(Re)Thinking the “New” North America through Women Citizenships in Mexico

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The editors of this book inviting this contribution ask a provocative question: does North America exist at all as a meaningful political entity, economic region, cultural idea or community? This chapter deals with this question by looking into the experiences of those women that have contested the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA thereafter) as a violent and far from sustainable project for regional integration, in particular, working class and Zapatista women in Mexico.

My central argument is that despite the constraints that NAFTA, as particular mode of political economic governance has posed to Mexican women’s exercise of their citizenship rights, their strategies and activities of localized¹ resistance have unveiled the violent and unsustainable nature of regional enterprises such as NAFTA extension in the form of the Security and Prosperity Partnership (SPP thereafter) for North America. Furthermore, these strategies and activities might contribute to an open ended questioning on regions and regionalism as cultural and imperial constructs which produce and reproduce particular ways of understanding the world in which certain knowledges are actively produced as inexistent and/or irrelevant by/for International Political Economy/International Relations academic communities.

In other to develop these ideas, this paper looks into the constraints that NAFTA and its ‘failed’ extension in the form of SPP have posed to working class and indigenous women rights-claiming activities and strategies. However, the paper also looks to these activities and strategies with the purpose of identifying how these might contribute to challenge ‘common

¹ The term localized is understood as placed based and it is used in contrast to placeless views of resistance (Escobar 2001).
sense’ assumptions on North American regionalism and given notions such as that of region. Following Catherine Walsh, the paper highlights the view of these resistances as both disruptions to and (re)constructions of dominant concepts and views of the political economy (Walsh 2007).

In so doing, the paper is divided in 3 sections. The first section places our discussion within current literature on citizenship and governance to identify both, material conditions and institutional shifts and continuities that Mexican women are facing in a NAFTA era. In order to make sense of these changes and continuities, the second section briefly presents the contributions and limitations of IPE/IR literature on resistance to regionalism to highlight that the cultural and imperial nature of “region” and “regionalism” notions have remained unexplored by this literature with the implication of actively producing questionings to this notions as inexistent (Santos 2007). Meanwhile, the third section focuses on women experiences of resistance to NAFTA in Mexico to identify some ways in which these are inviting us to critically (re)think “North American regionalism”.

As such, this contribution is a preliminary outcome of an ongoing research on social resistance to regionalism in the Americas. Interviews, participant observation and dialogues with women activists from Mexico City and San Cristobal de las Casas and with indigenous women of Maya tzetzal and tzotzil decent at Oventik (Zapatista territory) were relevant to explore these issues. I am approaching to these voices from the position of a mestiza feminist with a Southern background and working as academic in a European research centre on international development.2 Inevitably, these interconnected identities, mark and limit the interpretations that are presented in this analysis, which nonetheless seek to contribute to current debates on a critical inter-

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2 My analysis is inspired by the work of Mexican feminists Rosalva Aida Hernandez Castillo and Sylvia Marcos and US feminist anthropologist Dona Haraway.
cultural exchange on IPE/IR themes, including that of resistance to North American regionalism.\(^3\)

1. **Landscapes of Change and Continuity**

In North America, economic liberalization has been a dominant discourse and policy option for steering official region building processes. Nonetheless, in a post-9/11 world a securitization emphasis gained relevance too. Accordingly, the SPP together with the Smart Border Agreements signed between the U.S. and Canada and the U.S. and Mexico, aimed to be one step for the creation of the so-called North American Securing Perimeter announced by President George W. Bush after September 11, 2001 (Sandoval Palacios 2005).

The SPP, like NAFTA ten years before, faced the opposition of Mexican, Canadian and the US civil society networks and organizations critical to trade liberalisation effects on development and citizens’ rights. However, this time national legislatures as one key point for citizens’ engagement in regional governance offered restricted possibilities to citizens’ inputs as SPP decisions were formulated on the basis of an Executive partnership, which did not need the ratification of the legislatures in any of the three countries involved, like NAFTA as a treaty did. In addition to this, civil society groups and networks were confronted by the huge challenge of finding ways to bring security strategists’ contributions to SPP into wider public scrutiny.

For feminist and women organizations in Mexico opposing the SPP, there were important challenges to voice their concerns in both, official circles and within civil society, about this partnership’s gendered nature and possible implications for women’s security (Interview A).

\(^3\) There are some examples of an ongoing critical dialogue that include the Canadian-based project on Globalization and Autonomy, the UK-based project on Building Global Democracy, the US-Latin America research project on Modernity/Coloniality/De-Coloniality, the network Other Knowledges and the Programa de Democracia y Transformacion Global (PDTG).
Among these challenges, women and feminist organizations were confronted by a shifting context in which multisided and networked forms of regulation and steering increasingly emanate “from multiple locales at the same time” (Scholte 2004, Interview A and B; Workshop A, B and C). In the case of NAFTA/SPP, these forms of regulation included the three countries’ state apparatus (federal, provincial and local governments, judicial and legislative system and the military and national security forces), private corporations and firms with regional and local outlets, inter-governmental organizations and regional bodies (WTO, ILO, NAFTA Secretariat) and so on. Furthermore, this trend in governance seems to be reinforced by the fact that states and government apparatus didn’t lose their relevance, but that only certain aspects of how state power is exercised or claimed, such as that of full territorial sovereignty, have been reshaped by diverse globalising processes, such as migration, criminal networks, remittances flows, terrorist threats, etc.

This sort of “de-centralization” of previously sacrosanct state power and authority has unfolded through an uneven dispersion of public sector governance among different authorities and the involvement of non-traditional policy arenas and actors, including civil society actors. In the case of the SPP, tri-lateral working groups were projected as the real-decision makers (like NAFTA’s ad hoc working groups), which were supposed to involve public officials, private corporation’s representatives and security specialists, with the technical capacity and “knowledge” to be included in regional decision-making (Interview C).

Likewise, trends of governance privatization in North America have entailed that private corporate actors are increasingly involved in the formulation, implementation, monitoring and enforcement of control, consent and decision-making regarding public and general concerns such as trade, development, macroeconomic policies, and lately, the securitization of borders. This has been the case of the North American Business Committee (NABC) and North American Competitive Council (NACC), which since their inception have
promoted linkages between policy issues and business priorities (Carlsen 2007, Lendman 2007).

Moreover, as control and steering unfold through regional, sub-regional and extra-regional means of governance (institutions, regulatory bodies) different sets of formal and informal practices mechanisms and arrangements that regulate and co-ordinate social life in North America have been increasingly connected to various processes of regional integration, cooperation and complementarity. NAFTA and SPP are two examples of initiatives supported by states, which are pushing forward and/or resulting from increasing regionalization of governance. Meanwhile, civil society mobilizations and regional forums have been pointed out as examples of ‘informal’ trends of regional solidarity building on the basis of a share identity stemming from common identified grievances (e.g. NAFTA/SPP democratic deficits).

Continuities and Resistance

In the case of Mexico, turns in the governance of global relations have followed paradoxical directions of change and continuity. In particular, governance’s decentralization, privatization and regionalization have both, reinforced and challenged some of the traditional corporatist and authoritarian practices of the Mexican state. For example, some spaces have emerged for citizen participation and the public scrutiny of governing authorities in relation to foreign policy, but the role of the Executive that was central for the consolidation of neoliberal reforms through NAFTA continues to be key in avoiding (or promoting) this agreement’s renegotiation (Icaza 2008).

Furthermore, citizenship rights and entitlements have remained poorly enforced, and are even violated by formal authorities in Mexico. Therefore, the view of this paper as regards to women citizenships in Mexico is as ‘actually existent’ not to suggest that these are the only forms of citizenship possible
but to critically highlight which are the implications for women’s every day life when citizens rights are simply not enforced.

These trends of change and continuity constrain women rights-claiming efforts in different ways and degrees of intensity. A conjuncture of dominant material, institutional and discursive neoliberal frameworks and its accompanying structural reforms according to global markets’ requirements has had important implications on the capacities that certain groups and sectors of Mexican society have or not for protecting, claiming, enforcing and expanding citizenship rights as regards to trade policies and the militarization of borders (security) in local, national and regional arenas. This is especially true for women and among them, working class and indigenous women in Mexico.

Nonetheless, and despite the above mentioned constraints, a set of entailments in women right-claiming discourses and practices, in particular the right to participate in trade negotiations and the right to autonomous governance of the political and the personal, display that neoliberal regionalism in North America is far from a *fait accompli* (Icaza 2010). To be sure, this is not to say that NAFTA/SPP style of regional governance as enacted through diverse mechanisms of control, consent and regulation is not powerful or exploitative, gendered and racialized, but certainly is not a unique existing view on how social life should and is actually being organized in North America.

As women rights-claiming efforts are increasingly directed to multisided and networked duty and power bearers besides national states, some scholars have seen this as a golden opportunity for cross border activisms with positive prospects to hold accountable local and national authorities, the so-called *boomerang effect* (Keck and Sikkink 1998). Indeed, the intensification of women cross-border interventions seem to suggest that citizens around the world, and particularly in North America, are developing a post-national or least a regional sense of rights and claim making in relation to supra-state
(regional) concerns. Precisely, this has been argued in the case of feminist and women campaigning across borders in relation to structural adjustment programs, neo-liberalism, and NAFTA (Desai 2002). Expectedly, scholars dealing with citizenship questions are calling for the integration of ‘a transnational dimension’, ‘new spaces in which struggles for equal citizenship occur’ and ‘bottom-up’ perspectives (Hobson et. al. 2007, Kabeer 2005, Mukhopadhyay 1994, Siim and Squires 2007:404, Yuval Davis 2007).

However, some feminists have also reminded us about that understanding people’s diverse locations within relations and practises of citizenship are essential: “to better understand why it is, for example, that being a woman of color or with an impaired body or mind often means being much less able to exercise legal rights than women who are privileged by ableness and whiteness” (Chounard 2004: 237). In a nutshell, social location and difference becomes central to understand limitations of universalizing formal liberal approaches to citizenship in local, national, and post-national contexts. In what follows, this perspective becomes useful to understand Mexican urban based working class women networks and Zapatista women resistance to NAFTA experiences as these unfold inter-related to complex identification processes, and in some cases involvement, of different holders of power and duties in addition to state authorities.

*Multiple duty and rights holders, mixed strategies, unexpected outcomes?*

The Red de Genero y Economia (REDGE thereafter) is described in their official documents and statements as open to women groups and mixed organizations and states as its main objective that of transforming women life conditions of poverty and violence while generating alternatives to neo-liberalism and free trade agreements through participative methodologies, popular education and solidarity. Since the early 1990s, REDGE has coordinated joint actions of working class urban and rural based women and feminist organizations to opposed NAFTA. In 1999, REDGE became the
national counterpart for the Women World March (WWM) and for three years (2000-2003) held the coordination of the International Network of Women Transforming the Economy (RMETE). In 2005, REDGE joined the Mexican Action Network on Free Trade (RMALC) and the Women Committee of the Hemispheric Social Alliance (HSA), two of the networks that have been actively involved in hemispheric campaigning against free trade and neoliberalism in the Americas.

According to REDGEs coordinator, NAFTA has been an instrument of neoliberal governments in Mexico to consolidated structural reforms, and hence the downsizing of social provisions for working class women: ‘free trade agreements, such as NAFTA, have meant the prosperity of the few and the poverty of the major” (Interview A).

Since their public appearance on January 1st 1994, Zapatista women resistance to NAFTA has often been identified as part of the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) overall rejection to neoliberalism and in particular, land tenure reforms in Mexico (Harvey 1998). Nowadays, Zapatista women resistance to NAFTA should also be grasped as part of a larger project of political autonomy launched in 2005 in the so called ‘Sixth Declaration of the Lacandona Jungle” or “La Sexta” which delineates Zapatistas communities anti-capitalist, anti-neo-liberal and bottom-left agenda for the process of building-up autonomous systems of local governance. A Zapatista women explain some reasons of this strategy as follows: “we

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4 www.movimientos.org/remte
5 EZLN defined itself as the army body of the Zapatistas formed by indigenous communities of tzotzil, tzetzal, chol, tojolabal and mame descent.
6 Zapatista women include girls, young and senior indigenous women that support the Zapatistas demands, or/and live in Zapatistas autonomous territories, and/or are part of the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN).
7 One of the first strategies of this agenda was the organization of a parallel campaign to those run by major political parties in Mexico’s 2006 Presidential Election (PRI-PAN-PRD). The name of the parallel campaign was “The Other Campaign, the Other Politics” and promoted a radical break with the institutional systems of representative democracy, including a rejection to exercise the right to vote in the Presidential Elections of 2006. For more information visit: http://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/especiales/2?lp_lang_view=es
8 This and other statements by Zaptista women are part of a conversation that I hold with them and their male partners as members of the Oventik Junta of Good Government. They received me one day in the Summer of 2008 as part of a group of academics placed in an European research center based in the Hague (the Netherlands) and Central American activists engaged in the women, indigenous and anti-free trade agreements movements. All the comments are my own translation from Spanish.
decided that if the Mexican government would not do what they had promised to do [grant them political and territorial autonomy] and what their representatives previously signed [the San Andres Agreements of 1996] then, we would have to realize what the paper says by ourselves”.  

*La Sexta* as the framework that called for the strengthening of the Zapatistas political and economic autonomy through the creation of parallel governments in rebellion has created new territorial jurisdictions which received the name of Caracoles (snails) and run parallel and often semi-autonomously to the federal and local governments apparatuses (Workshop C). The Caracoles are administered by de facto Juntas of Good Government that are elected by majority vote every three years and ruled by the principle of ‘governing by obeying’ (Burguete Cal y Mayor 1995 and 2003). La Juntas are the bodies responsible of health, education, productive programs and the enforcement of Zapatista Women Revolutionary Law of 1992.

In this way, *La Sexta* contributes to re-emphasize the Zapatistas struggle for “real democracy, freedom, justice and political autonomy” and more recently, their rejection to the militarization of Southern Mexico. In relation to this last point, the Center of Political Analysis and Social and Economic Research (CAPISE) reported in 2007 the presence of 79 military compounds in Chiapas and 56 of them within indigenous territories. CAPISE also reported that elite military groups have also been deployed to areas that surround Zapatista autonomous territories (CAPISE 2007). Three years later, Zapatista struggle for autonomy is taking place in a context of increased militarization since SPP plans were announced, the *Merida Initiative* was implemented and Military forces become involved on President Calderon’s war against drugs.

It is within this context, that Zapatista women resistance resonates with REDGE women struggle over lives and bodies free of violence. In both cases,

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9 Despite that the 2001 Law on Indigenous Rights and Cultures was approved by all political parties in the National Congress, the view of Zapatistas is that this law did not include the agreements on autonomy and self-determination previously reached between them and President Zedillo in 1996.
women struggle is for the implementation of those rights formally granted by
the Mexican state but that nonetheless have remained without substantial
enforcement or heavily affected by NAFTA-related reforms (e.g. access to
land, right to work). Indeed, REDGE campaigns in Mexico City on the SPP
focused on the role that the Mexican state should play to protect women
rights. In particular, the security component resonated directly with REDGE’s
work on gender violence and their campaigning on the General Law Against
Violence to Women.

Furthermore, REDGE and Zapatista women resistance experiences to
violence have unfolded related to complex identification processes, and in
some cases involvement, of different holders of power and duties in addition
to state authorities. This identification has meant, for example, that women
define mixed strategies and programs. From the perspective of REDGE
experience, the increasing influence of inter-governmental organizations such
as the WTO, IMF, and the World Bank and of NAFTA institutions such as its
Secretariat in the governance of national and local economies is clearly
identified in their policy briefings and statements. Nonetheless, the Mexican
state remains as the ultimate responsible of promoting equitable development
for all and the main duty holder of women rights. ‘This is a paradox, REDGE’s
coordinator indicates, because the state apparatus is also the main
perpetrator and reproducer of gender based violence by direct actions or by
omissions of their responsibilities’ (Interview A).

By acknowledging this paradox, REDGE has followed mixed strategies in
relation to NAFTA and SPP that include direct engagement with or frank
opposition to state authorities. For example, the network has organized
workshops for women leaders on gender and economics in collaboration with
local governments in Mexico City and Campeche. Access to authorities to
influence their agenda is possible thanks to the fact that former members of
the staff have joined local governments (e.g. former REDGE coordination
works at Mexico City Women Institute).
However, to acknowledge and act in relation to this paradox hasn’t come free for REDGE’s campaigning against NAFTA/SPP in Mexico: “now we need to be actively involved in cross border networking and coordination efforts, to actively seek the de-centralization of our decision-making processes as much as possible to our local counterparts, to reach as many as possible authorities keen to our demands in Mexico and abroad, to lobby every single instance that opens among private corporations and labour unions, and do all of this at the same time! This has had a huge cost for our relationship with our grassroots” (Interview B).

As for Zapatistas resistance to NAFTA within a larger project for political autonomy has meant that their resistance turned also against formal mechanisms of representative democracy, but in the case of Zapatistas women it has also meant a struggle for personal autonomy and the implementation of the 1992 Zapatista Women Revolutionary Law, which grants them the right to choose a partner, to have the children they can take care of and to occupy positions of leadership.10 (Hernandez Castillo 2007a). Zapatista Commander Hortensia once indicated that: “the work that women have been doing in the five Zapatista [autonomous] zones is to try to exercise our rights and duties as Zapatistas. It hasn’t been easy for us, but we are working and we will continue to do so in order to accomplish what the Women Revolutionary Law states”.11

According to some feminists, for Zapatista women resistance the notion of rights is of much significance and this has been frequently raised in their discourses and comunicados, and of course in their Revolutionary Law, whether or not explicitly linked to the question of citizenship (Hernandez Castillo 2002 and 2007). In particular, this Law displays that their struggle is

10 This Revolutionary Law raised both, positive approval but also scepticism by feminist and women groups worldwide and it also includes the following rights: to participate in the revolutionary struggle, to work and receive a just salary, to primary attention in their health and nutrition, to education, to be free of violence from both relatives and strangers, to hold military ranks in the revolutionary armed forces.

for the survival and recognition of their rights as both, women and indigenous while providing them with a concrete framework of rights against patriarchal power. For one Zapatista women of the Junta of Good Government at Oventik there is a before and after the Zapatista Women Revolutionary Law: “Before, we didn’t have any right, but now anybody can say that we cannot do something, because the Law says that we have rights. It clearly says that!”

For Hernandez Castillo (2007a:126) a key aspect of this law is that it challenges both official nationalism and ideas of a mestizo Mexico but also ethnic essentialism heralded by some sectors of the indigenous movement. This Law has acknowledged the unfair and discriminatory life conditions of indigenous women due to their ethnicity, gender and social class, the so-called ‘triple oppression’, which had remained frankly overlook until the Zapatista uprising. Nonetheless, its positive aspect should not be grasped in its pure existence due to the fact that often their articles are simply not enforced in the Zapatista communities, and much less in non-Zapatistas communities (Workshop C, Cacho Niño 2007). Furthermore, given the gender hierarchies that still prevail among indigenous communities in Chiapas, domestic and community violence by husbands and relatives has been indicated as the cost that women have paid for their political involvement and challenge to those hierarchies (Hernandez Castillo 2007).

Despite this limitations, feminist mestiza activists in Chiapas emphasize the subtle but important differences between Zapatista communities and those that are not, stressing that in the first ones, those women that have exercised a duty in the Juntas display a transformation that is quite important for other younger indigenous women in their communities: “These women know that their right to speak and been heard is now a possibility” (Workshop A and B). A Zapatista women at Oventik describes her involvement in the Juntas as follows: “little by little we have advanced here and there. It hasn’t been easy, we don’t have resources or experience to organize ourselves. This won’t be quickly, we can’t speak our mind and say what we think, we need to learn
that…and our girls too”.

To sum up, the Zapatista women localized construction of political and personal autonomy as a form of resistance suggest that citizenship as a given set of political rights and duties enforced by the state remains too narrow if one aims to understand ‘actually existing citizenships’ in Mexico in a NAFTA era. Furthermore, these experiences display that citizenship might be an ongoing struggle open to different re-negotiations with diverse power and duty holders. These re-negotiations are taking place at multiple arenas of governance and in diverse arenas of politics and power (state authorities, households and the communities) but also through the de facto institutions and mechanisms such as Juntas of Good Government (Mukhopadhyay 2004: 20; Meer and Sever 2004). In which ways do REDGE and Zapatista women practices of rights claiming as resistance could be seen as contributing to the ways we (re)think “North America”. This would be my guiding question in the following two sections.

2. Thinking Women Resistances to NAFTA Regionalism

In IPE/IR mainstream literature on NAFTA regionalism, expressions of resistance to the North American model of integration, including the Zapatistas, have been marginalized, labeled as ‘nationalist’ or ‘populist’ expressions or rejected them as conservative and protectionist. Meanwhile, critical IPE/IR scholars who have taken seriously the analysis of women and indigenous people resistances to NAFTA model of integration have focused on exploring dynamics of cross-border solidarity as ‘bottom-up’ and contentious forces in the making of the ideas, institutions and policies for the region. It is within this literature that it is possible to identify different emphases on the analysis of resistance to NAFTA regionalism and more particularly of women resistance to this gendered framework.
A first emphasis in the literature stems from a liberal democratic perspective. These tend to give too much attention to the ‘impacts’ of civil society actors without considering how structural conditions drive and/or constrain these interventions. Accordingly, social transformation is portrayed as a product of purposeful actors’ resistance, to the extent that the making and re-making of regions is a product of their interventions.

As resistance to free trade is taken as an individualistic oriented expression of ‘private’ interests, which implies a purposeful and rational behavior without room for unexpected, unplanned, ‘irrational’ attitudes. Furthermore, the context where networked activism and resistance are analyzed is characterized as ‘opportunity structures’ that portrays a given/fixed political market place. Therefore, groups opposing or supporting regionalism in the form of NAFTA are observed as if they were demanding responses in the form of access to/creation of regimes and/or regulations from governments and inter-state organizations. Accordingly, ‘change’ is analyzed in terms of possible steps/policies/ regimes and the agents’ “interventions” are successful if these influence the implementation or reform of particular policies. This literature is heavily focused on policy outcomes achieved by civil society groups and networks, and hence, it has oversimplified or simply ignored those structural conditions that drive or constrain these ‘impacts’.

The acknowledgement of the above limitations in the ‘liberal’ approach to resistance to NAFTA has brought structural conditions to the forefront of some analyses as deeply interrelated to networked activism on regionalism. Accordingly, these ‘structuralist’ accounts tend to be focused on a careful examination of the dominant forces that instigate social resistance. This concern gives rise to a second emphasis in the analysis of resistance to NAFTA in IPE literature, the so-called Neo-Gramscian and Neo-Marxist analyses on social movements.

For some, these approaches have been quite useful to conceptualize those structural transformations that have stimulated social forces critical to NAFTA
model of regionalism in the Americas. However, resistance tend to be conceptualized as either the product of powerful structures or as making up these structures, and hence, hardly provides an adequate perspective in understanding the complexity of localized resistance to regionalism. For example, some neo-Gramscian authors tends to address ‘agency’ from the perspective of the structures (the whole) and as a result, these approaches portray ‘agency’ as unproblematic and unified ‘actors’ —just like liberal approaches tend to do with civil society actors— rather than, for example, explain them by taking into account their diversity or social location.

Meanwhile, constructivist perspectives by focusing on the social creation of regions have contributed to display the complex and multileveled nature of regionalism. Therefore, it opens the possibility of identifying key social forces (material, institutional or discursive) and the agents that are shaping and being shaped by the interconnection, formation, expansion and transformation of regions. However, this approach takes regions as socio-political spatial and temporal realities that exist previous to the cultural and imperial discourse inscribed in the notion of ‘regions’ (Coleman and Johnson 2008). This ontological option, as it is explained later, have deep epistemological implications for a critical (re)thinking of regions and regionalism.

Finally, in IPE/IR analyses on NAFTA a Foucauldian approach to power has contributed to the understanding of the role that discourse play in depoliticising decisions and producing counter-discourses to this model of integration (Donegan 2006, Gilbert 2005). From this perspective, IPE feminist approaches on women resistances display NAFTA discourses as sites where meaning is produced, exposing it as a gendered, exploitative, disciplinary framework for women lives and bodies (Marchand 1994 and 1996)

Overall, these four emphases have paved the way to reveal: a) the complexity of regionalism, b) the limits of neo-functionalism theories to grasp it, and c) the failure of EU regionalism as yardstick from which all other regionalisms
are assessed (Marchand, Boas and Shaw 1999, Icaza 2009). As a result, in IPE/IR literature there has been recent attempts to ‘integrate’ the infra politics of subaltern groups resisting NAFTA style of regionalism (Morton 2007). Meanwhile, some others have attempted to bring ‘Southern voices’ by describing what this means from a Chinese, Latin American, Indian, and/or British perspective (Blyth 2009).

Alternatively, some others have reminded us that regions as ‘subject of study’ emerged from a post-cold war moment in which area studies proliferated in the US (Coleman and Johnson 2008, Escobar 1995, Szanton2004). Meanwhile, some others emphasize the cultural and imperial nature of regions as a concept: “the notion of "region," might be seen as a particular way of seeing and organizing the world that began with Euro-American, Japanese, and perhaps Chinese imperialism. Within the academy, it might be reinforced through government support for "area studies" that, in turn, reifies a dominant notion of "region" in the West. "Regions" in this sense are constructed as places with "natural resources," "consumer markets," and "strategic importance" and given life by powerful states acting on these constructions. So we would need to accept at the outset that the notion of "region" is a cultural construct, coming from hegemonic power centers (Coleman and Johnson 2008:9).

**Three Experiences for (Re)Thinking the “New” North America**

To accept the above mentioned cultural and imperial connotation of “region” as a term and concept with historically weighted significance would have various implications for the ways in which IPE/IR have explained ‘North America’ and regionalism. Following Santos, one of the epistemological implications would be the active production of certain experiences as inexistent, contributing in this way to their cognitive erasure (Santos 2007).
For example, it has been noted that in IPE/IR thinking non-Western/modern/imperial philosophical frameworks not centered in the individual and/or the inclusion of economies and subjectivities that were never fully capitalist is absent (Walsh 2009:20, Rojas 2007). From the perspective of Quijano, this reveals established relations of domination, superiority/inferiority divides and a western model of judgment and control of IPE/IR frameworks for thinking regions and regionalism (Quijano, 2000). Furthermore, this would explain the subordination of non-Anglo/European modes of knowing, conceptualization, and representation of regions and regionalisms (Mignolo 2000). This epistemological subordination precludes a re-thinking of certain meanings of and /or common sense assumptions. In what follows, I show three ways in which the experiences of localized women resistance to NAFTA disrupts and (re)constructs dominant concepts and views on North America regionalism.

Rethinking SPP “failure”

NAFTA’s mode of regionalism as an economic failure has been increasingly accepted in Mexico on the basis of its merger results for this country’s employment creation and per capita income growth. Nonetheless, the ‘demise’ of the SPP because it was “quietly dropped by the three North American governments, without public announcement or consultation” (see the editors’ introduction in this collection) could be contested by REDGE activists and Zapatista women daily experience of military and drug trafficking related violence in both, their communities and their bodies.

In other words, the SPP as a discourse on security as militarization of borders hasn’t failed at all. Indeed, it has been quite successful as a violent practice that is affecting the life of women in concrete forms. For REDGE activists that monitor the increasing militarization of border zones in the North and the
South of Mexico, this trend is hitting hard migrant women workers arriving to the South of Mexico or leaving Mexico to the US (Interviews A and B). 12

Meanwhile, Zapatista women resistance in Chiapas faces pressing dilemmas due to the militarization trend. Indeed, local organizing for political and personal autonomy is treating women lives and bodies as the security component of SPP meant the construction of miles of walls in the North and heavy militarization of border zones. In Mexico, since the Calderon’s government offensive against drug cartels launched in 2007, the militarization of Mexican cities and towns has been on the rising too. This militarization trend has meant that highly unaccountable bearers of power and authority, such as the military, police forces, drug cartels and their mercenaries are acting with impunity. According to a report of the International Federation for Human Rights both the US and Mexico “openly disregard their human rights obligations under national and international law, including the right to life” (IFHR 2008). In this conjuncture, gender based violence and discrimination are the elements that characterize the landscape of women as migrants and residents of border cities in the North and the South of Mexico.

In sum, the increasing militarization of cities and small towns in Mexico instigated by the SPP plans and implemented through US-Mexico bilateral coordinated efforts such as the Merida Initiative, has meant that women physical integrity is under threat in a country that ranks among the first on levels of impunity. 13 It is well known that violence against women in Mexico displays a complex intersections of class, ethnicity and gender, for example, in the unsolved 370 femicides of young working class women in Ciudad Juarez and rapes of indigenous women in the Southern states of Chiapas, Veracruz and Oaxaca (the latter committed by military forces deployed there

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12 In March 2009, the Newspaper Excelsior reported that 8,500 soldiers were deployed just to Ciudad Juarez. http://www.exonline.com.mx/diario/noticia/primera/pulsonacional/reforzaran_cinco_mil_militares_a_ciudad_juarez/538322

13 Indeed, IFHR reports that female migrants are sexually harassed or raped by local, state or federal authorities in Mexico but that there was any case of judicial sentence against the perpetrators (IFHR 2008: 27).
for President Calderon’s offensive against drugs cartels) (Staud 2008, Hernandez Castillo 2007).  

In Chiapas, one feminist activist observes: ‘violence against women happens every day, but due to recent militarization women cannot do their ‘normal’ duties and activities, like going to the river for water. Women are afraid’ (Workshop A). Furthermore, it is been reported that Zapatistas women members of the Good Government Juntas are often unable to conduct their political work due to drug-cartels and military forces presence in their territories (Olivera Bustamante 2007 and 2009). Zapatista women involvement in the Juntas hasn’t come free of costs for them and it has been reported the killing of women and children by paramilitary forces in Chiapas. For some, this actually displays ‘contra-insurgency practices’ in which women and girls were visibly attacked because of their gender (Hernandez Castillo 2007, Workshop C).

Accordingly, these experiences invite us to critically re-think the SPP as ‘failed project’ and to question the assumption behind this affirmation: a region and in this case, a regional framework for security only exists once this becomes formalized. Lack of formal implementation of the SPP security component has not necessarily meant that the emphasis on security as militarization in North America is not a reality for those women facing their direct violence. This securitization trend opened by and legitimized through the official SPP discourse is shaping and re-defining official Mexico-US bilateral relations, but most importantly, it is affecting everyday women practices of resistance and mobilization against NAFTA too.

_Rethinking Oppression_

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14 Examples of gender based violence without any prosecution of identified perpetrators are abundant in the case of Mexico. REDGE has followed up a dozen of cases that date back to 1994. REDGE staff provided me a copy of this list which includes both, girls and elderly women that in most cases of working class and indigenous origin.
It has already been argued that a set of entailments in both, women right-claiming discourses and practices display that neoliberal regionalism in North America is far from a fait accompli. The concrete experiences of indigenous women participation in the construction of parallel governments through positions of leadership in the Zapatista Good Government Juntas can help us to observe this and in so doing, to re-thinking a supposedly all encompassing domination by NAFTA model of regionalism in the organization of social life in North America.

The following observation of a Zapatista women on women leadership in the community through the fulfilment of their duties in the Junta of Good Government help us to display this sort of questioning: “In the Juntas we learn how to make decisions, how to speak. It is not to solve our problems. It is a place to play a role in the discussions, organization and administration. It is where we exercise our resistance”.

In this way, the Juntas are means to contribute to the construction of Zapatista women political and personal autonomy. This becomes a particularly relevant experience especially when overall and persisting conditions of sexual inequality and discrimination within households and in Mexican society are taken into account. Furthermore, Zapatista women participation in the Juntas defies the role that, given the pressing structural constraints previously identified as ‘a triple oppression’, they were supposed to play as poor indigenous women in the New North America, mainly as maquiladora workers or maids in the cities.

Rethinking Dialogue

Since its public appearance in 1994, Zapatistas have organized numerous public dialogues, being the first of them the Intercontinental Gathering for Humanity and against Neoliberalism in 1997. Ten years later, took place the first Gathering of Zapatistas Women with Women of the World bringing together different strands of feminisms to listen women Zapatistas
testimonies. In particular, Zapatista girls and women talked about recent changes in their communities: “as a single women my father now let my go to school and outside the town”, said a young Zapatista woman. Another young Zapatista women mentioned that “before they [male relatives] rejected us because we were born woman and said that we had no value. Now, this is starting to change”. In both cases, they also mentioned how difficult has been to promote these changes and that “there is still a lot to be done”. 15

To date, feminists are increasingly aware of the potentials that critical intercultural dialogue might bear as an indispensable way for constructing ‘affinities’ among women (Hernandez Castillo 2002 and 2007, Otzoy 2008, Marcos and Waller 2005 and Marcos 2008). Walsh describes critical interculturality as that “initiates with a profound questioning of this system and seeks its major transformation in social, political, epistemic, and existential terms" as opposed to functional interculturality as “an institutional strategy that seeks to promote dialogue, tolerance, coexistence, and inclusion without necessarily addressing the causes of inequality; it makes diversity ‘functional’ to the system” (Walsh 2009: 21). From this perspective, a critical intercultural dialogue would be attentive to relationships of inequality that have characterized the urban/rural western/ non-western divides.

These divides might be grasped in the contentious topic of sexual and reproductive rights, and particularly abortion rights, which have been rejected by many indigenous women, including Zapatista women. An attentive attitude to the previously mentioned divides could be understood through the following observation by a young Italian feminist working for the rights of undocumented women migrants in Europe: “our challenge is not how to ‘convince’ women about their right to have a safe abortion, but to let them know that our

15 http://vodpod.com/watch/514088-3-encuentro-de-mujeres-zapatistas
grandmothers and mothers fought for this right while at the same time listen and understand why they don’t want this right’ (International Seminar).

This kind of listening and sharing has characterized Zapatista gatherings and other feminist fora and as such hold a radical but fragile potential: the possibility of cutting across geographical, class and ethnicity divides. A potential that seems specially relevant when demands for the enforceability and protection of formally granted citizenships rights in national and local arenas (life and bodies free of violence) and/or the extension of these rights across borders as regards to trade policies (whose prosperity?) and the militarization of borders (whose security?) are voiced by both, Zapatista indigenous women and mestiza women from different cities across the world.

Furthermore, the sort of critical intercultural dialogue that is explained here might open a questioning to IPE/IR (re)thinking on North America and regionalism in particular to this academic community research practices that have contributed to reproduce the hegemony of knowledge, hence promoting the epistemic inequality that characterizes the North/South, Western/Non-Western, Urban/rural, Male/female divides. Opening up research to other forms of knowledge would mean to take seriously the need for an epistemic justice if we are to attain any sort of social justice (Santos 2007).

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A: Alma Padilla Garcia, Centro de Derechos Humanos de la Mujer Chiapaneca.

B: Gladys Alfaro, Coordinator, Centro de Investigacion-Accion de la Mujer Latinoamericana (CIAM)

C: Martha Figeroa, Feminist Lawyer and activists. Main prosecutor of Centro de Derechos Humanos Miguel Agustin Pro (Centro Pro) for the Acteal massacre.