Renewing the Idea of Living Locally:
Two Case Studies from Latin America

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The current transformations produced by globalization processes highlight the need to redefine the concept of local and the way to live in it (our living locally). Interesting alternatives to the mainstream settlement patterns based on dominant paradigms of growth and development emerge from various recent Latin American phenomena of social struggle deeply rooted in local issues. In this paper are briefly described two of these cases (Mexico and Bolivia) in the attempt to show chances and challenges emerging from them to renew and rethink the ways of living locally even in our social contexts.

Local contexts in the globalization era

Within the complex and heterogeneous set of phenomena called "globalization" individual and collective life practices are subject to the action of several processes of weakening of space-time links. Indeed globalization refers to a "stretching process" in which there is an "intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa" (Giddens, 1991; 63-64). Phenomena related to this stretching process are several and have various effects both *vertically* -since relations of exchange and authority in national contexts are less strong- and *horizontally* -since they generalize the interdependencies between multiple systems and spheres of activity- (Ceri, 2002).

Global processes, especially those related with the current neoliberal version of capitalism, tend to ignore the specificity of every particular place and territory, since they consider world citizens and people as a mass of standardized consumers. In this perspective the "local" seems therefore to be the physical context where various types of global flows (people, information, energy, capitals etc) substantiate their positive and above all negative effects. Local context thus becomes affected by dynamics that are determined in global non-material places that are largely outside any form of democratic control, and this often makes local communities passive actors facing global processes. This exclusion particularly affects the poorest and marginalized parts of population, those who have less access to global flows of mobility, resources and information. For these subjects, globalization seems to be a one-way process, in which they are affected in their life context without being able to influence the transnational dynamics that determine them. This is all the more evident in those local contexts in which neoliberal process of social, economic and environmental exploitation are particularly intense. Actually in these local contexts practices of resistance to the large number of negative local effects produced by globalization are more frequent (Martinez Alier, 2005).

In this global scenario the idea of "local" itself is elusive, since it becomes plural and itinerant as the social practices of those who "using the territory" (Crosta, 2010) in various form build it socially. The local roots seem to be still a strong symbolic bond, but it becomes increasingly weak in physical terms to the extent that the growing weakening of social and geographical boundaries modifies the traditional concept of "*living locally*" that requires a renewed definition. It is evident that "local" contexts are subject to one of the strongest "pressure" produced by globalization processes. Even without support a deterministic approach to the theme of global-local interactions, it may however be argued that globalization causes in local contexts several processes of social and spatial break-up (that in turn cause conflicts and controversies) especially in context in which the link community-territory is particularly strong.

This is the case of several Latin American countries, where in recent years there have been various cases of social struggle in which an important role was played by issues related to local contexts, especially to traditional ways of living compromised or endangered by social, economic and environmental exploitation processes of neoliberal globalization. From these conflicting socio-political processes emerge many useful ideas to redefine the idea of *living locally* during current transformations in the relationship between spatial contexts and lifestyles. In particular within the cases of Mexico and Bolivia that will be briefly exposed in this paper the local and territorial dimension is both the physical context in which the conflicting phenomena take place, but also an object of contention. Starting from social conflicts on issues of social and environmental justice, in which the claims of local issues are central, these processes reframe and call into question various aspects of living locally as conceived from the mainstream.

Furthermore the resonance that these two cases have been in large parts of Western public opinion (in addition to practices of solidarity and international support) has engaged processes of adaptation to "northern" context of the ideas arising from these phenomena in terms of local community-territory relation, settlement patterns and land management. These two cases therefore provide us a number of facts that propose innovative ideas to develop new definitions and possibly to experiment new ways of living locally.

Mexico: the emerging of the indigenous issue

The struggle of the Zapatista movement in Chiapas is a phenomenon widely studied and analyzed (among others by Harvey, 1998 and Holloway & Pelaez, 1998). Since the uprising of 1994, and for the next 20 years of conflict's evolution, this struggle became a symbol of many other struggles in Mexico and in the rest of the world. In fact, the Zapatista struggle has aggregated multiple instances, united by sharing, in various ways, anti-liberalistic and anti-capitalist ideas. Claims for independence, justice, education (etc) of indigenous peoples go far beyond the armed conflict between the *Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional*[1] (EZLN) and the Mexican Army, inasmuch it mobilizes a broad national and international network of solidarity in which are part human rights organizations, NGOs, grassroots movements, environmentalist groups, farmers' organizations and indigenous movements from other parts of the world.

One of the elements of the Zapatista case that is particularly interesting here are the ways in which indigenous communities claim and practise alternative patterns of relationship to the local environment. Actually in 1994 Zapatistas had already claimed their own form of territory government, creating the Autonomous Rebel Municipality(ARM). These structures have a civil and public role that is separated from the military EZLN structure; ARM administer economy, justice, education, health, and the first self-defense, and are grouped into five ethnic areas, initially defined Aguascalientes, and in 2003 replaced by *caracoles*[2] micro-regional and territorial units administered by a *Junta de Buen Gobierno* (Council of good governance). These forms of self-government are based on a participatory power management model, that proposes a reworking of the direct democracy of the pre-Columbian Indio village, characterized by a communal and cooperative model of life, never completely disappeared in most of the Central and South American native cultures and communities. The Zapatista system of settlement and land management offers a model of living locally that could be summarized as follows:

- autonomy of the community and recognition of its right to govern the environment in which it resides;
- recognition of traditional lifestyles based on a eco-centric cosmology (Mires, 1992);
- rejection of capitalistic settlement model based on the principles of economic growth and urban sprawl (as proposed in various local and rural development projects of the Mexican government, under the guidance of the World Bank and WTO) and proposal for alternative settlement pattern that enhances indigenous communal ways of life in contrast with the individualistic and capitalistic ones;
- recognition and strengthening of local spatial characteristics such as traditional settlement pattern, sustainable methods of agricultural production based on local environmental knowledge, administrative division of the territory based on its ethnic and cultural characteristics.

Another particularly interesting aspect of this case has been the capability of the model proposed by the Zapatista communities to provide a symbolic and political code to involve many non-indigenous sectors of Mexican society like farmers, workers, urban poor, students, academics, human rights activists, NGOs (etc). For example the land management proposed by the *Caracoles* system has revived the public debate in Mexico about the *ejidos*, communal lands under the collective control of families that work them and that can't be sold or bought to any single individual. This kind of collective ownership of land dating from the Aztecs is one of the most important achievements of the Mexican Revolution and has been deleted in 1992 by President Salinas de Gortari to fulfill the commitments under the North American Free Trade Agreement. Protest against this reform is one of the main reasons for the EZLN uprising in 1994, during which over 500 *ejidos* are occupied by indigenous people. Furthermore similar claims to the direct control of territory have also been raised by several local conflicts against mega-projects such as dams, mines and landfills in other parts of the country such as the struggle against La Parrota dam in Guerrero or the struggle in San Salvador-Atenco against the construction of Mexico City new airport (Dominguez, 2008). Then this con-

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1 The "military wing" of the Zapatista movement.
2 Caracol means snail and within Maya iconography represents the community, indicates the region, but also the physical location where there is the administration structures.

flict has forced the indigenous issue as a national problem, but also linked the claims of the Indigenous people to other poor, discriminated, not represented sectors of the Mexican society.

The conflict in Chiapas has therefore implications that go beyond the specific local and national context; this is confirmed by the great interest that Zapatista experience has aroused in the public opinion of various "Northern" countries. In fact this struggle has become a symbol of resistance to local negative consequences of globalization and neoliberal policies, especially among the alter-globalization movements and organizations. Besides, the various networks that have been created in support of the Zapatista movement[3], are protagonists of various initiatives that claim and propose alternative ideas of living locally conceptually similar to the Zapatista ones such as local autonomy, communal models for decision-making and management of local resources, traditional farming and environmental knowledge.

Bolivian peasant-indigenous movements: from the *ayllu* to the multinational state

If in Mexico the indigenous issue has lived an illegal and insurrectionary phase to establish itself as a national political issue, in Bolivia this process has been largely public, from the bottom and peaceful (although not without moments of hard struggle and violence which have however never led to an armed generalized conflict). The process that led the Bolivian native movements to express in 2005 the first indigenous president in the history of the country, begins with the protest marches of the early '90s, such as the march "for the dignity and the territory" in 1990, the march against celebrations for the "discovery of America"in 1992 and the coca growers' march in 1994; these campaigns mark the emergence of an indigenous movement, that arises as a political national subject

As in Mexico this movement has gained support and participation of other indigenous peoples (like the Amazonian ones) and several sectors of the population (especially the poorest), aggregating around himself a wide social movement. The fact that the Bolivian population is mostly indigenous and rural has facilitated the establishment of a national peasant and indigenous movement. In the period of 2000-2004 occur many social struggles in Bolivia: the water war in Cochabamba in 2000, the Aymara uprisings in 2000 and 2001, the coca growers' struggle and the "gas war" in 2003. These conflicts reveal various claims of justice, dignity and empowerment, in which local issues is strongly present, and where it's evident the link between these local problems and the global dynamics. Many of the grassroots movements protagonists of these struggles form part of the campaign for the candidacy of Evo Morales in the presidential elections of 2005, whose victory marks the beginning of a process of deep transformation of Bolivian society and institutions. Emblem of this transformation process is the calling of the Constituent Assembly in 2006 (one of the first acts of the new government) that leads in 2007 to the new Bolivian Constitution in which are recognized the multiethnic and multinational character of the country (Chavez Leon, 2008). In this process the local instances on territory (common goods/environmental commons, local autonomy) and better living conditions (health, education, housing) have been critical, producing an explicitly territorialized identity (Andolina 2001) that makes claim on local issues with a new awareness of their connection to the global processes .

A symbol of indigenous different way of understanding living locally practices is the *ayllu*, the traditional form of Andean communities and the basic political and social units of Inca empire. An ayllu is essentially an extended groups of families that collectively farm a communal land; the particularity of this model lies in the ability of each ayllu to adapt its life practices to the environmental conditions of the ecosystem in which it is included, depending on the knowledge gained by the community in its relationship with local context in the course of time. In it we find the values of sustainability, mutuality and solidarity of the eco-centric indigenous cosmologies; the territory is not simply a physical and material context, rather it's a living element, an indispensable part of the community, primarily because it is their main source of livelihood. In this context "the local" is not only the material environment of life, but a social and cultural element

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3 For example in Italy the distribution chain of coffee produced by the Zapatista indigenous communities.

of collective identity. This conception of the socio-spatial relationship of the community with its local context, is incompatible with the instrumental and individualistic neo-liberal model; then, the *ayllu* is not only incompatible with the capitalist economic growth-based model, but it's against it (Mires, 1992). This communal and cooperative vision of living locally practices not only survived in the rural and Andean areas. In fact in several Bolivian cities many forms of mutual support and collective dwelling models such as the the neighborhood councils (Arbona, 2011) reproduce the ayllu model in the urban context. These forms of "micro-governance" (Mamani Ramirez, 2005) have played a central role in the social conflicts of recent years, in opposition to privatization of public goods like gas or water. These conflicts is furthermore the resistance of local communities to the imposition of lifestyles incompatible with their worldview, especially as regards his forms of living locally deeply rooted in non-liberal forms of collective organization and relationship with living space.

The incompatibility of the spatial relationship of the indigenous community, with the instrumental and individualistic neo-liberal model has also been endorsed in the process of constitutional reform. The new constitution proclaims that its primary aim is to achieve the *Vivir Bien* (good life) rather than *Vivir Mejor* (live better), which implies the idea of growth. *Vivir bien* is a counter-hegemonic concept that incorporates elements of indigenous philosophies, such as "equality in diversity", reciprocity and sustainability (Roncal Revollo, 2009). This concept has profound implications for models of living locally, since it's based on communal and cooperative life practices that can't conceive a settlement pattern based on urban sprawl, economic growth and individualized and utilitarian market driven social relations. Therefore also in this case processes of bottom-up social transformation and conflict relate various local themes with a new awareness of their link with global processes that produces alternative ways to conceive models of "living locally", and gives a renewed social and political challenges on settlement patterns.

The "indigenous teaching": chances to rethink our patterns of living locally
In conclusion, we can therefore summarize the indigenous proposal of "living locally" as follows:

- a model of local development not based on entrepreneurial and market dynamics;
- direct control on the development of community life space;
- collective and not individualistic settlement pattern;
- territory conceived as part of the community rather than being its geographical space;
- collective ownership and management of common goods and natural resources ;
- rejection of models of development based on the urbanization of rural communities and urban sprawl, that in large part increases the slums and the mass of the urban poor.

One a hand globalization is one of the causes of the problems against which social movements here described struggle, and on the other hand processes of globalization (especially those concerning communication media) contribute to the spread of the instances of these movements at an international level. In this perspective, global flows are not a one-way process since they also diffuse alternative practices, imaginary and lexicons that emerge from the experiences of resistance to ways of living locally imposed by dominant, outdated settlement patterns. These alternative models, beyond the specific local contexts in which they have developed, pose critical questions to the dominant settlement pattern even in our life contexts: how our research for "*vivir mejor*" has damaged our ability to "*vivir bien*"? How the settlement model based on growth, urban sprawl and soil consumption, has disrupted community relations and the capacity of local communities to decide their own living environment, so deeply rooted in Latin America indigenous peoples? And how can we recover and reinterpret the wealth of knowledge and representations of community-territory relationship of our settlement "native" patterns that in Italy corresponds for example to traditional practices of land management or specific regional settlement models (Vasapollo, 2011)?

The main contribution of these indigenous struggles to reframe our living locally models is the value attributed in them to the relationship between local community and territory in an eco-centric, rather than antropocentric, perspective. The experiences of Bolivia and Mexico offer practical demonstrations of the feasibility of alternative ways to live the relationship between local community and territory, unlike as proposed by the dominant settlement patterns, nowadays in a growing social and environmental crisis. Maybe for this reason these indigenous struggles collect the sympathy and the support of various movements and networks even in the "North" of the world. They show us how forms of local resistance to unintended consequences of globalization can be converted in opportunities to redefine the ways to live in the local context, and to try building our own way to *vivir bien*. Certainly, our country is not "indigenous" or rural as Mexico and Bolivia, but the challenges posed by the cases described here is precisely to rediscover and renew our living locally models starting from resistances and alternatives that emerge in our living contexts, more and more urban, standardized, anomic and unsustainable.

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