

## Democratic Confederalism: an Alternative for Facing Tensions Between Global Citizenship and Localist Citizenship

*Confederalismo democrático: una alternativa para afrontar  
las tensiones entre las ciudadanías global y local*

Luis Xavier López-Farjeat

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1140-2913>

Universidad Panamericana. México  
Correo electrónico: llopez@up.edu.mx

Tatiana Lozano Ortega

Universidad Panamericana. México  
Correo electrónico: t.lozano.ortega@gmail.com

RECEIVED: August 12, 2022

ACCEPTED: November 25, 2022

**ABSTRACT:** This article explores the tensions between different conceptions of “citizenship.” On the one hand, we point out the virtues and limitations of cosmopolitan citizenship in the terms in which Seyla Benhabib understands it in *The Right of Others...*; on the other hand, we delve into another notion of citizenship, namely, the localist, in a version that could be at odds with some cosmopolitan values, that is, localism as understood by some Mexican autonomous communities, particularly the Zapatistas. Although Benhabib’s cosmopolitan federalism is inclusive in spirit, it is conceived within a preponderantly global perspective and ends up being asymmetrical. While her proposal has some positive aspects, it faces some difficulties in the case of Mexican autonomous communities. In this article, we shall introduce the notion of democratic confederalism as a form of sociopolitical organization that seeks to strengthen the self-organization of social actors and to recognize the practice of citizenship in the terms in which autonomous communities exercise it. We propose that democratic confederalism could be an alternative for decreasing tensions between global citizenship and the idea of citizenship within autonomous communities.

**Keywords:** Citizenship, Cosmopolitanism, Localism, Autonomous Communities, Zapatistas, Democratic Confederalism.

**RESUMEN:** Este artículo explora las tensiones entre dos concepciones diferentes de “ciudadanía”. Por una parte, señalamos las virtudes y limitaciones de la ciudadanía

cosmopolita en los términos en los que Seyla Benhabib la entiende en “El derecho de los otros...”; por otra, ahondamos en una noción de ciudadanía distinta, la localista, en una versión que puede entrar en conflicto con algunos valores cosmopolitas, a saber, el localismo tal como lo entienden algunas comunidades autónomas mexicanas, en particular las zapatistas. Aunque el cosmopolitismo federalista de Benhabib es inclusivo en esencia, está concebido desde una perspectiva preponderantemente globalista y termina siendo asimétrico. Aunque su propuesta tiene aspectos positivos, se enfrenta con algunas limitaciones en el caso de las comunidades autónomas mexicanas. En este artículo sostenemos que el confederalismo democrático es una forma de organización sociopolítica que busca fortalecer la autoorganización de los actores sociales y reconocer la práctica de la ciudadanía tal como las comunidades autónomas la ejercen. Proponemos que el confederalismo democrático podría ser una alternativa para disminuir las tensiones entre la ciudadanía global y la idea de ciudadanía dentro de las comunidades autónomas. **Palabras clave:** ciudadanía, cosmopolitismo, localismo, comunidades autónomas, zapatismo, confederalismo democrático.

**CONTENT:** I. Introduction. II. Benhabib's Cosmopolitanism and the Problem of Autonomous Communities. III. Autonomous Communities and Democratic Iterations. IV. National and Local Self-Determination. V. Democratic Confederalism and Democratic Iterations. VI. References.

## I. INTRODUCTION

This article explores the tensions between two different models of citizenship. On the one hand, we point out the virtues and limitations of cosmopolitan citizenship in the terms in which Seyla Benhabib understands it in *The Right of Others...*; on the other hand, we delve into another notion of citizenship, namely, the localist, in a version that could be at odds with some cosmopolitan values. While there are a variety of localisms and some of them are not necessarily in conflict with cosmopolitanism, here we shall focus on localism as understood by autonomous communities, particularly the Zapatistas in Mexico. Indeed, several sociologists, anthropologists, and political theorists have recognized the importance of these kinds of communities and their exemplary forms of social and political organization.<sup>1</sup> Still, despite the recognition of their social and civic virtues, their understanding of citizenship may be troublesome for a cosmopolitan mo-

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Burguete Cal & Mayor (2000); Harvey (2000); González Casanova (2001); Mora & Stahler-Sholk (2011); Cerda (2011); Harvey (2000); Mora (2017); Baschet (2018).

del engaged with global values. Autonomous communities mistrust some aspects of globalization (e.g., the global economy and free markets), while Benhabib's model of cosmopolitan citizenship seeks to adapt to the cultural and economic demands of the globalized world.

Benhabib argues that the demands of a cosmopolitan citizenship must take place within the framework of the local, the regional, and other forms of democratic engagement (Benhabib, 2004, pp. 171-174). However, we can ask to what extent autonomous communities are willing to engage democratically with cosmopolitan citizenship and global values. The question we want to raise is whether Benhabib's commitment to the right to political membership could lead to an alternative for dealing with those communities that, instead of demanding their integration into a national political community, argue for the recognition of their own autonomy and self-determination. Of course, it could be argued that this type of community is outside the scope of Benhabib's approach. She wants to focus on the rights of foreigners and aliens, and not on autonomous minorities residing in a particular country and owning an imposed national citizenship. Nevertheless, if we want to uphold the functionality of a cosmopolitan model, it is necessary to propose an alternative to acknowledge the demands of those communities with a robust localist conception of citizenship, as is the case with autonomous communities.

In what follows, we first point out the virtues of Benhabib's cosmopolitan model of citizenship, mainly, her transformation of the meaning of "political membership". We will argue, however, that as compelling as it may be, Benhabib's cosmopolitanism with its commitment to global values may restrict the rights of local communities and autonomous peoples to political self-determination. To deal with the case of autonomous communities we argue, in the second section, that an adaptation of Benhabib's notion of "democratic iterations" may be helpful in the process of negotiation with these types of communities. Certainly, the Mexican State has gradually recognized those communities and, in this sense, the interactions between both, the State and the communities, could be seen precisely as an example of democratic iterations. However, even though the Mexican State officially recognizes some autonomous communities, this arrangement does not suffice for a symmetrical interaction regarding decision-making and other political rights.<sup>2</sup> Thus, in the third section, we argue that a democratic confederalist model could provide a more

<sup>2</sup> There is an enormous amount of secondary literature devoted to the processes of recognition and negotiation between the Zapatistas and the Mexican State. Two studies that provide helpful data and information on this matter are Aparicio Wilhelmi (2009), and Mora (2020).

symmetrical interaction between autonomous communities and the State, since it brings to the fore the concerns of autonomous communities instead of the demands of a homogeneous state or the imposition of alien values.

## II. BENHABIB'S COSMOPOLITANISM AND THE PROBLEM OF AUTONOMOUS COMMUNITIES

Political boundaries define some people as members of a political community and others as foreigners and aliens. In *The Right of Others...*, Seyla Benhabib examines principles and practices for incorporating foreigners and aliens into established political communities.<sup>3</sup> As she herself explains, even though the modern nation-state still regulates membership in terms of the category of national citizenship, phenomena such as transnational migration and, in general, the movement of people across state borders, have weakened that category. According to Benhabib, liberal democracies need new modalities of membership if they really want to respond effectively to transnational migration. However, there is nothing easy about establishing how the liberal ideal of moral equality and respect for universal human rights can be harmonized with the idea of State sovereignty and democratic self-determination. Scholarly literature has extensively discussed this dilemma.<sup>4</sup> Benhabib endorses a democratic cosmopolitanism and a theory of justice willing to recognize the fundamental rights of migrants, regardless of their political membership.

According to Benhabib, the condition of being an alien violates fundamental human rights. Aliens-immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers, etc., are often discriminated against. This is incompatible with the idea of community as understood in the terms of a liberal democracy. If liberal democracies recognize the freedom of movement, a right held in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, they should establish reasonable admission criteria. In other words, Benhabib argues that if the right to migrate is recognized, the right to membership should be recognized too (2004, pp. 134-143). In her argument, Benhabib upholds the Kantian cosmopolitan

<sup>3</sup> Although here we shall focus on *The Right of Others...*, Benhabib has expanded her views on cosmopolitan federalism in later publications. See, for example, Benhabib (2006; 2007). There were several reactions to *The Right of Others...*; in 2007, the *European Journal of Political Theory* devoted an entire volume to discussing Benhabib's book. There are highly relevant pieces in that volume, for instance, by Aleinikof (2007), Means (2007), and Sassen (2007).

<sup>4</sup> On this matter see Miller (2007, pp. 163-200); Benhabib (2017); Stilz (2019, pp. 187-215).

right, specifically the idea of “universal hospitality” that appears in the famous 1795 treatise, *Perpetual Peace*. She maintains that hospitality requires that international law not only admits and protects aliens, but even grants them membership in the communities to which they migrate (2004, pp. 25-43). Based on a moral argument inspired by Habermas’s discursive theory, Benhabib argues that it is possible to recognize individuals as persons who deserve moral respect, regardless of race, gender, religion, ethnicity, language, community, or sexuality.

In her defense of political membership rights for foreigners and aliens, Benhabib debates with communitarians, civic republicans, and liberal nationalists who see a threat in transnational migration. In their view, cosmopolitans do not seem sensitive enough to the “special attachments” that people have to their homes and countries (Benhabib, 2004, p. 114). Michael Walzer, for instance, thinks that the globalist vision of cosmopolitanism could lead to the overwhelming of local communities by establishing a world of *deracinated* people, to use Sidgwick’s words. Scholars such as Michael Walzer himself or Michael Sandel, among others, argue that given its support of economic and political globalization, cosmopolitanism can undermine the notion of citizenship and, consequently, diminish the nation-state.<sup>5</sup> For this reason, these scholars oppose Benhabib’s idea of porous borders. Although they do not oppose immigration, they tend to favor foreigners or aliens capable of becoming model citizens by adopting the social and cultural values of the country that receives them.

Unlike communitarians, civic republicans, and liberal nationalists, Benhabib argues for the reconfiguration of the notion of citizenship, to make it more inclusive. This reconfiguration requires porous borders and the political membership of foreigners and aliens, abandoning ideas such as the homogeneity of peoples and territorial self-sufficiency. However, in her approach Benhabib acknowledges a clear tension between the global and the local. And of course, in each of these positions there is a different notion of “citizenship.” While defenders of a local citizenship seek to underline the sense of civic virtue and identity —individual and collective—, those who argue in favor of a cosmopolitan citizenship seek to suppress the exclusionary character of unitary citizenship based on belonging to a specific territory, jurisdiction, or ethnic group.

It is striking, however, that both the localist and the cosmopolitan perspectives threaten the political and social rights of those who would or would not fall under the category of “citizen”. On the one hand, a localist defense of citizenship leads to the exclusion of those who do not be-

<sup>5</sup> See Walzer (2001), and Sandel (1996).

long to a particular political community, excluding immigrants who are not likely to become model citizens. On the other hand, under a defense of cosmopolitan citizenship engaged with global values, there is a risk of restricting the rights of local communities and autonomous peoples to political self-determination. In this last case, the effect of the cosmopolitan model upon autonomous minorities could be similar to the effect that the nation-state model has upon autonomous communities. Both models reduce the political rights of those minorities by imposing on them a kind of citizenship far removed from the political and cultural values of their own locality. Mexican autonomous communities—the Zapatistas and other indigenous localities—are a good example. By including the members of these communities within the category of “Mexican citizen”, the Mexican State excludes them from their right to exercise citizenship in their own terms. The imposition of a unitary form of citizenship could cause those who defend their local citizenship to lose the civic virtues that their authentic citizenship entails, and in turn, forces them to adopt an abstract, outlandish, and alienating form of citizenship. If, like the nation-state model, the cosmopolitan model intends to impose political and cultural values alien to autonomous minorities, we will find similar difficulties.<sup>6</sup>

Despite contrasting goals, the cosmopolitan model of citizenship and the local model of citizenship of autonomous communities share something in common: both maintain that the category of national citizenship supported by the nation-state system is no longer adequate for responding to the challenges of the global world or to the demands of autonomous minorities, respectively. While Benhabib argues that the modern nation-state system fails to respond in an effective way to transnational migration, and, similarly, the nation-state system has failed to factually recognize autonomous communities. In many cases, autonomous communities perceive national citizenship as a State-imposed membership that does not recognize their autonomy, political self-determination, and their practice of citizenship strongly linked to values and culture of their own lo-

<sup>6</sup> Throughout this article, we mention that the nation-state attempts to impose a model of citizenship in which autonomous communities are subordinated to the political structures of a central government. In this process, the exercise of citizenship in autonomous communities does not necessarily concur with centralist policies. For instance, in the nation-state model, political participation is commonly limited to electoral processes, narrowing values concerning self-determination, sociopolitical engagement, and sense of belonging. By contrast, citizenship practices such as regular assemblies to reach agreements related to internal political organization, the election of community leaders, the administration of local resources, etc., are deeply rooted in autonomous communities. These practices highlight the value of communitarian involvement—among other values related to political agency. In the global model, communitarian values of autonomous localities are also jeopardized by political and economic criteria and practices imposed for interests that exceed the local jurisdiction.

ality. Put simply, the notion of citizenship within autonomous communities could be widely different from citizenship imposed by the State. The notion of citizenship within autonomous communities is usually understood not as a legal status but as an identity, a place to live in community and in solidarity, fulfilling certain civic duties. This description sketches some of the characteristic traits of many of these communities' account on citizenship—for instance, the Zapatistas—which we identify with a localist perspective. However, this characterization should not be taken as a universal rule, since each autonomous community has its own way of understanding and exercising citizenship.

In the nation-state system, foreigners and aliens as well as autonomous minorities are perceived as a threat. In her defense of the recognition of a right to political membership for all people regardless of their citizenship status, Benhabib (2004, p. 213) develops the notion of *democratic iterations*, that is, “moral and political dialogues in which global principles and norms are re-appropriated and reiterated by constituencies of all sizes, in a series of interlocking conversations and interactions”. In other words, cultural and political normativity can be reformulated, reinterpreted, and transformed to examine political practices of exclusion and inclusion. Benhabib (2004, p. 21) thinks that even though these democratic iterations can be messy and unpredictable, they could lead to “a post-metaphysical and post-national conception of cosmopolitan solidarity which increasingly brings all human beings, by virtue of their humanity alone, under the net of universal rights, while chipping away at the exclusionary privileges of membership”.

### III. AUTONOMOUS COMMUNITIES AND DEMOCRATIC ITERATIONS

As is evident, local citizenship as understood by autonomous communities could be troublesome for Benhabib's cosmopolitan model, and even for Walzer's version of local citizenship. We think, however, that an adaptation of Benhabib's democratic iterations could be helpful for dealing with the case of autonomous communities. Democratic iterations, as Benhabib understands them, have at least two drawbacks. First, democratic iterations take global principles and norms as a basis without questioning their legitimacy and adaptability to all contexts. Second, democratic iterations are led by democratic majorities at the risk of excluding minorities from the conversation and decision-making. Those minorities could be immigrants or, in our case, members of autonomous communities. To include such minorities into democratic iterations and decision-making, there

should be a symmetrical relationship between them and democratic majorities. Still, symmetrical interactions are rather uncommon and usually those who are affected by decisions are excluded from deliberation. Benhabib (2004, p. 15) herself detects the dilemma: those more affected by exclusionary or discriminatory norms of citizenship are often excluded from deliberation and decision-making.

Democratic iterations are basically dialogues and interlocking conversations and interactions. This interactive resource allows democracies to reinterpret their norms and principles so that democratic people can get involved in decision-making, acting both as subjects and authors of the laws concerning the regulation of their own public life. In many cases, democratic iterations allow agreements to be established, while in other cases they work as a democratic exercise that may be inconclusive but enables tensions to be recognized and conflicting points of view to be renegotiated.

In the case of immigration policies, the negotiation takes place between international laws concerning migration and the local laws of democratic states that receive foreigners and aliens. Benhabib holds that democratic iterations may help induce a formal political change and foment engagement with the rights of foreigners and aliens—migrants, refugees, asylum seekers—and their inclusion within liberal democratic states. She thinks that democratic iterations can lead to relevant changes to established understandings in policy. Democratic practices such as political dialogue, public argumentations and deliberations, and fluid social interactions open to negotiation can induce a change of mind. And Benhabib has great expectations: she believes that these democratic practices may lead to a transformation of the notions of political membership and citizenship.

Benhabib observes that the privilege of the nation-state to define the political notions of citizenship and non-citizenship has become dysfunctional and obsolete in a globalized world. If the idea of “national citizenship” is maintained and foreigners and aliens are seen as “others”, discriminatory practices will continue to be justified. In a world characterized by global interdependencies, it is much more functional to maintain an inclusive and cosmopolitan idea of citizenship than a national and discriminatory notion of citizenship. Therefore, as mentioned above, Benhabib reacts to the nationalism and localism of Walzer and other philosophers. But for the purposes of this article, we want to point out that discriminatory practices are not reduced to the denial of citizenship. These practices do not only affect migrants but also autonomous communities who in several cases have been prevented from participating in the democratic decision-making process.



The conception of local citizenship of autonomous communities challenges both the notion of national citizenship and that of cosmopolitan citizenship. In other words, unlike migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, autonomous communities do not demand their integration into a national political community; rather, they demand the recognition of their self-determination and autonomy. If, as Benhabib proposes, national citizenship is replaced by a cosmopolitan citizenship, the political self-determination and autonomy of local communities may be restricted. Just as autonomous minorities reject the imposition of a national citizenship, they also oppose the imposition of a cosmopolitan citizenship model engaged with global values.

Although the local citizenship of autonomous communities and Benhabib's cosmopolitan citizenship model seem incompatible, democratic iterations could lead to a promising engagement with autonomous minorities. Just as democratic iterations contribute to the engagement in democratic interactions that promote the inclusion of foreigners and aliens, this resource can also work to advance the inclusion of autonomous minorities in decision-making processes without restricting their self-determination and autonomy. Democratic iterations in this case should be more symmetrical and need to avoid the imposition of global values. If democratic iterations remain asymmetrical, it will be difficult to democratically interact with autonomous communities.

Although Benhabib's cosmopolitan federalism is inclusive in spirit, it is conceived within a preponderantly global perspective and, ends up being asymmetrical in our view. While her proposal has several commendable points, it would encounter difficulties in the case of autonomous communities. As we mentioned, we are thinking of Mexican autonomous communities, particularly the case of the Zapatistas in Chiapas. Although article 115th of the Mexican Constitution recognizes the rights of indigenous peoples, several communities still claim that this recognition has not occurred factually, and for this reason they demand real political autonomy, that is, the construction of their own institutions and the appointment of authorities able to legislate over their local affairs.<sup>7</sup> In addition, these communities seek the recognition of their right to administer the natural resources

<sup>7</sup> The provisions contained in article 115th rule all municipalities as the minimum unit of territorial jurisdiction conceived by the federation. In doing so, the Constitution circumscribes autonomous communities to the municipal jurisdiction where they are situated, so that they can be "coordinated and associated" according to the law. This constitutional article poses the terms for the inclusion—or tolerance—of these communities in the nation's jurisdictional scheme, ruled by a central administration. In this way, article 115th recognizes the existence of indigenous communities without laying the basis for autonomous regimes with a factually recognized territorial jurisdiction.

that they conceive as their own, and to demarcate their own territories. All these demands challenge their institutional relations with the Mexican State, both at the regional and federal levels.

#### IV. NATIONAL AND LOCAL SELF-DETERMINATION

Within the framework of the discussion of transnational migration, Benhabib acknowledges the tension in liberal democracies between sovereign self-determination and the State's commitment to universal human rights. In her attempt to overcome that tension, she argues that political membership must be a human right for those who have already crossed territorial borders. However, she asserts that liberal democracies can stipulate the requirements for acquiring membership. This option ensures the protection of immigrants and at the same time it grants the state the right to establish conditions and requirements that immigrants must observe so they can attain full membership in their host country. In our view, Benhabib tries to formulate these requirements in a positive way, as conditions that should facilitate full membership rather than hinder it.

In *The Right of Others...*, Benhabib focuses on the sovereign self-determination of the State against the global political order. In our approach, we want to focus on the conflict between the sovereign self-determination of the state and the self-determination of autonomous communities. These two forms of sovereign self-determination will come into conflict as long as the nation-state model persists. If we consider a general view of political self-determination as the right of a community to govern itself independently, both of these forms of self-determination —the State's and the communities'— would be irreconcilable under the current federalist subjection of autonomous communities to the State. The conflict seems inherent to federalism, since it stems from the interposition of two different sovereign entities.

The right of nation-states to self-determination is broadly understood and accepted, mainly based on their legitimacy as well-constituted (i.e., institutionalized) political entities, participants in the global order and economy. Generally, sovereignty is attributed to nation-states with no acknowledgment of the sovereignty of the peoples within those states. As we shall see, a state's population is not usually a properly unified people since diverse and plural communities integrate it. These diverse communities unite as a polity when they authorize their shared government. That is not the case for autonomous communities where the state's government is imposed over their own political institutions. In this paper, we are argu-

ing for the right to political self-determination of communities that have well-established forms of cooperation and governing outside the State's institutions, but which are subjected to the State's jurisdiction.

Mexican autonomous communities, for instance, the Zapatistas, Cherán, and many other indigenous communities or nations,<sup>8</sup> have built solid political institutions that could be understood as a form of democratic communitarianism. The members of those communities are often involved in the administration and ruling over their territory—often in dispute with the local and federal governments' intervention—in the creation of their institutions, and in activities beneficial to their community. The members of autonomous communities exercise their political duties with much more commitment to their polity than most Mexican citizens are expected—and allowed—to engage with their institutions, given the rules of representation and citizen participation laws. The involvement of citizens in their political institutions is crucial for justifying their right to self-determination.

According to Anna Stilz, peoples (i.e., communities) should enjoy self-determination “only when members engage in institutionalized political cooperation, and come to value that cooperation” (2016, p. 102). Such engagement should give the communities' members the status of “makers” of their own institutions, meaning they should be involved in their creation, reformation, and their functioning. From this perspective, members of autonomous communities, who share civic responsibilities and have common goals, exercise their citizenship in a more fully active and cooperative manner. By contrast, many members from any Mexican city are detached from common responsibilities and their ultimate political engagement is reduced to electoral participation.

Through the notion of citizen, the Mexican State designates individuals as members of their “representative, democratic, secular, federal republic”. Although this notion is supposed to grant certain rights to those designated as citizens, it specifically allocates and bounds their political rights—as one is a citizen in his or her relation to a given constituency. The political rights granted to Mexican citizens by Mexican legislation<sup>9</sup> are largely aimed to constrain all political engagement to electoral participation and to the recently added popular queries (*consultas populares*).<sup>10</sup> Histori-

<sup>8</sup> While the Mexican State does not recognize “indigenous nations” as such, many members of those nations argue their nations are accidentally placed inside of the Mexican fictitious nation where they are seen as communities. See Aguilar (2018).

<sup>9</sup> Mainly specified in article 35 of the Mexican Constitution and in the local citizen participation laws for the states.

<sup>10</sup> Most citizen participation laws make it virtually impossible for citizens to engage in decision-making to a significant extent. Few exceptions give rise to a greater participatory citizenship, like the one issued in 2018 in the northern state of Chihuahua.

cally, the Mexican government has noticeably excluded its citizens from the decision-making process. This exclusion can be traced back to Mexico's vertical and centralist colonial tradition.<sup>11</sup> In its federalist, yet centralist tradition, Mexican federalism presupposes a sort of imaginary homogeneity of its peoples. The notion of "Mexican citizen" works as a conceptual vehicle in this process of homogenization. That explains why some members of autonomous communities seek to detach themselves from this notion. They are members of legitimate self-determining polities, and they do not see themselves as members of the Mexican State.

As autonomous communities have fought for their recognition and autonomy, the Mexican state has only granted them recognition as a form of "pretend autonomy". While the legislation recognizes their existence, many communities and nations consider that this recognition is not sufficient for an authentic regime of autonomy, since it does not liberate them from the State's intervention in their political institutions and territories. It also fails to acknowledge them as collective agents with a specific juridical situation. Instead, this form of autonomy grants them a limited catalogue of rights that focus primarily on freedom to exercise their "customs and habits". The Mexican government conceptualizes autonomy as jurisdictional autonomy within the states' jurisdiction. According to Héctor Díaz-Polanco (2009, p. 29), it is a special regime that shapes a community's self-government "which thus choose authorities from the members of the community, exercise legally attributed powers, and have minimal powers to legislate their own internal life and to administer their own affairs".

From the Mexican government's perspective, being an autonomous community is a way of belonging to the State and of being subject to its jurisdiction under "special conditions".<sup>12</sup> Autonomous communities are granted limited jurisdictional and administrative powers over their territories, and not autonomy in any sense that would grant them self-determination. The State does not recognize that these communities are, in the first place, self-determining peoples, and, secondly, officially members

<sup>11</sup> Seen from the perspective of indigenous communities and municipalities in general, both the Spanish colonial government and Mexican post-colonial government even up to present day, have concentrated much power over the most significant administrative decisions—including those over the use and abuse of natural resources—(Cruz Martínez, 2002; Medina, 2009).

<sup>12</sup> The 2nd constitutional article grants indigenous communities the right to self-determination as the prerogative to elect their own authorities—subordinated to the municipality and each state's rule. As we brought out previously, article 115th rules the municipality as the minimal territorial jurisdiction; in doing so, autonomous communities are constrained to subsume their institutions within the municipal structure and its law. There is no regime for an autonomous territorial jurisdiction, just the right of indigenous peoples to exercise their 'costumes and practices' inside a given municipality and state.

of the Mexican State (some might argue that they are so by virtue of being accidentally placed within its borders). On these grounds, the regime prescribed for the autonomy of communities inside Mexico only grants them autonomy as an external aspect of their relation to the State. This regime does not recognize that autonomy is “the internal manifestation of self-determination” (Aparicio, 2009, p. 15).

Alluding to these conflicting views on autonomy, namely the external aspect recognized (top-down) by Mexican legislation and the internal aspect consistent with the right to self-determination (bottom-up), the Zapatista communities and other indigenous nations have argued that the State’s tolerance of their particular customs and habits does not factually amount to an acknowledgement of their autonomy and therefore it violates their political rights. For the Zapatista communities, autonomy is their way of exercising their right to self-determination through their solid structures for political organization and self-government, which are central to their lifestyle, values, and purposes, all encompassed within the notion of *mandar obedeciendo* (to rule as obeying) (Mora, 2017, p. 200).

Daily practices of self-government and political organization account for autonomy in its internal aspect. The Zapatistas have organized *juntas de buen gobierno* and assemblies for decision-making over their *caracoles* —the territories under their rule. Both the *juntas de buen gobierno* and the assemblies represent forms of collective authority for decision-making. The first level is integrated by representatives who rotate weekly, and the assemblies are integrated for specific problem-solving among communities. Every member of the community has the responsibility of participating in the community’s activities and is expected at some point to represent a commission, municipality, or group in the *juntas de buen gobierno*. This arrangement is designed to integrate an actual form of collective authority where representatives rotate constantly so that every citizen governs.<sup>13</sup> Everyone is, at some point and to some degree, in charge of the administration of the resources and the ruling over different aspects of everyday life. These practices make room for dialogue over contending points of view and dissent among members of the community.

The Zapatistas’ political organization is a great example of self-government and of the exercise of internal autonomy. Although the Mexican State has signed agreements (*Acuerdos de San Andrés*) for the constitutional recognition of their autonomy, it has not acknowledged their right to self-determination through a juridical reform; therefore, these communities exercise their autonomy as a form of rebellion. The *Acuerdos de San*

<sup>13</sup> See Mariana Mora (2017, p. 195).

*Andrés* are an example of what we previously described as “asymmetrical democratic iterations”. This would be a case in which the State has taken advantage of its privileged position disregarding the demands of minorities by not legislating accordingly.

Both the self-determination of the nation-state and that of the autonomous communities denote both an external aspect, namely their right to govern the State or the community free from external intervention, and an internal aspect considering the people’s right to rule themselves based on their values and priorities.<sup>14</sup> The actual activity of self-government that takes place within Mexican autonomous communities accounts for the internal aspect, without the acknowledgement of its external aspect. From a strict perspective on self-determination through the current legislation and federal arrangement, it seems that the communities’ right to be free from the state’s interference would collide with the democratic majority’s right to choose a state government ruling over the territory as a whole.

Benhabib’s democratic iterations for a federalist cosmopolitanism—where a nation-state’s sovereignty copes with the international order’s jurisdiction—proposes a strategy for managing these interactions democratically. Perhaps Benhabib’s federalist cosmopolitanism and her democratic iterations could be adapted to contain this kind of conflict. However, if the cosmopolitan model were to be adopted, asymmetrical relationships should be avoided. This implies that, other than universal human rights, no values or interests should be imposed.<sup>15</sup> If we adopt Benhabib’s cosmopolitanism we would need to face the fact that autonomous communities would find it difficult to accept global values. So, again, in view

<sup>14</sup> See Anna Stilz (2016).

<sup>15</sup> Since each autonomous community has a particular set of cultural beliefs and some of them could contend with liberal values, we consider that strict adherence to Human Rights should be the only “external” guiding principle at the core of their institutions to ensure both autonomy and the respect of fundamental rights. Kymlicka (1989, pp. 206-244) has discussed in depth the tensions between minority rights and the liberal tradition. He observes that, indeed, it seems that liberalism plays down the relevance of membership in cultural communities as contexts of choice. He mentions how even Rawls holds that in just societies self-respect is ensured by the recognition of equal citizens, and not by the membership to cultural communities. Certainly, there are different approaches to minority rights among liberal thinkers. We are sympathetic to Kymlicka’s attempt to dissolve the conflict between liberalism and cultural minorities. To put it very simply, he advocates a form of liberalism in which many collective rights can be implemented. His position deserves further attention and indeed opens more possibilities to argue for minority rights. However, given the context of the two forms of autonomous communities mentioned here, that is, the Zapatista and the Kurdish, we have taken a different direction than Kymlicka. The peculiarity of the Zapatistas and the Kurds is that their struggle takes place in the context of fragile democracies, as in the case of Mexico and Turkey.

of the obsolescence of the nation-state model and the possibility of moving towards a cosmopolitan citizenship model engaged with global values, we should ponder an alternative to ensure the coexistence between cosmopolitanism and the self-determination of autonomous communities.

In order to deal with the case of Mexican autonomous communities we shall introduce the notion of “democratic confederalism”. In general terms, democratic confederalism strengthens the participation of minorities; in our case, it strengthens the participation of autonomous communities, recognizing the very notion of “autonomy” and limiting the imposition of values and political conditions from external agents such as the State or democratic majorities. In the final section, we shall argue that democratic confederalism can be an alternative for overcoming the tensions that may arise between the cosmopolitan model of citizenship and the local model of autonomous communities in the framework of the exercise of democratic iterations. It is worth mentioning that intellectuals from autonomous communities have also proposed a form of confederalist model.<sup>16</sup>

## V. DEMOCRATIC CONFEDERALISM AND DEMOCRATIC ITERATIONS

Up to this point, we have been raising some of the tensions taking place between two different models of citizenship, namely, the cosmopolitan model (as conceived by Benhabib) and the local (as conceived by autonomous communities, e.g., the Zapatistas). Although it seems that the two models of citizenship are incompatible, they share something in common: they aim to overcome the nation-state’s structures of political exclusion. As we mentioned above, Benhabib’s cosmopolitanism is inclusive in spirit, and we think she is right in her defense of political membership for immigrants. We also agree with her that, in view of global interdependencies, it is more practical to move from the nation-state model to a cosmopolitan model of citizenship. However, we also believe that, just as Benhabib’s cosmopolitan model defends the political membership for foreigners and aliens, it must also consider alternatives for coexisting with legitimate forms of localism.

Benhabib’s cosmopolitan federalism is open to multiple iterations in the context of which even localist conceptions of citizenship can be discussed. However, in the case of the autonomous communities to which we have referred in this article, we think that the democratic confeder-

<sup>16</sup> See, for instance, Aguilar (2018). The title of her essay is particularly illustrative: “Nosotros sin México: naciones indígenas y autonomía”.

alist model is more functional and practical. The model we propose is inspired by the controversial Kurdish militant Abdullah Öcalan, who formulated the political concept of “democratic confederalism” as a solution to the recognition of Kurdish nationalism.<sup>17</sup> An adaptation of his notion of democratic confederalism proves helpful for strengthening the participation of autonomous communities, recognizing their self-determination and autonomy.

Democratic confederalism rejects centralism and the imposition of dominant cultural and sociopolitical values, whether these values are those of a nation-state or those of the global world. As is the case with cosmopolitanism, democratic confederalism is open to commitments that concern heterogeneous social structures; furthermore, it proposes an equitable coexistence between local political communities, and it is opposed to any kind of centralism or imposition of dominant cultural and sociopolitical values. Democratic confederalism shares values to some extent with cosmopolitanism, insofar as both are against the idea of peoples as unitary and homogeneous entities, and both conceive society as heterogeneous and inclusive. However, democratic confederalism seeks to strengthen the self-organization of social actors and to recognize the practice of political citizenship in the terms in which autonomous communities exercise it.

A democratic confederalist model provides autonomous communities a very broad autonomy, so both they and their members have inherent rights, and not only those granted to them by a central government. There is a highly relevant change of focus in this model: it is not simply a matter of recognizing the existence of autonomous communities in cultural and social terms. Rather, it is a matter of recognizing their right to exercise their political autonomy and self-administration. This change of focus radically modifies democratic iterations. We mentioned previously that democratic iterations, as Benhabib understands them, have at least two drawbacks. On the one hand, they assume that global principles and norms provide the leading model of citizenship; on the oth-

<sup>17</sup> Kurdish people are dispersed in a territorial portion that stretches from southeastern Anatolia to western Iran, parts of northern Iraq, northeastern Syria, western Armenia, and surrounding areas. The demand for a territory of their own and the fight for their political recognition have strained the relationship between the Kurds and the adjacent countries. The most difficult relations have been perhaps between the Kurds and Iran, Iraq, and Turkey. Öcalan founded the Kurdish Worker's Party in 1978 with the aim of creating an independent Kurdistan. He is controversial because his strategies included guerrilla activities. Nevertheless, as we show here, his political ideas and demands deserve more discussion. Among other things, Öcalan demanded territorial models of democratic autonomy, cultural rights, confederalism, and the formation of an independent state. As can be seen, there are some similarities between the Kurdish people and the Zapatista communities, mainly, their demand of the recognition of their autonomy (see Bengio, 2014; Çifçi, 2019).



er hand, they exclude minorities from democratic decision-making. This understanding of iterations, as we said, would make it difficult to establish more symmetrical interactions. By contrast, democratic confederalism gives voice to autonomous communities, positioning them as real agents participating in public debates, deliberations, and even decision-making processes, within the larger framework of a plural and heterogeneous political community.

Cosmopolitan values such as the recognition of pluralism and heterogeneity would make it possible for nations to assimilate other forms of citizenship and social organization that do not depend on the structures of the State or global values. Rather, there are autonomous communities with the right to preserve their own political autonomy, their local economy, as well as their local civic and cultural values. Indeed, the acceptance of local autonomous communities is not enough to eliminate the natural tensions that tend to arise in any sociopolitical space. We want to be clear about this: we do not believe that democratic confederalism would completely eradicate the tensions that arise in any context in which there are communities defending their own autonomy. What we do believe is that the change of focus we have proposed, that is, from the dominant agency of the State or democratic majorities to the real political engagement with autonomous communities, would favor a more equitable coexistence of communities with different conceptions of citizenship.

It is worth insisting that the participatory integration of autonomous communities in democratic iterations must be constituted from voluntary participation. Democratic iterations must be open to the participation of any cultural and political group respectful of human rights. Hence, these iterations perfectly fit the values of democratic confederalism that, in Öcalan's own words, "is flexible, multicultural, anti-monopolistic, and consensus oriented" (2011, p. 21). Democratic confederalism takes as central pillars ecology and feminism.<sup>18</sup> Here, we will not explore in detail the importance of these two pillars, but we want to note that in the case of several communities, it is important to think carefully about their attachment to the land and about the importance given to the political participation of women in those communities. In addition, Öcalan also refers to the necessity of an "alternative economy". This is an interesting pillar that fits

<sup>18</sup> Öcalan's ideas on ecology appear in several parts within his works; see, Öcalan (n. d., pp. 310-327). His approach to ecology has recently been discussed by Hammy and Miley (2022); see also Öcalan et al. (2020). For Öcalan's feminism and his ideas concerning the liberation of women, see Öcalan (2013). His promotion of the liberation of women has been analyzed in several recent scholarly works and media. See, for instance, Novellis (2018); Shahvisi (2018); Briy (2019); Al-Ali & Tas (2021).

with the local economy of autonomous communities, such as the Zapatistas. An alternative economy would be focused on increasing “the resources of the society instead of exploiting them”, thus doing justice to the manifold needs of society.

Assuming the change of focus we have proposed for the democratic iterations is accepted, there remains a final relevant point concerning the dynamic of iterations: democratic iterations must look for a balance between the central, the regional, and the local. Again, this principle is also crucial for democratic confederalism. Iterations may change focus at different moments of the process, leading to a combination of vertical and horizontal interactions. However, democratic iterations shall seek the integration and participation of every political and social group, religious community, and intellectual tendency, avoiding centralism or any dominant positions of majority groups. Öcalan points out that

...the creation of an operational level where all kinds of social and political groups, religious communities, or intellectual tendencies can express themselves directly in all local decision-making processes can also be called participative democracy. The stronger the participation the more powerful is this kind of democracy (2011, p. 26).

Democratic confederalism, however, cannot be simply understood as a form of participative democracy. We share with Öcalan (2011, p. 27) the idea that a real democracy applies decision-making processes from the immediate local level to the global level. Thus, unlike the nation-state model or other forms of localism we even find in some liberal democracies, democratic confederalism is open to the association of different groups and communities that may have different political and cultural values. The democratic confederalist model applies to interacting with communities that, as is the case with the Zapatistas, are already involved in participative democratic processes in their internal social and political organization.<sup>19</sup> This being the case, it will be easier for autonomous communities to become part of democratic iterations, of negotiations, and of decision-making processes.

In conclusion, we think that Benhabib’s model of cosmopolitan citizenship would be much more functional and practical, even for recognizing the model of citizenship of autonomous communities, if it adopts the “change of focus” we have proposed by introducing democratic con-

<sup>19</sup> As examples of the internal political organization of Zapatistas see Martínez (2007), and Larrosa et al. (2019).

federalism. Perhaps the materialization of this proposal requires several iterations.

## VI. REFERENCES

- Aguilar, Y. (2018). *Nosotros sin México: naciones indígenas y autonomía. El futuro es hoy*. Biblioteca Nueva.
- Al-Ali, N. & Tas, L. (2021). Kurdish Women's Struggles with Gender Equality: From Ideology to Practice. *Third World Quarterly*, 42(9), 2133-2151.
- Aleinikoff, A. (2007). Comments on The Right of Others. *European Journal of Political Theory*, 6(4), 424-430. Doi:10.1177/1474885107080648
- Aparicio Wilhelmi, M. (2009). La libre determinación y la autonomía de los pueblos indígenas. El caso de México. *Boletín Mexicano de Derecho Comparado*, 1(24). <http://dx.doi.org/10.22201/ij.24484873e.2009.124.4087>
- Baschet, J. (2018). *¡Rebeldía, resistencia y autonomía! La experiencia zapatista*. Ediciones Eón.
- Bengio, O. (2014). *Kurdish Awakening. Nation Building in a Fragmented Homeland*. University of Texas Press.
- Benhabib, S. (2004). *The Right of Others: Aliens, Residents and Citizens*. Cambridge University Press.
- Benhabib, S. (2006). *Another Cosmopolitanism. Hospitality, Sovereignty, and Democratic Iterations* (with responses by Jeremy Waldron, Bonnie Honig, and Will Kymlicka). Oxford University Press.
- Benhabib, S. (2007). Democratic Exclusions and Democratic Iterations: Dilemmas of "Just Membership" and Prospects of Cosmopolitan Federalism. *European Journal of Political Theory*, 6(4), 445-462. Doi:10.1177/1474885107080650
- Benhabib, S. (2017). Democratic Sovereignty and Transnational Law: On Legal Utopianism and Democratic Skepticism. *Critical Theory in Critical Times*. Columbia University Press.
- Briy, A. (2019). The Theory and Practice of the Kurdish Women's Movement: An Interview in Diyarbakir. *Open Democracy*. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/theory-and-practice-of-kurdish-women-s-movement-interview-in-diyarbakir/>
- Burguete C. & Mayor, A. (Eds.). (2000). *Indigenous Autonomy in Mexico*. International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs.
- Cerda, A. (2011). *Imaginando zapatismo: multiculturalidad y autonomía indígena en Chiapas*. UAM-X.

- Çifçi, D. (2019). *The Kurds and the Politics of Turkey. Agency, Territory and Religion*. I. B. Tauris.
- Cruz Martínez, M. (2002). La voz íntima de la democracia: el municipio en México. *Federalismo y regionalismo*. UNAM, Instituto de Investigaciones Jurídicas.
- Díaz-Polanco, H. (2009). *La diversidad cultural y la autonomía en México*. Nostra.
- González Casanova, P. (2001). Los zapatistas del siglo XXI. *Revista Convergencia*, 13, 22-25.
- Hammy, C. & Miley, Thomas Jeffrey. (2022). Lessons from Rojava for the Paradigm of Social Ecology. *Frontiers in Political Science*, 3, 2-13. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpos.2021.815338>
- Harvey, N. (2000). *La rebelión en Chiapas: la lucha por la tierra y la democracia*. ERA.
- Kymlicka, W. (1989). *Liberalism, Community, and Culture*. Clarendon Press.
- Larrosa, M., Hernández, M. A., Alavez, J. F. (2019). Las Juntas de Buen Gobierno zapatistas, ensayo de una diferente forma de gobierno local: acercamiento desde la ciencia política. *Alegatos*, 101.
- Martínez Espinoza, M. I. (2007). Un puente entre la movilización y la democratización: la democracia en rebeldía de las Juntas de Buen Gobierno del movimiento zapatista. *Pensamiento Jurídico*, 19, 149-174.
- Means, A. (2007). The Right of Others. *European Journal of Political Theory*, 6(4), 406-423. Doi:10.1177/1474885107080647
- Medina, L. (2009). Federalismo mexicano para principiantes. *Documentos de Trabajo*, 58. CIDE.
- Miller, D. (2007). *National Responsibility and Global Justice*. Oxford University Press.
- Mora Amezcua, H. M. (2020). Movimiento zapatista y reforma constitucional en México. El artículo 2o. en la Constitución mexicana. *CAP Jurídica Central*, 4(7), 071-084.
- Mora, M. (2017). *Kuxlejal Politics. Indigenous Autonomy, Race, and Decolonizing Research in Zapatista Communities*. University of Texas Press.
- Mora, B. M. & Stahler-Sholk, R. (Coords.) (2011). *Luchas "muy otras": zapatismo y atonomía en las comunidades indígenas de Chiapas*. UAM; CIESAS; UNACH.
- Novellis, A. (2018). The Rise of Feminism in the PKK: Ideology or Strategy? *Zanj: The Journal of Critical Global South Studies*, 2(1), 115-133. Doi:10.13169/zanjglobsoutstud.2.1.0115
- Öcalan, A. (n. d.). *Manifiesto por una civilización democrática*. Tomo 2. *Civilización Capitalista*. Descontrol Editorial.

- Öcalan, A. (2011). *Democratic Confederalism*. International Initiative "Freedom for Abdullah Öcalan-Peace in Kurdistan".
- Öcalan, A. (2013). *Liberating Life: Women's Revolution*. International Initiative "Freedom for Abdullah Öcalan-Peace in Kurdistan".
- Öcalan, Abdullah et al. (2020). *Social Ecology and Democratic Confederalism*. The Anarchist Library.
- Sandel, M. (1996). *Democracy's Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy*. Belknap Press at Harvard University.
- Sassen, S. (2007). Response. *European Journal of Political Theory*, 6(4), 433-446. Doi:10.1177/1474885107080649.
- Shahvisi, A. (2018). Beyond Orientalism: Exploring the Distinctive Feminism of Democratic Confederalism in Rojava. *Geopolitics*, 26(11), 1-25. Doi:10.1080/14650045.2018.1554564
- Stilz, A. (2016). The Value of Self-Determination. In David Sobel, Peter V. & Steven W. (Eds.). *Oxford Studies in Political Philosophy*. Oxford University Press.
- Stilz, A. (2019). *Territorial Sovereignty. A Philosophical Exploration*. Oxford University Press.
- Walzer, R. (2001). In Response: Support for Modesty and the Nation-State. *The Communitarian Network*, 11(2), 28-31.