CIPO-VAN in May of 2006, actively participating and organizing with the group, yet my formal ethnographic fieldwork did not commence until mid-January 2007. For six months, ending in mid-June, I participated in the comuna, attended and contributed in meetings, helped organize events and became a part of communal life in CIPO-VAN. Throughout my time in ‘the field’, I tracked my observations – particularly of the comuna’s organizational process – by keeping a handwritten research log. I also conducted six in-depth, loosely structured and open-ended oral interviews with members, each ranging between one and two hours in length (see appendix B).

In what follows, I explore life in the comuna, based on my ethnographic observations and interviews. In the next two sections I examine (1) what it means to contract alternative social relations in the group, and (2) how those relations are understood to challenge systems of power. By way of conclusion, I point to the novelty of CIPO-VAN’s process – particularly its flexibility and humility – and how it critiques contemporary academic theories of radical social change.

EXPLORING AND CONTRACTING ALTERNATIVE SOCIAL RELATIONS IN CIPO-VAN

CIPO-VAN’s project to build alternative forms of social relations must first be understood as a process undergoing constant change. One cannot define it in any
concrete terms without negating its very existence as a process in motion. To define
CIPO-VAN's process would violate its plasticity, reifying or solidifying what must
ultimately be understood as a complex and transforming set of social relationships.

Rather than attempting to capture this process, and subordinate it to a definition, I will try
to open a window to it, to catch a glimpse of community in motion. Indeed, glimpses of
communality are all we have, both in explaining this process and acting it out. As Raúl
put it:

I take as my reference in building society, these cases [the comuna,
Oaxacan communities, events that embody communality]; concrete,
miniscule, insignificant if you want, but inspiring for me. I have no other
reference. (Interview with Raúl Gatica, 02/05/07)

My goal, then, is to catch a glimpse of this alternative in motion. First, I introduce the
comuna by way of my experience in comuna meetings, attempting to offer a peek into
CIPO-VAN's constantly evolving, dynamic and deeply personal process. After
establishing a feeling for the lived experience in the comuna, I turn to an exploration of
some of the principles that guide communality within the group.

A reflection on the meeting of friends in resistance

We are making a process. We are building. We are learning. Because
always, always... [when] you do something in a group, in community, it's
going to be a process of learning. And in the end it's a process that, well,
gives you life. (Interview with Rosalinda, 02/12/07)
*Comuna* meetings don't have a starting time. They neither start nor end. They flow. In the early evening people begin to arrive, usually from work, ducking into the low-ceilinged basement apartment that the group calls the 'CIPO-house'. The apartment is Raúl’s, donated to him by members of the Anglican Church upon his arrival as a refugee. I am always happy to arrive, content at the entry into a human space, where friends are. One can feel the transition at the threshold of the door; it is a subtle change, but unmistakable. It’s the feeling one might get when she meets an old and dear friend – but these are not old friends, and many are not even personally close outside the group context. Even so, they form a community, which in all of its imperfections, exudes warmth and closeness. When *comuneros* and *comuneras* arrive, they are met with cries of welcome from the others; usually a cocktail of sincere affection and joking stabs. “*Pinche Campanita!*” (Fucking *Campanita!* someone will inevitably yell when one *comunero* enters the room, but always with broad smiles and often with hugs.

Like ‘*Campanita*’ – a business operations manager in his early thirties who talks with a kind of laid-back southern California groove – almost everyone has a nickname in the *comuna*. Nicknames seem to speak to the centrality of friendship within the group. I have been lucky enough to be given a respectable one: “Benito Juárez”, the only indigenous president in Mexican history, and a Oaxacan to boot – an honor that I’m given distinctly because my name is Ben. *Campanita* hasn’t been so fortunate. His nickname means “little bell”, which stuck after a friend from CIPO-RFM – a soft spoken but tough-as-nails indigenous Oaxacan woman in her mid forties – made a joke about the acoustics of his real name. Another *comunero*, a Mexican in his mid twenties with a slim build and a keen grasp of the struggle, has been dubbed “*Delgado Zero*” (“Skinny Zero”, a play on
the new title of Subcomandante Marcos of the Zapatistas, “Delegado Zero”, or “Delegate Zero”). Raúl is called “El Dragón”, no doubt for his propensity to breathe fire; a name that I think he likes. Another comunera, Susan, a hip East Vancouverite in her mid twenties who once had an unfortunate encounter with chili peppers, now goes by “picosa” (spicy). And Emilie, a dear friend of the comuna who is a priest in the Downtown Eastside and a long time radical (her Oaxacan friends call her an “anarcha-anglicana”) is known in the comuna as “La Padrecita,” the feminine diminutive and endearing form of “the father”. And so on throughout the group.

Comuneros and comuneras slowly flow in through the early evening, and with them come the raw materials for dinner. Everyone who comes – usually between 12 and 15 members – contributes in some way to the meals, but nobody really keeps track. “Jefe” – a graduate student with a bone-dry sense of humor and a knack for penetrating introspection, describing his participation in CIPO-VAN as deeply personally transformative – will without fail bring avocados, tomatoes, onions, cilantro and jalapeños from which he crafts his celebrated guacamole. El Dragón, however, will no doubt joke that his “Canadian guacamole” needs some heat. Somebody else will bring the makings for a salad, while others bring beans, rice, juice or dessert. The food is usually Mexican, an important symbol and visceral tie to the communities in Oaxaca. Although sometimes we branch out: We once made mediocre sushi roles, and Jefe, on another occasion, made ravioli stuffed with chicken mole, a kind of Oaxacan-Italian fusion that seemed to capture the ridiculous but life-giving border-crossings that the group embodies.
Three or four people in the kitchen sit around a small glass dinner table, and at least half of them are working on dinner. The other half are likely eating the fruits of the first half’s labor, often guacamole, or pico de gallo, or a salad in progress. All are chatting, in a continual shift between English and Spanish, with Portuguese and French making an occasional appearance. Some of the members are better with each language than others, and some end up translating. Meals, then, are the product of a semi-organized communal practice – a communal creation – and they are deeply endowed with meaning in CIPO-VAN’s political project. At the intersection of convivencia (living together) and creation, meals are the heart of the comuna. When in a May meeting I asked the group what it was that held them together, Marie-Eve, a young Québécois woman who was raised for a time in Mexico, jokingly answered, “guacamole”. Of course she couldn’t be more right.

When the meal is prepared, it is usually brought out to the living room, because there is not room enough for everyone in the kitchen. People sit wherever they can: on the couch or on one of a few scattered chairs if they’re lucky, but more often on the floor. They eat their food off of their laps, and continue to talk, spending time. This usually progresses for an hour or so, eating together, becoming better friends, and bit by bit constructing a community out of a group of individuals, all within the context of sharing food. To eat in the comuna is to take that communality into ones body – to be sustained by it – and the group sees it as such. As Eric described the importance of meaningful human community,

So much a part of modernity is this sense that we’re getting further and further away from the need to actually be in the same place at the same
time through all these different technologies.... Its like there’s this disembodied experience that’s very much a part of modernity. This is really saying: we perceive the need to be physically together and to talk and see each other’s faces and so on. And we’re gonna stop and make time for that. And that to me, in itself, is radical. (Interview with Eric, 01/17/07)

Conversation eventually flows into the meeting proper, for which the procedures are completely informal, if they can in fact be called procedures. Usually, one person will volunteer to write a list of topics for discussion on a sheet of paper taped to the wall (or taped to the bright canvas banner that hangs from the wall), and the group will propose ideas to be discussed. No one facilitates the meetings; at most, the comunero or comunera who writes the list will act as a timekeeper, encouraging the group to move along so that meetings end at a somewhat reasonable hour – which they usually do not.

Decisions are made informally, by consensus. By this, I mean that no decisions are made without full agreement in the group, but there is almost never a formal ‘call for consensus’, never a formal procedure. CIPO is anti-procedure, or at least it is most of the time. As Eric says,

As we’ve grown, we’ve grown as a shared context, which is more powerful than any structure that we can pen down to paper and then try and police. We don’t try and police things, we work with the shared understanding. (Interview with Eric, 01/17/07)

Because of the value CIPO-VAN places on egalitarian interpersonal relations, disagreements are discussed at length, and if consensus cannot be reached, they are simply put off to another time. As such, some decisions take time, and others are never
made. If any member is concerned about one particular path, another will be found. Results, then, are sometimes slow. But as Juan put it, "this process, ... it’s more important than the result" (interview with Juan, 01/31/07). Indeed, the process is part of the result.

Meetings usually continue until around 11:00pm, by which time some members have already left, going home to family or to other responsibilities, and sometimes just because they are tired. Time is a constant issue in CIPO-VAN, with some comuneros and comunerias unable to stay throughout the length of meetings. Some will begin to trickle out around 9:30pm. Indeed, the issue of time cuts to the heart of the conflict between two social spaces in contest: the dominant rationalized capitalist one against which CIPO-VAN struggles and the flexible exploratory one that comuna tries to construct. Each comunera and comunero has to negotiate this conflict, attempting to operate to some extent in both spaces. Pablo points to precisely this struggle:

I’ve been learning how to behave in communality, but at the same time continuing with my individual schedule, my agenda. So, I can only give a little piece of my heart when I come in. But...the comuna meaning, I think, is that you go in fully because it’s your community. You sleep, you eat, you shit, you spend all day together right. I think it is a big commitment, but, I think, one that is worth it, because we just need to kind of give ourselves the opportunity to be engulfed by this concept and to fully understand it. (Interview with Pablo Alvarez, 01/29/07)

The comuna has repeatedly sought out ways to make room for family and work responsibilities within the communal project. Yet despite the numerous occasions that the group has discussed ways to shorten its meetings (including the one person keeping time, mentioned above) ultimately informality has always trumped efficiency, and the
group has maintained it’s non-structure. For community, as one comunero put it, begins with spending time together – an inevitable conflict with the efficiency and alienation inherent to capitalist relations. CIPO-VAN meetings embrace this conflict – indeed it is their intent – as they seek to challenge the dominant relations in capitalism and the state. In meetings, in spending time, people become friends, members of a community, comuneros and comuneras. Together, they seek out ways to build meaningful community. The comuna itself – and the exploratory process by which members build it – stands as a challenge to dominant social relations and interpersonal alienation. It is an evolving challenge fundamentally based in the group’s interpersonal processes. Process, then, trumps results. Indeed, process constitutes results.

**Principles of communality in CIPO-VAN**

I mean, what’s more boring that going to a meeting and sitting around and talking about, you know, Marxist-Leninist social theory or blah blah, or the vanguard of the people. I mean, snore. I just can’t stand it. So here is a group that is really built on other principles. (Interview with Emilie Smith, 02/08/07)

Three principles borrowed from Oaxacan indigenous communities (Chinantec, Mixtec, Zapotec and others) inform communal relationship building in CIPO-VAN: tequio, guetza and guelaguetza. Each describes a kind of human interaction, a mode of

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33 In my research I did not directly observe tequio, guetza or guelaguetza in Oaxacan communities. My descriptions of tequio, guetza and guelaguetza in the Oaxacan context
relations, and – like CIPO-VAN’s process in general – each resists concrete definition. Above all, these principles should be understood as relationships between people, better defined through practice and experience than through description. In CIPO-VAN – as compared to CIPO-RFM – they are especially loosely defined, informing but never dictating community relations.

The *Tequio*:

*Tequio* is a form of community work. It is obligatory and unpaid work performed by members of a community for the good of the whole, and it is understood as an inherent part of living in communal relations. In many Oaxacan indigenous communities, including CIPO-RFM pueblos, *tequio* is the method by which communities construct and maintain, among other things, roads, bridges, schools, water systems and community halls.34 *Tequio* work projects are prioritized and chosen collectively by community assemblies and organized by temporary community leaders chosen by the assembly. As such, *tequio* is a method by which communities meet their own needs without relying on the state. Perhaps more accurately, *tequio* builds community relations


34 My ethnographic work did not include direct observation of any Oaxacan communities, only discussions with indigenous Oaxacans. Therefore, my intention in describing Oaxacan indigenous communities is simply to provide context for CIPO-Van’s project. I neither mean to provide an analysis of Oaxacan indigenous communities (for which I am not qualified) nor do I mean to capture the broad heterogeneity of them.
that contradict and challenge the legitimacy of dominant state relations. Indeed, CIPO-RFM communities have faced a chain of state-orchestrated campaigns to co-opt and/or repress the tequio.

As a social relationship, tequio is much more than a mechanism for democratically meeting community needs. It is a process that builds interpersonal relations and ties of friendship and communality. Typically held every weekend, a tequio gathers together nearly every member of a community\(^{35}\), creating a social space in which friends catch up, neighbors form bonds in work and even some conflicts between community members are mediated within the context of a common project. The concept of tequio, then, taps the double meaning of the phrase ‘community building’: it is simultaneously a process of building (or working) as a community and building community by working together.

In CIPO-VAN, tequio exists on a smaller scale, but its meaning in ‘community building’ is equally strong. The most obvious and frequent tequio in CIPO-VAN occurs in weekly comunas, where members collectively prepare a meal out of pooled resources and share the work of cleaning afterward. Informed by tequio, the comunas also emphasize self-production in any organizing activity, from poster design to translation, and from food production to managing the tiendita, the portable ‘little store’ where the group sells, among other things, chocolate, mole and crafts from the (CIPO-RFM) Margarita Magón Women’s Cooperative. As Eric describes this process:

\(^{35}\)In many Oaxacan communities, only men between the ages of 18 and 60 are required to engage in the tequio, though often an entire family will participate. For some in CIPO-RFM, the gender bias in the tequio is a site of ongoing and unresolved conflict.
It's really about empowering, basically, on the basis of; what can we do ourselves? What are our skills? What can we do together as a group, instead of inferring to systems and institutions and structures, to create? And the activity of creating, which is very much a part of making food, is critical to this whole endeavor, because it emphasizes ideas about the human spirit.... Like, how do we live from day to day without creating? We do that through having other people creating for us, and we consume that creation. We buy it, we watch it, we read it, etcetera, etcetera. And this is like a counter move to that. (Interview with Eric, 01/17/07)

Though ostensibly simple, comuneras and comuneros conceptualize their communal work as an integral part of the group's process—as constructing relations of mutual aid and communality that embody the spirit of tequío.

The Guetza:

Guetza is the second principle of community (borrowed from CIPO-RFM pueblos) that guides social relations in CIPO-VAN. Whereas tequío is obligatory work for the benefit of the entire community, guetza is wholly voluntary, and it usually occurs between individuals, families or communities. And whereas tequío always exists as a form of work, guetza is more broadly defined, including work, but also gifts in kind, or even money. Guetza is the communal principle of mutual aid that guides voluntary intra- and inter-community relations.

As with each of these concepts, examples are more instructive than confining definitions. In CIPO-RFM communities, neighbors or friends might perform a guetza by helping a friend replace the roof of her house. They might gather for an afternoon, pool supplies, and collectively complete the job, while other neighbors or friends who cannot
attend (or who choose not to) might contribute to the *guetza* by supplying a hammer and nails, some spare wood, or some cookies to snack on. Whatever the contribution, the *guetza* is a communal relation of mutual support that builds interpersonal ties and relations of equality and communality within and between communities.

The *comuna* engages in *guetza* in a different context but based in the same principles: mutual aid and relationship building. In one example, CIPO-VAN combined its June 2\textsuperscript{nd} and 3\textsuperscript{rd} retreat\textsuperscript{36} with a *guetza*. The *comuna* held its retreat at Sutikalh – a resistance camp erected by members of the St’at’imc nation, attempting to prevent the construction of a planned ski resort on their ancestral land. On Saturday, the first day of the retreat, the *comuna* spent the day in a meadow on the north end of the camp next to Melvin Creek – swollen and raging with spring runoff. We sat in a circle for most of the day, in the grass or on various sleeping pads or blankets, engaged in discussion and debate. On Sunday, the *comuna* engaged in a *guetza*. Dan, Thomas and I spent most of the day gathering and piling wood from the forest, some to be used as firewood and some for fencing around the garden. Eric, Jose, Rachael and Katie built a garden plot in the northern meadow and planted it with potatoes, and 50 meters downstream Marie-Eve, Salina and three Sutikalh supports weeded the greenhouse. In the main camp, Juan helped in the kitchen, doing dishes and gathering spring water, and Todd helped two

\textsuperscript{36} In the retreat, the *comuna* reflected on its organizing process in the months prior, particularly focusing on how it did and did not achieve its goals, as well as how it would attempt to do better in the future. Also included in this discussion were debates on the more theoretical concepts of solidarity, activism, authenticity, identity, community, *tequio, guetza, guelaguetza*, and, more generally, CIPO-Van’s form of struggle.
St'at'imc elders pour the concrete footings for a new greenhouse. The guetza provided tangible support for the community of Sutikalh. At the same time, it forged new ties between the comuna and the St'at'imc nation that both groups committed to maintaining. CIPO-VAN, in a first step toward continuing the relationship, invited the Sutikalh community to attend the October 2007 Indigenous Intercontinental Conference in Mexico, organized in part by the Zapatistas.37

A second example of CIPO-VAN’s use of guetza grew out of a conflict in organizing. Recall, from chapter 3, the clashes that arose when organizing the Connecting Communities event. Resulting largely from insufficient communication about expectations and organizing methods and compounded by linguistic barriers between some members of the group and Rachael, conflict broke out within the organizing process. As a symbolic act of apology and outreach, some in the comuna engaged in a guetza by helping Rachael paint her apartment. On an evening, after work and school, Rachael and members of the comuna gathered together in her downtown apartment. We painted a large wall on the south end of her studio apartment, and, after finishing, shared a meal. Sitting around her kitchen counter, Rachael served a stir-fry – organic ground beef, bell peppers and dill, over barley – and we chatted about Marxism, school schedules and the ‘Magónist utopia’, about which Javier was reading. This is a guetza. It was not an instrumentalist or utilitarian tool for reestablishing a working relationship, it was rather a more humble act of communality and human interaction that

37 The Zapatistas have requested that CIPO-Van help advertise the conference in Canada and coordinate Canadian attendees.
acted, in part, to mend an injured relationship. At the conclusion of my research with CIPO-VAN, Rachael had become an active member of the *comuna*.

The *Geulaguetza*:

The final principle of communality is the most slippery of the three – the most resistant to definition – and it is perhaps the most important. *Guelaguetza* is the merging of *tequio* and *guetza*, with celebration and joy. The *guelaguetza* is the communally organized fiesta; the space in which the community makes a party, and in so doing reaffirms communal ties, culture, and *convivencia* (living together). It is the space, at least for CIPO-RFM and CIPO-VAN, in which community and resistance are born out of dance, music and friendship – where celebration and rebellion become synonymous.

In CIPO-VAN, *guelaguetza* materializes in its most explicate form in the group’s annual fiestas. As described in chapter 3, the April 2007 fiesta, aptly titled “Theatre of Reality, Theatre of Dreams”, was a participatory theatrical event in which everyone attending was invited to act out a dramatized version of the events of 14 June 2006 in Oaxaca, a major victory and catalyst for the popular movement there (see Esteva 2007). In celebration, CIPO-VAN opened a creative and imaginative space – what Eric called a “dream space” (interview with Eric 1/17/07) – in which roughly 200 people experienced a glimpse of the rebellion. This glimpse was made particularly personal by the presence of CIPO-RFM’s general coordinator, Delores Villalobos Cuamatzi, a middle-aged Oaxacan indigenous woman whose gentle laugh somehow compliments the fierceness with which she defends her communities. Villalobos lived through the events of June 14 and shared her experiences with the group. In *celebration* and in *mutual work*, the party
opened a space in which people establish meaningful relations, contextualized by political struggle.

To understand the importance of mutual work in the fiesta, we need to recall the process from which it grew. In the spirit of the guelaguetza, the *comuna* decided early in the organizing process that the party should be a product of the larger community, not simply thrown for it. The group therefore organized three workshops (on street art, papier maché and theatre of the oppressed) in collaboration with local politically engaged artists. The *comuna* designed the workshops to invite participants into the creative process. In the weeks leading up to the fiesta, CIPO-VAN also held work-parties (*guetzas*) every weekend; finishing props and sharing a meal (tortilla soup, *pozole* or *tostadas*, usually with *agua de jamaica*). In each workshop and *guetza*, the *comuna* established new relationships, more people became involved in the process and the party became increasingly rooted in the community. Ultimately, the fiesta constituted a kind of modified guelaguetza, informed by Oaxacan indigenous practices but customized to the specificity of Vancouver life. At the intersection of communal work and joy, it established and affirmed cooperative relations within and between communities that have endured beyond the end of the fiesta.

However, it did not do so without flaw. Members of the *comuna* sharply scrutinized the organizing process of the fiesta, during and following the event. Upon reflection on their process, *comuneros* and *comuneras* agree that a small group of members had been given too much responsibility for the event – overworking them unfairly and alienating other members who felt distant from the organizing process. This guelaguetza, then, simultaneously built and challenged communal relations. Yet in this
simultaneous success and failure, *comuneras* and *comuneros* have informed and adapted their communal project.

In CIPO-VAN, each of these concepts – *tequio*, *guetza* and *guelaguetza* – operate as fluid guides to social relations within the *comuna* and between it and other communities. They are neither definitive nor restrictive to the process of exploring community relations. Rather, they are informative. CIPO-VAN *comuneras* and *comuneros* do not mimic the communal organizational processes of Oaxacan indigenous communities; instead they borrow insights from their friends in CIPO-RFM and attempt to open a space for exploring alternative forms of human interaction and organization. Recognizing the imperfection and the local specificity of Oaxacan community models, the group neither mimics those traditions nor excludes others. Indeed, drawing on the various communal traditions of its members, the *comuna* has also repeatedly discussed non-Mexican communal processes, including, for example, the barn-raising traditions common in many Canadian and American rural communities.

Above all, the relations that *comuneros* and *comuneras* build must be understood as (1) exploratory, or posed as an open question and (2) as an attempt to act out their dreams of communality. *Comuneros* and *comuneras* try to establish relationships that are both deeply personal and – for that very reason – deeply radical.

‘ARMED WITH IMAGINATION’: COMMUNITY AS RADICAL PROJECT

Pasted beside a photo of an indigenous *campesino* at a CIPO-RFM demonstration, mounted on a tri-fold poster board that CIPO-VAN often displays at events, is a short
phrase that when I first saw it stopped me in my tracks: “Armed with Imagination.”

What does it mean to arm oneself with imagination; to refuse the rifle and instead pick up the dream? What does it mean to resist capitalism and violence on the basis of hope and creation? How is it not just naïve idealism? How does community conception – the imagination and creation of community in resistance – actually challenge the systems that oppress us?

To approach answers, we need first to define those systems. Like Landauer (1910; 1915; 1978; N.d.), Holloway (2005) and Day (2005) suggest, systems of power must be understood as complex webs of social relations that are perpetually remade by subjects. That is, they are remade by us. We are the unwitting parents of contemporary capitalism and the state, and they rely for their existence on our continuing to be such. Because of this, these systems are at the same time remarkably resilient, as they exist inside each of us, but also inherently instable, as their very existence depends on our perpetual recreation of them.

As I attempted to establish in my previous discussion of theories of radical change, we cannot topple this system of social relations, nor can we ever confidently know the way toward radical change. We have only the question, and the humble project of seeking answers within the dizzying field of power and resistance within which we find ourselves situated. We have only the project; exploration and construction; building, from the evolving blueprint of our dreams, and learning from our radical mistakes.

CIPO-VAN’s process, however, provides one remarkable glimpse into alternative forms of creative resistance. It offers one example of another way to resist: to conceive of community.
CIPO-VAN challenges the regeneration of capitalism and the state in at least four overlapping ways.

First, the comuna begins to explore ways to stop reproducing systems of power. On the one hand they reject forms of struggle that continue to engender power relations and reify the state and capitalism. As Eric put it, “if we ask things of the state, that just reiterates its existence. It makes it a solid object” (interview with Eric, 01/17/07). On the other hand, many comuneros and comuneras attempt to resist power relations – and the reproduction of them – in their everyday lives, including the state and capitalism, but also racism, sexism and heterosexism. They try not to act out power, not to act out the state and capitalism and any other relations of domination and exploitation.³⁸ Raúl gave two examples:

[The state says.] “You can't walk through this street”, and if reason and need tell us that we have to walk through this street, we can walk through this street. And let’s show them that we can, in fact, walk on it. [The state says.] “You can't organize a protest if you do not ask for permission”, and if need tells us that we cannot ask for permission and we organize the protest, we make it happen. (Interview with Raúl Gatica, 02/05/07)

³⁸ As this struggle is at all times posed as an open question, the group often discovers forms of power that it was acting out without knowing it, and subsequently seek out ways to interact without reproducing such relations. This is especially true for sexism and heterosexism, which CIPO-Van has struggled with.
In doing so, in refusing to act out state relations, comuneros and comuneras refuse to reproduce the state. Or at least they try to. They fall short most of the time, but they’re learning.

Second, by exploring and constructing alternatives, CIPO-VAN undermines the symbolic legitimacy of prevailing social relations. The comuna – like many other groups – presents the possibility of imagining and constructing other ways of existing, and in so doing robs dominant systems of their ideological monopoly. It produces alternative ways of imagining the social world outside of rationalized bureaucracy. Raúl put it this way:

CIPO-VAN and CIPO-RFM – more than getting people informed – …promote a good spirit, inspiration for others, and that is a radical action. In these times in which everyone feels defeated, because they cannot confront capital, power… the fact that there are these kind of activities that motivate people, that inspire; It’s a radical action, because it promotes – in concrete terms – organization, rebelliousness. It promotes saying “we can generate other alternatives to power”. That is a radical action…. It goes to the bottom of things. In this case it goes to the bottom of what is the inspiration, the spirit, because power has attempted to instrument [ways of] making us believe that it cannot be confronted; to make us believe that it's impossible that those who are not from the circles of power – or anti-power – can have an alternative. (Interview with Raúl Gatica, 02/05/07)

As Raúl makes clear, CIPO-VAN’s (and CIPO-RFM’s) project produces modes of thought – inspiration and imagination – that contradict the dominant ideologies and mental structures that prevail within the state and capitalism (see Bourdieu’s 1998 discussion of ‘state thinking’ or Deleuze and Guattari’s 1987 discussion of ‘arborescent

39 Theorists of new social movements have made the same point. See Melucci (1985).
In so doing they open the imaginary; they make room for other ways of imagining the social world; for imagining worlds composed of many. Or at least they try to. And they’re learning.

Third, the process of building autonomous and self-reliant communities—communities no longer dependent on the state and capitalism—(1) undermines the power of those institutions by rendering them unnecessary and (2) makes post-capitalist/post-state society possible. I think that the autonomy that CIPO is looking for is one that is from the ground. It’s small-based, small-scale. Where there is effective representation, because there is no continual control of power. So the way I understand autonomy is through a slower process.... I think that economic development works in hand with self-determination, trying to become less and less dependent on government resources until we get to that point when we don’t need them any more. (Interview with Pablo Alvarez, 01/29/07)

Juan made a similar point:

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40 Deleuze and Guattari (1987) describe “rhizomatic” thought as existing outside and in opposition to “arborescent” or state thought. Though both forms of thought are about “becoming”, I would suggest that unlike rhizomatic thought, CIPO-Van’s imaginary is more about opening space and creating possibilities than it is about flight or escape.

41 As we know not how to organize such communities now, revolution today would do us little good. But unlike Communist strategies that instruct us to wait for the ‘right time’ for revolution, autonomy enables action in the present.
Raul put it simply:

We renounce power and build in the immediate now a different way of being. (Raúl Gatica quoted in Notes from Nowhere 2003: 393)

To build is to construct social relations or forms of human organization that challenge dominant relations by rendering them unnecessary and making alternatives possible. Yet we do not know how to build such communities – confounded by the systems in which we live – and so our process of building must simultaneously be one of exploration. The project, then, is to build, learning as we go – learning new ways of living with each other.

At least for CIPO-VAN, the project is to establish communities that are self-reliant, that meet human needs without institutions of power, and that cooperate with other such communities. First, the comunas carve out non-capitalist and non-authoritarian spaces. This is the root of the concept of comunas. The comunas open an imaginative and constructive sphere in which people are able to connect with one another.
and together explore novel forms of social organization. As Eric put it, “It's opening up space that is non-administrative, and that people can share” (interview with Eric, 01/17/07). Informed by the principles of *tequio, guetza* and *guelaguetza*, *comuneras* and *comuneros* explore and contract relations of communality and mutual aid. Second, based on the same values and the same exploratory premise, CIPO-VAN builds communal and cooperative relations with CIPO-RFM. These relations attempt to transcend thousands of miles, national-, cultural- and linguistic boundaries, and more than a century of north-to-south paternalism in leftist struggle. CIPO-VAN and CIPO-RFM are exploring and beginning to build cooperative inter-communal relationships between transnational autonomous communities. They are exploring and creating forms of community that render capitalism and the state unnecessary and make a post-capitalist/post-state society possible. That is, they’re trying to, falling short most of the time. But they’re learning.

The final point then, the final way that CIPO-VAN challenges power, is that by exploring and constructing alternative social relationships, CIPO-VAN begins a deeply internal process of personal and communal transformation. In communality, *comuneras* and *comuneros* are attempting to remake who they are and how they interact with each other. In transforming themselves and their community, they are building their dreams, personally and collectively. As Rosalinda put it:

So this is where my dreams of being a better person lie, of building a path that gives me strength and clarity in what I do, right? As a person, as a human being, as an individual, as a person that is also, well, who is from a community, and who, when you leave that place, starts acquiring more dreams, more desires, you start hoping, building. So, the *comuna* is that, because when you go about building your dreams, when they start taking shape, you start acquiring others and others. And when you share these dreams with others, it starts taking on more life, it starts – how can I say it,
how do you call it when this happens? ... Well, it starts walking.... So... everyday, little by little our dreams start becoming reality. So when I see that banner, when I see the [CIPO] flag, when I see the crafts; for example, when I see a weaving, right? A huipil. I don't know. That's how I think it is; maybe dreams start becoming reality, like that weaving. It starts forming and taking... strength, right? Dreams, right? When I see – I don't know, maybe I bullshit too much or I'm too pendeja, right – but for example when I see a huipil [woven basket], I say “puta, que chingon!” How beautiful that through this weapon you can communicate what you are, what you know, what you fight for, what you want, what you wish for, what you dream of, what you desire, all of it. (Interview with Rosalinda, 02/12/07)

Personally and collectively, comuneros and comuneras are slowly building their dreams.

Of course they’re not getting as far as they would like; always struggling; always making mistakes.

I think that’s the way it always was with utopic visions; was that they’re held up, and then they’re challenged. There’s a kind of a stumbling towards them, and never ever arriving. (Interview with Emilie Smith, 02/08/07)

But comuneros and comuneras are stumbling along. And they’re learning.

CONCLUSION: COMMUNITY CONCEPTION AS CONSTANT PROCESS

To conceive of community is to arm oneself with imagination, and to realize that one’s imagination is only a weapon inasmuch as it is tool for creation. Community conception is not a program. There is no manifesto, and there should never be one. I do not know how to create the change that I hope for, and CIPO-VAN does not claim to
know the path to something better. Instead, their process of searching and creating explores and begins to build those paths, and they attempt (often with difficulty) to cooperate with others who have taken up the same endeavor. They are exploring pluralist processes of resistance and creation. This is why Juan says, "Magonismo is the process and not the prescription of a movement." There can be no prescription. Only process. As people engulfed in the social relations of capitalism and the state and all other intersections of power and resistance, none of us are in any place to prescribe a model or a program. We can only search. As Raúl put it:

We couldn't find anything out there that answered our need for change so we create this as we go along. There's lots of contradictions in it. It's not a theory but a practice in development. (Raúl Gatica in Notes from Nowhere 2003: 110).

Or as Eric made clear:

If we had that sense that we were going to do certain things in an instrumental way that would suddenly change the world, we would be back to square one, because its just a sense of constant struggle, that even at the best of times will always be necessary. Because each day, each country, each situation is embodied by a bunch of people and they can screw it up as much as they can make it succeed. So I guess it's really a myriad of dreams, and just a sense of being free to create and imagine... (Interview with Eric, 01/17/07)

In exploring and building methods of resistance and creation, CIPO-VAN avoids the universalism and domination that has marred the left for much of its history. As people in struggle, we have to recognize that we are faulted, that we cannot see the way
to change, and neither can anyone else. There can never be an ideal revolutionary subject, whether it be the proletariat, the multitude, the whatever singularity, or any other prescribed and endowed cross-section of humanity. There is only us – or plural 'us-es' – and as faulted beings and communities we are obliged not to lead or follow, but to explore. It is long past time to lay all the vanguards of history to rest, and realize that we have only our faulted selves from which we can build other ways of existing. This is the radical humility of exploratory struggle. As Raúl put it:

The challenge to power is done by simple, ordinary beings: the men that pee, that shit, that cry, the women that grow tired, those who rise up, those in the kitchen, who wear aprons. (Interview with Raúl Gatica, 02/05/07)

This humility in struggle makes it possible for us to create pluralism without relativism – that is, it could if we knew how. Community-based or autonomous resistance opens a field of plurality – both in the methods and in the ends of struggle – in which distinct communities can imagine and construct their own way of being and resisting. These processes, however, must stand at all times in opposition to power-over. They must stand universally against oppression and plurally in creation. How this will work out in practice, in all of its many contradictions, remains to be established – it remains for us to establish. Indeed, figuring that out is part of the searching, the process that constitutes communal resistance and creation. It is our task to attempt to act out what the Zapatistas call “one ‘no’ and many ‘yeses’”. This is, of course, a question of relationships between individuals and communities – relationships that need to be
created. Emilie offers us a possible starting point (based rightly in humor) for building pluralism without relativism, or a world of many worlds:

I think the diversity issue is, you know all these clichés of how rich it can be, and how much better it is to have a full banquet than it is to just have black beans. So you know, the more variety the better. As long as on the banquet table is food, and not deadly nightshade. (Interview with Emilie Smith, 02/08/07)

Part of the process, you see, is distinguishing the food from the nightshade; distinguishing what gives life from what takes it away.

My point is not to propose an answer, and neither is CIPO-VAN’s. To questions of pluralism without relativism, or to the nature of post-capitalist and post-statist relations, I offer no solutions, and neither does CIPO-VAN. The point is anti-solution. Anti-program. The point is that we must explore. Our dreams are undefined and our methods for creating them must be even less so. What CIPO-VAN offers, what community conception puts forth, is not an answer or a theory, but rather one humble process among many from which we might move forward. We can no longer live under the illusion that ‘we know’, because our ‘knowledge’ is killing us, and each other. Rather, the goal must be to open spaces of exploration where our dreams can be built and refined, where we are able to conceive of other kinds of communities. The goal is to create spaces of life in which the confidence of knowledge is replaced by the humility of hope, and where, in that fertile soil, we can re-learn how to grow corn. Once we’ve done that, we can let our corn deal its fatal blow to capital and the state.
CHAPTER V

Conclusion

On 5 June 2007, the comuna held its meeting at the west side apartment of a non-member; Salina’s boyfriend. She jokes that he is the comuna’s most loyal groupie. Kindly, he had invited the comuna to a barbeque that he and his roommates would be throwing. When one comunero had apologized to him, saying that we could not come because the comuna meets every Tuesday night, he invited the group to come anyway, and hold their meeting at the barbeque. It should be clear, by now, why the comuna accepted the invitation.

We met in the living room early in the evening, while the other guests mingled on the back porch. An uncommon heaviness weighed upon all of us. It was as if two worlds existed at that barbeque, divided by the kitchen door. We could hear the beat of the bass from the stereo outside, and people laughing. Inside, however, the mood fluctuated erratically from the laughter and joking that normally characterizes comuna meetings to a tense and oppressive quiet. Comuneras and comuneros sat around the room, looking at the floor, rubbing their foreheads or pouring glasses of wine. We had put off this conversation for a few weeks now – although in small groups everyone had been talking about it. We could no longer sustain our quiet on the subject.

Upon the request of the Oaxacan communities, Raúl had decided to return to Mexico, probably to his death. Before he fled to Canada he had survived a chain of
assassination attempts and arrests and had been tortured many times. Since he left, the situation in Oaxaca has only become more dangerous for dissidents. Everyone in the comuna fears that the paramilitaries and state agents might succeed where they have failed in the past.

Juan and Eric joked that Raúl should get a Robocop suit, so that he would be bullet proof. But the comic relief only worked for a moment. The burden was too real.

None of us quite knew how to approach an issue of such weight – such personal meaning. My stomach turned over as I looked across the room at the man who had become my friend and who could very likely be murdered in the next few months. I got mad when Raúl suggested that we put our energy into making a plan for what we would do after he was killed: how his death might at least put the plight of his communities into the international spotlight. I cursed him, and said I would rather put my energy into organizing ways to keep him alive.

The conversation marked a shift in the activities of the comuna: The summer would consist less of educational or community building events and focus more on a media campaign. The comuna would attempt to make Raúl’s return a point of international attention, focusing the North American public eye on the breakdown of human rights in Mexico and thereby pressuring the Oaxacan government to comply with international law. CIPO-VAN would have to learn how to mobilize media discourse, and to find a way to do so that is consistent with the comuna’s larger goal of community building. Like the rest of CIPO-VAN’s project, how that will transpire remains an open question. It will emerge from the constant process of exploration that constitutes the comuna’s struggle.
My research ended shortly after that meeting, and at the time of writing, I do not know if the group will be able to attract the media’s attention. Even if they are able, I know not if it will help keep Raúl safe. That remains to be seen. What is clear, however, is that CIPO-VAN’s process has in some way transformed everyone involved. The group, in the time that I observed it, has become a community, and the individuals that make it up have tasted communal life. They have at least partly redefined themselves as members of a community.

FINDINGS AND CONTRIBUTIONS

Like CIPO-VAN’s process, this research project was also a constant process of learning. Indeed, I have learned far more than I could include in this thesis. Such, I suppose, is the nature of ethnographic research. I have tried, however, to answer two questions – those that to me were most pressing. First, I inquired: How does ideation interact with CIPO-VAN’s organizational form? Second, asked: What is CIPO-VAN’s process, and how does it challenge systems of power?

In chapter 3, I analyzed CIPO-VAN’s exploratory process by way of the relationship between ideas, or ideation, and the group’s organizational form. I argued that the comuna engages in a cyclical learning process, in which ideas – ideologies, theories, dreams – guide the way that the group organizes, and that the experience in organizing reshapes the group’s ideas. In other words, the comuna attempts to construct its dreams within its organizing forms; within the social relations inside the comuna itself, between the comuna and other organizations and between it and CIPO-RFM.
However, as CIPO-VAN's ideas are always in process—its dreams always in a state of rebirth—the social spaces of the *comuna* and the larger movement act as learning environments in which *comuneras* and *comuneros* refine their ideas. As such, the organizational form guides the continual recreation of ideas within the group. I therefore argued that CIPO-VAN engages in a cyclical process of learning and community building; a mutually constitutive cycle of ideation and organizational form.

This research therefore suggests that—at least in contemporary radical movements that construct their struggle as a question or a searching, and particularly those informed by anarchism and *Zapataismo*—ideas play a pivotal role in social movement organizing. For movements in which means and ends become nearly indistinguishable, the acts of dreaming (ideation) and dream constructing (organizational form) are central to the transformative project. In CIPO-VAN, *comuneros* and *comuneras* attempt to build their dreams of community concretely within the social relations of their group. CIPO-VAN, then, provides one concrete example of how, in at least some contemporary movements, the imaginary takes on particular significance. These movements engage in a constant process of dreaming, attempting to build their dreams, falling short in doing so and redefining their dreams accordingly. The process, of course, is neither this neat or well defined. It does not exist in steps, but rather in a constant process in which every aspect is at once engaged. Dreaming and searching, however, are at all times central. We can no longer assume a dichotomy between ideas and organizational forms, between theories and methods and between dreams and structures. We cannot hope to understand contemporary radical movements without accounting for the constant and evolving processes of searching and dreaming.
In chapter 4, I explored in greater detail CIPO-VAN's form of struggle, using it as a critique of prevailing theories of social change emerging from theorists on the left. I began to develop a concept of resistance, based on CIPO-VAN's project, which I called community conception. This concept points to the double meaning of the term 'conception': first as a form of imagination or cognition and second as a form of creation or genesis. CIPO-VAN, I believe, offers us one starting point for reimagining resistance—particularly for seeking out forms of resistance based in the creative project of dream building. The comuneras and comuneros of CIPO-VAN attempt to construct alternative social relationships that stand in opposition and as alternatives to the dominant social relations of capitalism and the state. They attempt to create the beginnings of another reality, based on principles of mutual aid and community, informed by tequio, guetza and guelaguetza.

I argued that CIPO-VAN challenges systems of power in at least four ways: First, comuneros and comuneras attempt to stop reproducing the state and capitalism within their daily actions. Second, the comuna disrupts the symbolic legitimacy of dominant social relations by presenting alternatives to them. Third, in exploring ways to construct autonomous communities, CIPO-VAN undermines the power of the dominant systems by making them unnecessary and making alternatives to them possible. And last, by exploring and contracting alternative social relations within their own lives and their group, the comuna embarks on a deeply personal and collective process of transformation.

CIPO-VAN, however, does not provide a model—it has no interest in doing so. It is only one attempt within a global field of struggles. Yet it is a very insightful attempt,
and one from which we can learn a great deal. It offers one starting point for building forms of resistance and creation that are radical but non-violent, that challenge power but do not seek it, and that take on the humble project of exploration rather than the universalizing and anti-democratic projects of vanguardism and leadership. The *comuna* is one small node within a broad field of struggle. Yet within today’s decentralized network-based social movements, the small node has become the primary site of resistance and creation, and therefore a particularly potent site for analysis. In resistance, and in academia, we need to look to the example of small communities in struggle, and learn from them.

**FUTURE RESEARCH**

As we know woefully little about contemporary radical social movements, much more research is needed to explore them. Further research can help illuminate the broad and rich particularities of these contemporary transformative movements. Specifically, in depth participant observation can help us understand the specificities of today’s liberatory struggles; how these heterogeneous communities in resistance challenge power and attempt to construct alternatives to it. As such, this research must simultaneously be an exploration of a community’s ideas and its forms of resistance — its dreams and its methods for building them. Such research can also make clear how these communities relate to one another, and in what way those relations do or do not mimic their collective hopes for another form of social organization. Future research, then, might be most successful if it explores the interaction between the specific ideas developed in an
organization or a movement and the structures or organizing forms of groups and movements. This research project takes a first step in this direction, but it is admittedly a preliminary one. If we are to understand these struggles, much more research is needed. Only a plurality of research projects can help us understand this plural field of struggle.

Such research, I would suggest, provides an important opportunity for researcher-movement conversation and collaboration.\(^{42}\) In recognizing that social movement actors are theorizing methods of social change and alternative forms of social organization, it becomes clear that the researcher’s project and the project of communities in resistance are not terribly disparate. Indeed, they are complementary. The type of research that I am suggesting opens a space in which academics and movement participants (a dichotomy which is in practice often difficult to maintain) can together explore theories and methods of social change. Informed by these contemporary movements’ emphasis on multiplicity and cooperation – on conversation across various struggles and points of view – researchers and movement actors can engage in a mutual project of exploration. In this project, they can explore and refine theories and methods of creative resistance as equals. Respecting the various forms of knowledge that each brings to the conversation, researchers and movement actors could open a productive space in which committed and responsible theory and practice is possible.\(^{43}\)

\(^{42}\) For a discussion of political commitment and collaboration in researching social movements, see Bevington and Dixon (2005).

\(^{43}\) For a discussion of the theorist’s role in resistance, see Foucault and Deleuze (1972).
CIPO-VAN comuneros and comunerases have not built their dreams – they have not constructed a utopia. That is not the point. Rather, the comuna of CIPO-VAN is engaged in a process in which its members are exploring their dreams and trying to act them out. They have no illusions of grandeur, for they know very well how far they are from creating the type of community they dream of. Indeed many comunerases and comuneros are sharply critical of their process and its shortcomings. But recognizing their failures enables a productive self-critique that allows to group to move forward.

In their concrete, everyday lives – in their relationships with each other and with others in struggle – CIPO-VAN comuneros and comunerases are making an attempt. They are struggling to live up to their ideals, and in so doing, to build the communality that they desire. They are trying, with only the reference of their dreams and the examples of their friends, to build a community that stands in opposition to power, and that provides an alternative to it. This is the heart of the contemporary radical project: the attempt to create based on dreams, and to resist based on creation.

Today's radicals develop processes of resistance that, even in their many shortcomings and failures, constitute a field in which dreams can germinate. The small spheres of their organizations and communities act as sites for exploring and constructing their dreams of another kind of world. The social spaces they create within their movements are intended to be the beginnings of another social reality that stands in opposition to dominant social relations within capitalism and the state. They are planting the seeds of another social order within their microscopic social environment.
Dreams are in fact seeds, if you plant them right.

That is the trick. No one quite knows how to plant dreams – or what seeds to use. But perhaps it is best that way; because when you do not know what to plant, or how to plant it, you, and the communities around you, plant many seeds, and nurture them in as many ways. These multiple communities, which plant many seeds, reap multiplicity – that is, if they reap anything. Most dreams fail to germinate. They die in the field. Yet even in their death, seeds teach those who sow them. In all of their many failures to live their dreams, CIPO-VAN comuneras and comuneros learn; they revise their process and tweak their dreams. Thus is the constant process of community conception: perpetually (re)imagining and (re)engendering community. Concretely, in their every day lives, comuneros and comuneras are challenging power by slowly – without skill or certainty – giving life to an alternative.
REFERENCES


Interview Questions

NOTE: These questions provided only a guide to interviews. Interviews were open ended. None of the interviews followed these questions closely. For Spanish language interviews, interviewees were provided a document with these questions translated into Spanish.

Breaking the Ice

- Before I ask you any questions, is there anything that you would like to ask me?
- Tell me a little bit about what CIPO is to you?

CIPO’s Politics

- If you can, try to summarize what you see as CIPO’s political stance.

Autonomy and Solidarity

- What does autonomy mean to you?
  - How does CIPO see autonomy?
- Does CIPO-Van practice autonomy? How so?
- CIPO-Van is a *comuna*. Why has CIPO-Van chosen to organize itself into a *comuna*? Is this a purely organization decision or is it also part of CIPO’s politics? How so?
- Describe the ways in which CIPO builds relationships with other organizations or communities in struggle?
- Do you think that the types of relationships that are built have anything to do CIPO’s ideas of autonomy?
- Would you call these relationships “solidarity”, or would you call them something else?
- How does CIPO see solidarity?
- What role does solidarity play in CIPO’s struggle, and in struggle in general?

What CIPO struggles for

- When *you* think of the world you would like to create, if your entire political struggle was successful, what would that world look like?
- How does *CIPO* envision a better world?
Do you think it is more ideal to all people in the world to build a single unified movement, or a group of individual movements that work together, or some thing else?

How does CIPO fit into the type of movement you just described?

Is there a relationship between the way that CIPO struggles, including the way that it organizes itself, and the type of world it envisions?

A lot of people on the left argue that means have to be kept separate from ends, or that the way that you struggle shouldn’t be defined by the better world that you hope for, while others say that means and ends have to be consistent, that the form of your struggle will predetermine the society you hope to create. How do you see means and ends?

Do you see CIPO’s ideas of autonomy as connected to the type of world it is trying to create, or is it more a tactic?

In a similar question, do you see the relationships that CIPO builds with other organizations as mostly tactical or as part of the world that CIPO envisions? Or are they both, or neither?

Do you think that CIPO makes decisions about organization and actions while considering the type of society it would like to create, or are these decisions mostly about achieving immediate goals?

Closing

Is there anything that you’d like to add to our conversation?

Do you have any questions for me?

What do you think is the most important thing that can come out of this research?

Thanks!