Development in Chiapas:
Dams, Tourism and Peasant Politics

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<tr>
<td>CDI</td>
<td>The National Commission for the Development of Indigenous Peoples&lt;br&gt;Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CFE</td>
<td>Federal Commission of Electricity&lt;br&gt;Comisión Federal de Electricidad</td>
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<tr>
<td>CONANP</td>
<td>National Commission for Protected Nature Areas&lt;br&gt;Comisión Nacional de Áreas Naturales Protegidas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONEVAL</td>
<td>National Council of Evaluation of the Politics of Social Development&lt;br&gt;Consejo Nacional de Evaluación de la Política de Desarrollo Social</td>
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<tr>
<td>CTM</td>
<td>Confederation of Workers in Mexico&lt;br&gt;Confederación de Trabajadores de México</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EZLN</td>
<td>Zapatista Army for National Liberation&lt;br&gt;Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FONDEN</td>
<td>Fund for Natural Disasters&lt;br&gt;Fondo de Desastres Naturales</td>
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<tr>
<td>GDP</td>
<td>Gross Domestic Product</td>
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<tr>
<td>INDESOL</td>
<td>National Institute of Social Development&lt;br&gt;Instituto Nacional de Desarrollo Social</td>
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<tr>
<td>INEGI</td>
<td>National Institute for Statistics and Geography&lt;br&gt;Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-governmental organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MLN</td>
<td>Movement of National Liberation&lt;br&gt;Movimiento de Liberación Nacional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MOCRI</td>
<td>Regional Independent Peasant Movement&lt;br&gt;Movimiento Campesino Regional Independiente</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MORENA</td>
<td>Movement for National Regeneration&lt;br&gt;Movimiento de Regeneración Nacional</td>
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<tr>
<td>OPEZ</td>
<td>Proletarian Organization Emiliano Zapata&lt;br&gt;Organización Proletaria Emiliano Zapata</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PEMEX</td>
<td>Mexican Petrol&lt;br&gt;Petróleos Mexicanos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRD</td>
<td>Party of the Democratic Revolution&lt;br&gt;Partido de la Revolución Democrática</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PROCAMPO</td>
<td>Program of Direct Support for the Countryside&lt;br&gt;Programa de Apoyos Directos al Campo</td>
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SEDESOL  Ministry of Social Development (for the state of Chiapas)  
*Secretaría de Desarrollo Social* (para el estado de Chiapas)

SEDEPAS  Ministry for Development and Social Participation  
*Secretaría de Desarrollo Social*

SUTERM  Sole Union of Electricity Workers of the Mexican Republic  
*Sindicato Único de Trabajadores Electricistas de la República Mexicana*
A note on names, translations, etc

All the names of the people that appear in this thesis are used with their explicit consent. In that way, I want to recognise their valuable participation in the research, but also make it easier for other researchers to get in contact with them. To protect their anonymity at times when I have considered it necessary, I have however used pseudonyms, titles, and/or have not specified whom I am referring to among a larger group of people, or have omitted information that could identify him or her.

All the translations of my interlocutors’ words, or citations from the literature published in Spanish, are mine.

Throughout the thesis, I have used Mexican pesos to express monetary values. During my fieldwork, one pound sterling was worth about 25 pesos.
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Abstract

Development in Chiapas: Dams, Tourism and Peasant Politics
The University of Manchester, Social Anthropology, School of Social Sciences
Martin Jesper Larsson
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This thesis analyses how development appears as lived experience along the Grijalva River, in the state of Chiapas, Mexico. Here, the post-revolutionary Mexican State tried to move a modernist project forward through a series of dams, in the middle of a state associated with rural poverty and indigeneity. Contemporary experiences of development along this river relates to this broad history, and the established image of the state – deepened by the uprising of the predominantly indigenous Zapatista Army for National Liberation in 1994 – but also involves a range of other struggles that are materially and historically anchored in the river.

To approach development along the river, the thesis pays attention to important connections and disconnections between things, beings, forms of knowledge and practices that relate to the river, and which enter into the struggles over particular projects. Above all, the thesis examines the significance that issues about land and water, notions of people and population, gender, labour, borders, and ethnicity have had for the appearance of development as lived experience. While these topics have been important for the literature on development, as well as in the writings about Chiapas, the main contribution of this thesis is how the anchoring to the material traces of development along river offers a different angle from which to enter these discussions. Using the materiality of the river as an entrance point leads to a reformulation of certain central ideas about the politics of development, but also opens up the field for issues that do not immediately show any clear relation to the phenomena referred to as development. At the same time, the approach implies a revision of the contemporary significance of certain histories in the state.
Declaration

No portion of the work referred to in the thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or other institute of learning.
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This project could not have been undertaken without the help that I received from the Muñoz and Estrada families in the town of Chicoasén; Humberto, José Juan, Francisco, Pedro and Fernanda in La Represa; Francisco Cameras in Chiapa de Corzo, and the people at the boat company: Roberto Castillejos, Marco Antonio Hernández, Fredy, Sergio, Hugo, Francisco, Abigail, Pedro, Abisaín, Agustín, Gaby, Moisés, Camilo, Ernesto, Gabino and Berlaín. The same is true for the leaders and members of
the Proletarian Organization Emiliano Zapata, and above all for César Gómez, Héver Sanches, Umberto, Victorio, Jesús Velázquez, Mariano, Martina, as well as Jonny and Enrique. I am equally thankful for the support that I received from the personnel at the CONANP, especially from Belén Jiménez.

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The author

Martin Larsson holds a Master of Social Anthropology from Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social; a Bachelor of History of Science and Ideas from Uppsala University; and a Bachelor and a Master of Law from Stockholm University and Pontificia Universidad Católica de Perú. For his master’s thesis in Social Anthropology, he was awarded the Gustavo Cabrera prize, from Centro de Estudios Demográficos, Urbanos y Ambientales, of Colegio de México, and the Magda Fritscher Mundt prize, from Asociación Mexicana de Estudios Rurales.

Martin has been working in Chiapas since 2002, and has conducted research there for his theses in 2007; 2010-2012; 2013; and 2014-2015. Martin has also worked as a Research Assistant for Dr Marcela González Rivas, at the University of Pittsburgh, during her research on the Sustainable Rural Cities Program, in 2013.
Figure 1. Hydrographic map of Chiapas. The Grijalva River is marked with red. The main fieldwork sites have their names in red.

Figure 2. Chiapas on the map of Mexico.
1. Introduction
A rescription of development in Chiapas

Development and politics along the Grijalva River

The state of Chiapas, in southern Mexico, emerged during the last century as a place tied to rural poverty and indigeneity, but also, with the uprising of the Zapatista Army for National Liberation (EZLN) in 1994, to the construction of an alternative to capitalism and Western modernity. Over the last few decades, the government of Chiapas has used a version of this image to promote the state as a tourist destination, where the emphasis is on the authenticity evoked by its indigenous population, pyramids, mountains, jungle, and the Sumidero Canyon. The Grijalva River – which runs through the Sumidero Canyon – is particularly interesting in this political geography, as it, in different ways, captures the natural attractions of the state, the indigenous presence, and the rural poverty, which all link to one of the crucial development projects in the state during the twentieth century: a series of dams.

In this thesis, I argue that the different objects, places, beings and histories that are found in the river shows a complexity where things tied to development don’t add up, don’t unfold on a linear time-line, and cannot be pinned down on a map by referring to a single set of pre-established coordinates (cf Law & Mol 2002:1). Central to this argument is that the lived experience of development relates directly to a series of ambiguous, local “political forms” – institutions, things, beings, landscapes and infrastructures, which give a materiality to certain conflicts.

The concept of political forms that I will outline refers to emergent material realities, which are intimately related to different fields of political conflicts about how
to define specific actions morally. The idea is inspired by Bruno Latour’s (2013) discussion about modes of existence, which outline different ways to establish truth; central to the political forms is instead the establishment of the morally correct action. Just as in the work of Latour, the concept of political forms also constitutes an attempt to expand beyond the clear focus on human beings and human conscience, which is found in theories that for example use “language” or “discourse” as their main tool of analysis (see for example Roseberry, 1994; Foucault, 1969), and thus address the problematic division between nature and society that has emerged with the idea of modernity (Latour 1993 [1991]). Particularly important for the conflicts that this thesis focuses on are the political forms of land, pueblo, population, environment, movement, and gender. In the following chapters, we will thus see how the historical configurations of certain modalities of land holding – such as the ejidos and the fincas – have given rise to a theoretically clear conflict between political projects based on the collective and the individual, respectively. This political form of land is however difficult to understand without taking into account the pueblo and the population politics. The pueblo politics revolves around the tension between kinship and friendship ties, and their (immoral) outside: a form that is important for the defense of collectively based political projects. The population politics, in turn, concerns a conflict described in terms of reason versus tradition, which tends to support projects that emphasise the importance of a rationality based on desires understood to be individual. While these two political forms have occupied a crucial place in political struggles in Chiapas, I will also show how they both have been drawn into yet another political form, which has been more marginal in the academic discussions in the entity: the field of conflict dealing with the dichotomy between nature and society.

Despite the contradictions between and within the forms referred to, and between different generations of policies, I will also show that whenever the State\(^1\) appears along the Grijalva River, it does so in the name of development. Drawing on

\(^{1}\) Because of the federal system in Mexico, I have retained the distinction between “the State” and “the state” to signal a difference between the kind of abstract, governing entity that is conveyed through different material forms and ideas, and the entity that comes out of the geographical divisions of the federation. We can thus both talk about the state of Chiapas, as an area that is delimited through a political geography, and the State of Chiapas, which then refers to an abstract entity that claims to govern that area.
Timothy Mitchell’s (2006 [1999] and 1991) work on the State effect,² I will argue that this appearance corresponds to attempts made by different governmental representatives to produce development as something with an existence that goes beyond the material forms made in its name, and beyond the relations and ideas that particular projects are involved with. In this way, development would not only give a materiality to the State, but also to an overarching project that cannot be delimited to any particular government – despite the important policy shifts that are made over time, and the material contradictions they give rise to. This overarching State presence is particularly visible when approaching development as a State discourse from the margin of the projects made in its name, as I will show through the political form of movement. Here, we will see how development is opposed to migration, in a theoretical scheme which draws on basic assumptions regarding the characteristics of the modern, sovereign State – assumptions that link the State to a particular territory, and to the power of deciding over its citizens and about the legitimate use of violence. From the perspective of the State, development is in other words a crucial expression of its sovereignty, and the ongoing project that legitimises its existence. While this is an important point, by drawing attention to the kind of movements that do not fit within this scheme, I also want to stress how certain acts and ideals escape the all-encompassing claims of development. If these acts and ideals are illegible from the perspective of the sovereign State, they on the other hand start making sense when being observed from the perspective of the political form of gender. I will thus show how the ideas about development that circulate along the Grijalva River are deeply embedded in a conflict between male autonomy and kinship solidarity, where the former constitutes the very essence of politics. I will then argue that certain acts and desires coded as female will fall outside of the legible forms of politics, and outside of particular projects of development.

² What Mitchell proposed was to approach the State through its material forms, rather than taking the State as an entity with a proper existence that is possible to pin down conceptually, or – on the other hand – as just an ideological construct. By focusing on the effects of the State, his idea was to acknowledge its material forms and different ideas connected to the State, stressing how the State appears as “an abstraction that stands apart from material reality” (Mitchell 2006 [1999]:181).
By moving from the visible centres of development (its projects and the conflicts that appear explicitly through the formulation of problems made by different actors involved with the particular projects) to its margins (in movements and desires that are not recognised in development documents, and in the implicit, gendered, bias of development as part of political actions that are more or less legible from the perspective of the characteristics of the sovereign State), I will then show how the experience of development along the Grijalva River relates to a series of political forms, which both give development its practical form, and which re-emerge through the resources mobilized by the development projects. A consequence of this is that development, despite the attempts to delimit its scope, and to give it a specific direction, is much more difficult to fit into any particular, political project than has been argued in the literature on the topic. Approaching development in these terms is then a way to engage in the highly political endeavour of describing development in a new way – or, as Harbers (2005) put it, pointing to the political dimension of this kind of description, to make a “rescription” (Harbers 2005:265) of development.\(^3\) If the attempt then is to produce an account that reorganizes things in a way that makes it easier to read development projects carried out along the Grijalva River – by focusing on political forms instead of, for example, approaching the subject through different discourses of development – through its details, it also aims to offer analyses that can be relevant elsewhere. While the focus is on development, this kind of rescription also necessarily re-writes the history of Chiapas, and questions certain analyses of contemporary politics in the entity. In a place as densely political as Chiapas, this is an intricate project, which needs a considerable amount of tact to at least have the possibility to be taken into account by different actors involved in the political struggles in the state.

\(^3\) What Harbers tried to do with the term was to formulate an answer to the critique of Science and Technology Studies that claimed it was too occupied with descriptions, while not worrying about moral or political questions – or, as Harbers chose to frame it, “prescriptions”. What Harbers wanted to stress was then the highly political implications of dealing with a kind of “infra-normativity” on which conventional politics rests. The idea of “rescription” clearly echoes Latour’s proposal to “reassemble the social” (Latour 2005) – that is, to pay close attention to particular things that travel through different, established “domains”, such as religion, law and political science – and which thereby give a new image of the phenomenon that is studied.
Isolation and centrality of Chiapas

As already noticed, Chiapas occupies a particular place in the political geography of Mexico. Several authors have pointed to its high levels of marginalization, and its physical and political isolation in relation to the important political events in the country. Antonio García de León (1985), for example, has stressed how Chiapas lacks a natural place in Mexico from a historical perspective, as it was not – as the rest of the country – part of the Viceroyalty of New Spain. The administrative divisions drawn by the Spanish State during the colonial era, instead placed the province under the jurisdiction of the Audiencia de la Capitanía General de Guatemala, which encompassed a large part of what today is known as Central America. Shortly after the declaration of independence of the provinces of the Audiencia, in September 1821, the Audiencia was incorporated into the new Mexican Empire, and was thus united with the provinces of the viceroyalty of New Spain. The Mexican Empire, however, fell after only two years of existence, and when the new federal republic – the United States of Mexico – was declared in 1824, it was in no way evident that Chiapas would be part of it. In fact, it was the only province of the former Audiencia that chose to do so (García de León 1985:42).

Jan Rus (1994) has in turn argued that the next crucial event in the historiography of the Mexican republic, the Mexican Revolution, was something that at least the large indigenous population in Chiapas was excluded from. For the Mayan peasants in the Highlands, he claimed, it was “little more than a civil war between an occupying federal army […] and bands of local, counterrevolutionary landowners” (Rus 1994:265; see also Larsson 2012:63-4 for local categorizations of the historical events that occupy the centrepiece of the national historiography). More important here was the Agrarian Reform, which started in the 1930s, and slowly incorporated the indigenous population into the political structures of the post-revolutionary, one-party State, without therefore overcoming the historically marginalized position they occupied in Chiapas.

This new presence of the central State, however, did not prevent anthropologists working in Chiapas in the 1950s from being struck by the perseverance of colonial relations – particularly the deep divide between the former Spanish towns
and the indigenous *hinterland* (Aguirre Beltrán 1991 [1967]). These relations in fact were the explicit reason why the first *indigenista* centre in the American continent was established in the colonial capital of San Cristóbal de Las Casas, and which brought many anthropologists to the entity in the name of acculturation – a State project aimed at the integration of the isolated areas with a marked indigenous presence. The efforts by the *indigenista* centre were in turn not enough to prevent the authors writing in the wake of the Zapatista uprising in 1994 from pointing at the “isolation” of Chiapas, as Collier and Quaratiello (2005:15) did. Roger Burbach (1994) is another example here, as he drew attention to “the worst indices of poverty and marginalization of Mexico’s thirty-two states” (Burbach 1994:115), and to the marginalization of the indigenous population that constituted the overwhelming majority of the members of the EZLN.

If Chiapas thus occupies a particular position in Mexico, as we have seen, it has at the same time been connected to the central conflict of the federal system in Mexico: between the federation and the states. The Mexican Revolution, as Rus noticed, was perceived locally as an armed struggle between federal and local forces. The Agrarian Reform, the main project of the post-revolutionary State, was in turn a project that was moved forward by the federal government, and which encountered a similar resistance from local landowners as the revolutionary forces had done (Rus 1994). This conflict was again repeated in the case of *indigenismo*. As Stewen Lewis (2004:111) has noticed, the National Indigenous Institute (*Instituto Nacional Indigenista*) started its community development projects in Chiapas against the will of the state governor, local municipal authorities, and local business interests.

It was, however, a quite different conflict that was used to explain the Zapatista uprising in 1994. Authors such as Burbach and Collier & Quaratiello, referred to above, tied the isolation and marginalization to the involvement in a capitalist economy that plundered the state of its natural resources, without leaving any benefits for the local population. The conflict that was stressed here was thus not between interests tied to the federation and the state respectively, but between the marginalized inhabitants of Chiapas and the alliance between capital and the different levels of government – or, as the EZLN used to stress, between the “civil society” and neoliberalism (EZLN 1994b, 1996, 1998 and 2005).
If the marginal role of Chiapas has been stressed repeatedly, it has then at the same time – and even because of the perceived marginality or isolation – occupied the centre stage of important struggles in Mexico, such as those between the federation and the states, and between civil society and neoliberalism. These kinds of struggles have in turn been rather easy to relate to broad political paradigms – such as those referred to by David Harvey, between the liberal, modern fordism which secured capital accumulation through economies of scales, and the neoliberal, postmodern, flexible accumulation. Indeed, Harvey has also used the Zapatista uprising as an example of a “popular revolt” (Harvey 2007:38) against neoliberalism – an analysis that echoes the claims made by the EZLN itself (EZLN 1995, 1996, 1998 and, above all, 2005).

What I want to stress here is however that, while these kinds of approaches can be informative about certain tendencies and histories, they clearly run the risk of oversimplifying complex relations (cf. Estrada & Viqueira 2010), and focusing exclusively on particular actors and places that fit within these schemes (cf. Gledhill 2008). If Chiapas thus occupies a particular place in the political geography of Mexico, it depends on certain analytical schemes and methodological strategies, where some places, actors, and processes become significant, and others don’t.

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4 This shift, he argued, implied a move from a paradigm which circled around the “government” – understood as “state power on its own” (Harvey 2005:77), with a certain space for democratic participation through the institutions tied to the State. The neoliberal paradigm, he suggested, increased concern with “governance”, that is, “a broader configuration of state and key elements in civil society” (Harvey 2005:77), which relies heavily on expert knowledge, and is directed at a “flexible accumulation”. Harvey’s concept of “flexible accumulation”, in turn, referred to:

flexibility with respect to labour processes, labour markets, products, and patterns of consumption. It is characterized by the emergence of entirely new sectors of production, new ways of providing financial services, new markets, and, above all, greatly intensified rates of commerical, technological, and organizational innovation. […] It has also entailed a new round of what I shall call ‘time-space compression’ […] in the capitalist world – the time horizons of both private and public decision-making have shrunk, while satellite communication and declining transport costs have made it increasingly possible to spread those decisions immediately over an ever wider and variegated space (Harvey 1990:147).

5 This is a rather common claim. See for example Vodovnik (2004:46); Collier and Quaratiello (2005 [1994]:185-194); and Láscar (2004:181).
Development and the complexity of the Grijalva River

A place that has occupied a very marginal space in the discussions about Chiapas is precisely the Grijalva River, which I will focus on in this thesis. What makes the river so interesting for the purpose of this thesis is however not its marginal position in the dominant discussions in the state per se. While this relative marginality is important to locate the place in the local, political geography, the theoretical attraction of the river is rather to be found in its relevance for the discussions about development and politics, especially because of its remarkable complexity of several generations of development projects of different kinds, which are mixed with a variety of histories that have been important in the state and in the country. Few places in Chiapas can indeed show the same material complexity as this river, which makes it more complicated to pursue a particular argument about current tendencies, struggles, and actors. On the one hand, the regions used as centres in the schemes of isolation and centrality of Chiapas – the Highlands and the Lacandona Jungle – have been much more intimately connected to the Agrarian Reform and the indigenismo, which both were abandoned with the neoliberal turn that has attracted so much attention to the state, and thus constituted pedagogical examples of important changes. From this perspective, the Grijalva River has been of little interest, not only because of its marginal indigenous population, and the absence of the EZLN, but also because it relates more clearly to the category of development, due to the dams. Despite important changes in its content, the category of development has not been abandoned, and therefore requires a more detailed discussion to reveal the ways in which neoliberal ideals have tried to turn it into a quite different project. On the other hand, the dams that are found in the river imply a material presence that makes it difficult to single out particular conflicts that are not related to the modern, Mexican State that was built simultaneously with the dams. The dams, and the discussions related to them, would necessarily leak into the contemporary projects and conflicts, and the possible relations to neoliberalism. What the dam thus points at, as already noticed, is rather the wide range of histories and relations that have been encompassed by the broad concept of development.

When following the use of the term in governmental documents, it is indeed difficult to find any outside of development. Currently, development is considered to
be the overarching goal of the Mexican State, and the three levels of government – i.e. the federation, the states and the municipalities – have a legal obligation to formulate Development Plans, which should direct the activities of the different levels of the state in its totality. Tourism – an important, but still emergent sector of the economy in Chiapas – is in this way expressed in terms of development; energy is development; the activities of the police are thought to aim at securing development; and the programs directed at the poor population in the countryside is referred to as development (Gobierno de la República, without date).  

When we move along the river, it is however difficult to perceive how this concept holds together in the multiplicity of histories that are found here. We can, for example, use an ancient route to make our way along the river, which linked the centre of Mexico with Guatemala and the prosperous west coast of Chiapas, thus referring to a story about commerce and the struggles for control over its routes. Travelling by boat, another series of histories awaits us. Here, we pass by destroyed bridges, from the

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6 Plans of this kind have existed at least since 1934, but it was first in 1966 that it included the word “development” (the plan of 1934 was for example simply called “the First Six-Year Plan”). Since 1980, the same model for a “National Development Plan” (Plan Nacional de Desarrollo) has been used as the directing document of the federal government, where the budget of the government and the central policies are specified (Villarreal 2013). A particular ministry – the federal Ministry of Social Development (SEDESOL) – is now also in charge of looking after the implementation of development goals in the other ministries. In the states, SEDESOL has its own delegates, which then depend directly on the federal programs. At the same time, there are state ministries for development – as the Ministry for Development and Social Participation (SEDEPAS) in Chiapas – with their own funds. There are in other words two parallel systems working in the states, which count on different sources of funding. Simultaneously, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) coordinates its activities with both federal and state entities, representing an additional important actor for development issues. In Chiapas, with its relatively high percentage of population speaking indigenous languages, the National Commission for the Development of the Indigenous Peoples (CDI) is another important institution to take into account. CDI is a federal institution that inherited the role of the National Indigenista Institute, which however differs from the latter as it does not focus on executing its own programs, but rather to harmonize the activities of the three levels of government in “indigenous regions”. The most important difference is however that it does not build on the ideas of the indigenismo; I will discuss the indigenismo in the following chapter. To this, we should add the private participation in development projects, but also the National Council of Evaluation of the Politics of Social Development (CONEVAL), which, as the name indicates, is in charge of the evaluation of development projects. CONEVAL is financed by the federation, but does not depend on any ministry.

It is also worth mentioning that even if the states have the right to charge certain taxes, they are generally dependant on the federal government for the funding of their programs – an order with precedents at least from the 19th Century (Kroeber 1994:19). The figure of the Mexican president is therewith also important, because of his power to influence decisions about funding of the different entities. This dependence on the federal government is not the least visible in the case of Chiapas, as it is one of the poorest states in the country; according to official figures for 2015, the federal contribution to Chiapas corresponds to 90% of its budget, and 83% of the budgets of the municipalities in the entity (Centro de Estudios de las Finanzas Públicas, 2015:4).
beginning of the twentieth century, standing side by side with the new bridges that connect the capital, Tuxtla Gutiérrez, with the pre-hispanic “capital” of Chiapa de Corzo. We also see how the boatmen, who drive the boats on a part of the river, educate the tourists about spider monkeys, crocodiles, stone formations and the waterfalls, while trying to avoid the garbage in the river, or – when that is not possible – use it as a rhetorical device to indicate what their passengers can do to improve the environment. At the end of the tour, we arrive at the impressive dam of Chicoasén that enabled the tours in the first place. Here, an enormous statue of an engineer apparently indicates the grandeur of modern knowledge and the modern Mexican State, as well as the male power needed to bring about a project the size of that dam (see figure 28, p. 144). At the same time, however, it stresses the environmental problems that face the creatures living on the river, like the spider monkeys and crocodiles. Trading the motorboat used for the tours for the canoes used by the anglers on the other side of the dam, we furthermore see the strategies they have employed to adapt to this landscape, but also how they – as part of a broader organization – struggle to be compensated for the construction of a new dam. At the next dam, in Malpaso, we can, in turn, see what remains of a Sustainable Rural City, which was supposed to relocate people who had endured a flood, and visit the discussions that emerged about it. Moreover, we will also see how the Proletarian Organization Emiliano Zapata, which was involved in this process, continue with their attempts to occupy the State in the same way as they had done during the construction of the Sustainable Rural City, by drawing on their experiences of the land occupations that they had done in coordination with the EZLN. Rather than calling for a question about particular tendencies and struggles, or a simple answer that reduces everything to development, what this multiplicity of histories, things, creatures and people compel us to answer are then the methodological question of how to approach complexity, and the analytical question of how to understand the category of “development” in this complexity.
Dams, development, and the politics of the modern State

In the literature dealing with dams, the comprehensive connections that they are involved with have also been noticed – in a similar way as they have been described above. To introduce the discussion about liquid power in Spain, Erik Swyngedouw (2015) for example starts up with a paella, the emblem of Spanish cuisine. A central ingredient of paella is rice, which takes him to the Ebro Delta in Andalucía, one of the regions that produces the most rice in Europe, and to the canals that came together with El Tranco de Beas Dam (Swyngedouw 2015:5). While this example is used to illustrate the far-reaching implications of large hydrological projects, the thesis that Swyngedouw first of all defends is however “how every political project embodies a process of socio-environmental transformation and every [sic] socio-environmental project reflects and materializes a particular political vision” (Swyngedouw 2015:19-20). The political project that interested Swyngedouw was the forging of the post-imperialist, hydro-modern and developmentalist Spanish State, and its relation to capitalism (see above all Swyngedouw 2015:21).

In the literature on dams, the relation to particular political projects has in fact been more important than the multiplicity of connections and political projects. David McDermott Hughes (2006) has for example highlighted how dams have been employed to create a link between white settlers and the landscape in Zimbabwe, while Christine Folch (2015) has noticed how dams have been effectively used for electoral purposes in Paraguay. The relation between dams and the construction of modern States is also something that has been at the centre of Timothy Mitchell’s (2002) discussion about a dam in Egypt. The construction of dams, he claimed, was a way to “demonstrate the strength of the modern state as a techno-economic power” (Mitchell 2002:23). At the same time, and much like Swyngedouw had pointed to the environmental importance of political projects, Mitchell connected the dams to the “politics of national development and economic growth” (Ibid:19), which he claimed had been so important during the twentieth century. This kind of politics, he argued, was:

a politics of techno-science, which claimed to bring the expertise of modern engineering, technology, and social science to improve the defects of nature, to transform peasant agriculture, to repair the ills of society, and to fix the economy” (Mitchell 2002:19).
The relationship between the politics of the modern State, expertise, economy and development is on the other hand something that has occupied the centrepiece of the discussions about discourses and doctrines of development more generally speaking. This was, for example, essential to James Ferguson’s (1990) well-known idea about development as an “anti-politics machine”, which turned political issues into technical issues to be handled by experts. Ferguson claimed that the most crucial outcome of development were the “side-effects” that would make it worth continuing with development despite the repeated failures of particular projects. What these “side-effects” did was to extend the reach of the State bureaucracy and its military, which in turn would enable certain political projects tied to important, corporate interests.

Another author who has been influential in this field is Arturo Escobar (1995), who has inserted a number of concepts used in development discourses, such as “the third world” and “poverty”, into an orientalist framework that echoes the colonial and imperialist predecessors of development. Development, from the perspective of Escobar, could be translated as a set of ethnocentric assumptions that simultaneously produced the “West” and the “Third World” – in the interest of the former, and particularly the United States. While he considered the modern States to be important sites of knowledge production and of translation of knowledge into concrete policies (see for example Escobar 1995:179; 185 and 133), the primary subject in this process was to be found in international institutions, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, and at universities promoting the interests of the “West”, first of all Harvard University (Ibid:55-101). Through the concepts produced and circulated through these institutions, he claimed that the world order would be legitimizied, and thus sustained. Central here was the political economy as an academic discipline, which, he sustained, was “a master narrative indebted at the cultural level to the reality that it seeks to sublate, modern capitalism” (Escobar 1995:203). Political economy could thus be used to normalize the accumulation of capital as a basic principle for human endeavours.

Another fundamental contribution to this discussion was made by Cowen and Shenton (1996), who above all stressed the relationship between development and capitalism. According to these authors, the idea of development builds on the basic
tension between economic Progress and social or moral Order, as formulated by Auguste Comte (Cowen & Shenton 1996:27-28). Cowen and Shenton used a similar division, between *immanent* and *intentional* development, to distinguish between a “discontinuous process in which destruction and renewal are simultaneous, as much as sequential” – a process they tied to the dynamics of capitalism – and the intended interventions in this process, made “in the name of development”. Much as Comte’s ideas about the moral Order balancing the excesses of an unequal, material Progress, Cowen and Shenton thus suggested that intentional development normally addresses the undesirable effects of immanent development (or capitalism), such as unemployment and impoverishment (Cowen & Shenton 1996:ix). The kinds of intentional development that interested Cowen and Shenton were those framed as a State policy, where the State takes on the trusteeship of its citizens, something that they referred to as “doctrines of development” (Ibid:viii). A similar distinction has also been made by Gillian Hart (2001), who however stressed a shift from a form of development that contrasted with the immanent development – which she referred to as “big-D Development” – to a form of development that was simply part of the immanent development: the “small d-development” (Hart 2001:650).

While the authors referred to have dealt with situations marked by intricate relations, and long term changes – which show similarities with the multiplicity of things and histories that I have lined out by following the currents of the Grijalva River – there has in general been less interest in complexity as such. The focus has rather been on offering historically grounded explanations to particular, contemporary entities, trends, or political projects, thus trying to encompass the multiplicity of things that are dealt with, within a particular set of organizing principles. Implicit in the model proposed by Cowen and Shenton is for example the idea that the only thing that can disrupt the dialectics of Order and Progress is to give form to an alternative to capitalist relations – which is precisely the kind of idea that has made the Zapatista autonomy so attractive, and which has undermined places as the Grijalva River. Despite his interest

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7 In Hart’s words, the former refers to “a post-second world war project of intervention in the third world that emerged in the context of decolonization and the cold war”, while the latter is defined as “development of capitalism as a geographically uneven, profoundly contradictory set of historical processes” (Hart 2001:650).
in multiple connections, also Swyngedeouw’s study focused on how the modern Spanish State had taken its form through a socio-environmental project, which was presented as “ultimately driven by political forces and economic processes that aspire to turning nature into capital” (Swyngedeouw 2015:21). A similar interest also motivated Arturo Escobar, although his angle instead stressed the importance of shifting the development tales about “populations in need of development and aid” (Escobar 1995:213), for an understanding of how “the modern world, including the modernized Third World, is built on the suffering and brutalization of millions” (Nandy in Escobar 1995:213). The complexity also disappears in Ferguson’s claim that:

the ‘development’ apparatus in Lesotho is not a machine for eliminating poverty that is incidentally involved with the state bureaucracy; it is a machine for reinforcing and expanding the exercise of bureaucratic state power (Ferguson 1990:255).

Even the study by Mitchell (2002) is in fact not as interested in the complexity that it describes, as the techniques used by experts to reduce it.

**From the false/true divide to the issue of complexity**

It is worth stressing that the way that I have approached the literature on dams and development differs from a critique formulated by David Mosse (2005), despite the evident similarities that our approaches show. What Mosse has drawn attention to – echoing Marshall Sahlin’s critique of the “Foucauldian-Gramscian-Nietzschean obsession with power” (cited in Gledhill 2009:11 and 18) – is how easily a “new functionalist sociology” has taken its form, which “substitutes false objects with real ones” (Mosse 2005:6). In this way, development would above all have to give way to political economy. Mosse, on the other hand, claimed that the relationship between policy making and the practices in particular projects was much more complicated than authors such as Ferguson and Escobar would give at hand. What they failed to recognise, according to Mosse, was the importance of the negotiations of development – which was what Mosse focused on.
While Mosse’s critique is important, his proposal in a sense side-stepped the issue. If the “new functionalist sociology” produced a simplified version of development, Mosse did not address the concept of development, and its production, which had been so central in the discussions he criticized. Despite his promising focus on how development projects were made, Mosse delimited his analysis to that which went on within an institutional framework that he however took for granted. If he thus did not “undermine” (Harman 2013) development by proposing that something else, such as the “global context”, is essential for its presence, he rather “overmined” (Ibid) it – that is, he presented development as consisting of that which appears to the human perception, or is constructed by human beings.

The basic difference between Mosse’s proposal and the one put forward in this thesis is thus that Mosse focused on the distinction between true and false, while I have stressed the place of complexity – a preoccupation related to the ways that certain people, places, things, beings and relations become difficult to perceive in the analyses focusing on encompassing a messy reality into certain organizing principles (cf. Spivak 1988). On the other hand, while Mosse is firmly located within development agencies and their practical work, this thesis seeks to avoid the overmining of things that appears in Mosse’s study, by moving from the frameworks set up by development institutions, and instead approach development by looking “elsewhere” (Harvey 2005). The entrance to the discussion is thus not through a particular development project, but through the materiality of the Grijalva River – and the material forms and the ideas that give development its presence in the area. In this way, much as Penny Harvey (2005) has proposed in relation to the study of the State, the research chooses a different path than the representations that follow the instutions established in the name of development, and also lets development be absent at times – as opposed to the case of Escobar, Cowen & Shenton, etc. By moving along the river, development appears and disappears, and in this way, a space is opened up for things not completely occupied by claims that relate them to development. As we will see, at times, important ideas

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8 When the theoretically unexpected, despite everything, does appear in these kinds of models, it too easily turns into a peripheral, or “local” abnormality without major importance for the general theory (cf. Harvey 2005) – or, as we will see with more detail in Chapter Three, as a form of corruption of an ideal model.
tied to development can in fact be more visible where no development project is involved.

An evident advantage of this approach is that it gives way to development as an ethnographic category, rather than approaching it as a philosophical character – as has been the case of the definitions of development discussed above. While the ideal of a philosophic concept is a clearly delimitable phenomenon, an ethnographic category instead takes its form through an open-ended typology of instances where it appears practically (Candea et al 2015:17-9), and where the things that are included don’t necessarily “add up” (Law & Mol 2001:1). Turning development into an ethnographic category thus implies moving away from the question of what development is – which is the kind of question that moves the production of a philosophic concept – to instead focus on how specific things and practices bring a notion of “development” into being as lived reality. In other words: rather than studying what development is, this thesis focuses on the local complexity that is involved when particular development projects are brought about, at the same time, however, that it pays attention to the forms and ideas that produce the effect of development.

Instead of pointing to any single, “general” tendency – whether it concerns how a particular developmentalist State has been built through a socio-environmental project (Swyngedouw 2015); how the State takes its form through side-effects of the “anti-politics machine” of development (Ferguson 1990); how the “West” dominates the rest through the economic theories formulated by international development agencies (Escobar 1995); or how development is intimately related to the dialectics of capitalism (Cowen & Shenton 1996) – this thesis then aims at maintaining the complex multiplicity of things that emerge in the Grijalva River by turning development into an ethnographic category, which implies an approach to the category through its materiality and the different concepts and ideas tied to it, but also through its presence and absence. On the other hand, the thesis shows an interest in the effect of development, which makes it come forth as a coherent entity, and, as such, part of a particular political project. In fact, as Ziai (2015) has implied in his analysis of the post-
development literature that emerged in the wake of Escobar’s work, the critique of development easily becomes a participant in the production of this effect.

**The travel guide approach**

The study of development that I have proposed here needs a methodological strategy that makes room for the complex multiplicity along the Grijalva River, and which does not imply either its undermining or its overmining, but which can also spot the techniques that are used to reduce this very complexity. One way that fits a place like a river particularly well is to think of the ethnography as a travel guide (cf. Latour 2005:17). A brief example of how this approach works is when Bruno Latour described how he climbed Mont Aiguille with the help of a map. Instead of staring at the contrast between the map and the territory, what he wanted to draw attention to was a whole “chain of reference”, which had given rise to the map and other artefacts that made it effective. This chain included all the standards, bureaucracy and funding necessary to launch satellites, which in turn were needed for the positioning on the map with a GPS, as well as certain physical indicators laid out along the way to make the map easier to connect to the territory (Latour 2013:74-80). While this example shows the limits of a focus on certain established dichotomies, it also questions the focus on human actors: claiming that it was Bruno Latour who climbed the mountain is only part of the story. By considering the chain of reference involved in this endeavour, it is indeed impossible to determine exactly *where* the source of the act is to be found; therefore, it is also impossible to delimit exactly *what* is acting within a network of things. Agency would consequently have to be understood as “distributed” between a range of human and non-human actors. “Purposeful action and intentionality”, Latour also has claimed, “may not be the properties of objects, but they are not the properties of humans either” (Latour quoted in Donovan 2014:878). Where agency can be found, he argued, was instead in foucauldian *dispositifs* – in institutions and apparatuses.

For the question about the material forms and the ideas tied to development, this means that they cannot easily be connected to a particular intention to act against the negative sides of capitalism, as Cowen and Shenton (1996) argued, nor can they be
withdrawn from intentionality altogether and placed in a sphere of immanent
development. Development would rather have to be understood as appearing through
the material chains involving things that could be referred to one end or the other of
dichotomies such as the one drawn out by Cowen and Shenton.

It is worth adding that Latour’s questioning of dichotomies, and the related
idea of distributed agency, follows from his idea of a flat ontology – which in turn
draws on his “principle of irreducibility” (Latour 1988:158), that is, the idea that
“[n]othing is, by itself, either reducible or irreducible to anything else”. By maintaining
things local, the principle thus aims at neither undermining nor overmining things, in
the sense of Harman (2013). Certain places can indeed have safer connections to far
more places than others, but would not be understood as relating to a local/global
divide. The kind of long-term and far-reaching things that interested Escobar, Ferguson
and Swyngedouw would rather be related to “entities that don’t sleep and associations
that don’t break down” (Latour 2005:70), such as certain forms of infrastructure and
technologies.

If the travel guide proposed by Latour then draws the attention to chains of
things rather than established dichotomies, it is also deeply committed to understanding
local ways of doing and ordering things in different domains, such as law, religion,
biology, engineering, and so forth. In fact, this interest in local practices is crucial to
the broader political project outlined by Latour. By understanding both local practices
and their domains – including their dichotomies – and the networks which they
themselves have difficulties perceiving, the analyst can become a “diplomat” (Latour
2013:297) who knows how to “speak better” (Ibid:135-6). These ideas connect well to
the ideal that Latour drew out in the beginning of the 1990s, of making way for a
“parliament of things”, which would enable the inclusion of that which modern politics
has excluded – first of all non-humans (Latour 1993 [1991]:142-5). As Candea et al
(2015) have pointed to more recently, these ideas, however, imply a problematic
“analytic asymmetry” which emphasises connections over disconnections, and thus
undercuts “the productive potential of disconnection, distance and detachment, as
ethical, methodological and philosophical commitments” (Candea et al 2015:1). There
is, on the other hand, hardly any problem incorporating a more pronounced focus on
disconnections into the approach of the travel guide; in this thesis, this is also what has been done.

Navigating on the Grijalva River

Instead of trying to control a particular territory by mapping it into pre-established coordinates (cf. Mol & Law 2001:1), the travel guide then stresses the “partial perspective” (Haraway 1991) of the guide, which draws its analytical strength from focusing on details that don’t necessarily add up when putting them together. What the ethnographer makes in a place like the Grijalva River is therefore a sort of nautical chart, a practical tool designed to give the user the ability to move through unfamiliar waters, to know where it is adequate to make stops, but also to make it easier to spot where there are dangerous currents, rocks, plastic bottles, logs, and other things that can endanger the trip. In this sense, the chart clearly connects to the places that it describes in a way that makes it difficult to become detached from the territory – as for example is the case with maps that become logos of the State (Anderson 2006:175) – without therefore being relevant only for those wishing to travel along the Grijalva River. Rather than delimiting the importance of a study, the idea is that an analysis clearly anchored locally has particularly good possibilities of contributing to a more detailed understanding of other places as well (cf. Stengers 2005:186-87).

In more practical terms, the way that I have gone about producing the nautical chart of the Grijalva River has been to use participant observation and a form of case study method, combined with a historical approach that draws on Foucault’s (1969) archeology of knowledge. In this way, I have thus sought to capture the material traces of development projects, while paying close attention to the way people along the river act and organize things. A good way of perceiving disconnections has in turn been to spend time in theoretically ambiguous places, that have not found a clear place in established narratives in Chiapas.

What makes Foucault’s (1969) archaeological approach so interesting when considering the discussions referred to above, is how – in a similar fashion to the idea of approaching the subject of study by looking “elsewhere” (Harvey 2005) – it looked
for a particular discourse far from its most evident centre. Although the starting point would be to analyse the emergence of established concepts like medicine, political economy or psychopathology, Foucault did not want to place himself within them, to study their internal configuration or their secret contradictions. What he instead aimed at was dispersing their apparent familiarity (Foucault 1969:9-43; see above all p. 38).

Rather than putting ourselves within the discourse of development itself, as Escobar (1995) is a good example of, what the archaeological approach suggests is to approach it by looking at a number of discourses and the material forms they are part of, which relates to development in one way or another. By using this kind of archaeology, development is again not constantly the centre of attention, but appears and disappears throughout the thesis.

To be able to find and understand these materially embedded discourses, I have relied heavily on participant observation. As Gillian Evans (2012) has argued, participant observation is a way of turning the self into “the primary research tool”, which is done through the participation in the activities of those the anthropologist engages with during his or her fieldwork. In relation to the methodological strategy outlined above, this method is an excellent way to change perspectives, and understand different ways in which things are ordered, as well as the ambiguities found in these orders. As Evans put it:

The objective is to make an embodied, visceral journey into the socially and culturally distinctive way of life of a particular group of people in order to know what it is to inhabit their environment, live their social relations, understand their preoccupations and appreciate their values and feelings about each other and what matters in their world. The aim is to gain insight into what it is like to experience the world from a different point of view and to question, thereby, everything that is taken for granted about what it is to be human.

Implied in these ideas is the importance of learning from the people that one is living with, and the openness to ways of seeing the world otherwise. Participant observation then also depends on the relationships that the ethnographer is able to create and maintain with people in a particular context, and the willingness of those that he or she works with to share their lives. As trust is crucial in this process, we are
therefore dealing with a method that is often time-consuming, and more so as the ethnographer is often not very familiar with the place where he or she has arrived in, and therefore might act in ways that do not lend much confidence. Where I worked, the figure of the anthropologist was not as established as in certain places in the Highlands and the Lacandona Jungle, and it was also common that I initially would be associated with some government institution.

If not knowing the people that one wants to work with can be an initial obstacle that takes time to get over, on the other hand, this very alienation makes it much easier to get answers to “dumb” questions about “everything that is taken for granted about what it is to be human”, as Evans formulated it. This is a quite straightforward process when we actually have no idea about the issue at hand, or when we expect to encounter difference, but much more difficult regarding things that we also take for granted in a deep sense – that is, where we do not expect alternatives, and where such alternatives are even challenging to imagine. As Viveiros de Castro (2004:11) put it, partly drawing on Wittgenstein’s work, “[a]n error or deception can only be determined as such from within a given language game, while an equivocation is what unfolds in the interval between different language games”. While “errors” in other words are relatively easy to spot and correct, when it comes to “equivocations”, it can take tremendous effort even to perceive that a deep difference is at hand. According to Viveiros de Castro, this equivocation cannot be overcome by translations that imply that the same thing is understood in different ways; rather, what can be done is to control the equivocation by not trying to overcome the differences.

The event which made me realize this in a visceral way was when I was “equivocated” regarding a particular use of the term “politics” – a term that would turn out to be central for this research. The event occurred the very first time I arrived outside the offices of the new dam that was about to be built in Chicoasén, when a young man, Joaquín González, complained about not being hired because of the “politics” of the Federal Commission of Electricity. Joaquín had a degree in engineering from a university in the capital, and expressed his ideas in a way that made it easy for me to connect with him; in fact, he would later become my entrance point to Chicoasén. This connection, and his education, might have been part of why I
assumed I only needed a minor translation of his “politics” to fit it into my own scheme. I took for granted that he was referring to “corruption”, which I in turn understood as a way of privileging family or friendship ties, or as making a particular decision because of a monetary compensation, instead of considering professional experience and formal training – an understanding deeply rooted in liberal ideals. This understanding would not change until I was back in Manchester and started working over my field notes again, comparing what he had said with the knowledge that I acquired later on in Chicoasén regarding the way that the new dam was discussed. In this way, I started re-thinking my initial assumption, and instead framed his ideas within a principle of fair exchange between the company and “the pueblo”, the inhabitants of Chicoasén. This idea implied that the pueblo had given the Federal Commission of Electricity permission to build the dam on their land, which would entitle them to a fair share of the earnings that it would produce. Part of this deal would consist of jobs, and when the jobs were given to somebody who was not from the pueblo – even if they had a higher formal training and more adequate experience – this principle would then be violated. The “politics” of the company could in other words still be translated as “corruption”, but not of a norm defending merits as the correct ground for deciding about employment. The corrupt conduct that was to be found within the Federal Commission of Electricity was instead understood as sidestepping their primordial commitment with the pueblo of Chicoasén. This, in other words, implied quite a different way of understanding politics than I had expected – but also pointed to an understanding of development that was not that easy to relate to fundamental divides, such as the one between its immanent and intentional forms, as proposed by Cowen and Shenton (1996). While González’s wish to get a job could be related to the kind of moral Order Comte referred to, and which the intentional development projects were supposed to deal with, the reason why González and so many others in Chicoasén were so upset was not because the construction of the dam had made their lives worse. The problem was that their share of the gains was far from as high as they had expected.

What is curious about discovering alternatives to the kind of ideas that one deeply takes for granted is that they are both the most gratifying and the most
embarrassing ones during the research. While these discoveries appear to put things in place, they also quickly seem to be so obvious that it becomes difficult to understand how they were not apparent from the very beginning, or why one’s own assumptions were so deeply rooted that alternative interpretations did not even appear possible.

Although participant observation then has been fundamental for my work, and offered the possibility of thinking in different ways about things, I have also at times used certain aspects of the case study method. As Kapferer (2006) has pointed to, this method reconstructed anthropology as a study of modernity through studies of situations related to crisis and change. Much attention was given to particular encounters – as Gluckman’s (1940) famous analysis of the inauguration of a bridge – because of their possibility of clarifying the relations in a specific field (Kapferer 2006:118-123). In general terms, the extended case study then builds on situations, registered through participant observation, which aims at abstracting meanings of these events. The case study could therefore be understood as “a detailed examination of an event (or series of related events) which the analyst believes exhibits (or exhibit) the operation of some identified general theoretical principle” (Mitchell 2006 [1983]: 27).

What I found useful with this method was how it helped to make the relations between different actors more visible, and how it showed the relations between different forms of knowledge – which again was an important aspect for the nautical chart that I sought to draw out. What, however, did not work as well with this method was its assumption that the actors shared the same “terrain of struggle” (Li 1999). In other words, it was not always possible to simply locate the different positions of those involved in relation to a shared situation; more important than the positions was often how they considered the situation at hand. To go back to the example of the engineer from Chicoasén who could not get a job: at times, the problems formulated by different actors would only coincide on a superficial level of words, while differing in terms of the ways that these words were framed.
**Entering the river**

As should be clear from the examples that I have drawn on in this introduction, I conducted fieldwork in several places and with different groups along the Grijalva River. The three main places were the municipalities of Chiapa de Corzo, Chicoasén and Mezcalapa (see maps on pp. 17, 52 and 141). My main interests in these places were quite varied. In Chiapa de Corzo, I worked as a boatman to understand more about the relation between development and tourism on the river. The same interest also led me to work with the development department of the institution in charge of the nature reserve where the boats made their tours, the National Council of Protected Nature Areas (CONANP). In Chicoasén, in turn, I focused on the negotiations about a series of development projects and the production of energy through the dams. Here, I worked with two groups that participated in these renegotiations, but also with a cooperative of anglers who worked right where the new dam was about to be built. In Mezcalapa, finally, the main issue was the relation between rurality and urbanity, tied to the Sustainable Rural Cities Programme. This time, I started off at the local office of the organization that had been involved in this project, the Proletarian Organization Emiliano Zapata (OPEZ). Later on, I started working in the settlement of Los Guayabos, which had also been involved with the Sustainable Rural Cities Programme.

While the idea for this research project started off in relation to the Sustainable Rural City in Mezcalapa, it was among the boatmen giving tours in the river where I formally started my fieldwork. I hoped that this entrance would give a good overview of the area, as I would be moving back and forth on the river on a daily basis. Chiapa de Corzo would also turn out to offer an important strategic advantage, since my wife shortly before leaving for the town found out that she had relatives there. This made the arrival much easier, as one of her relatives, Francisco Cameras, helped us find a nicely located house, with an amazing view over the town and the river; he was also the owner of the workshop of *carros alegóricos* – a kind of carriage that is used for different festivities – where I spent a lot of time during my months in Chiapa de Corzo.

Francisco also quickly connected me with one of the owners of the company where I started working only a few days after arriving. Throughout my fieldwork, he
would also let me be present in situations that otherwise would have been very hard to get access to, not the least when it came to his relations with local politicians.

The relation with those working at the boat company was somewhat more complicated, at least initially, as they all related me to the owners; it was after all through one of them that I had accessed the site. I had also happened to come just a day after one of the boatmen had been fired, which the others would relate to his involvement in a labour conflict unfolding at the time. That situation added to their suspicions that I was employed by the owners to get information about how the boatmen behaved during the tours. After a couple of weeks working with them – washing the tourists’ life vests, cleaning the waiting room, helping out the visitors who arrived, putting on and taking off their life jackets, driving the tours together with the boatmen – one of them, Roberto, however, decided to take on the task of teaching me how to become a boatman. The boats were a great passion of Roberto’s, and he had dreamt of becoming a boatman as a child. As he grew up, he lived right next to the harbour, and would see the boats pass by every day. When the harbour where he lived was to be rebuilt, he and his family nevertheless were forced to move from the river side, to a place much closer to another small harbour that was also about to be built, and where he then started working.

Figure 3. At the dock of the boat company.
It was not difficult to understand Roberto’s passion for the boats, particularly as they were moving through such a beautiful landscape as the Sumidero Canyon. Roberto, however, taught me much more than how to drive a boat and what to tell the tourists. For example, he taught me a great deal about another passion of his: cockfights. In fact, his skills as a rooster trainer probably earned him more money than his day job.

While working with the boatmen, I also started visiting Chicoasén and Mezcalapa, and after five months in Chiapa de Corzo, I moved to the town of Chicoasén, where the discussions about the development projects that were to come with the construction of the new dam had just started taking place. Here, I stayed with the extended family of Fermín Muñóz, who was one of the leaders of a group that had formed to negotiate the development projects with the Federal Commission of Electricity, the so called Movimiento 16 de septiembre. I had met him one of the first days I visited Chicoasén, through Joaquín González, the engineer I had met outside the offices of the new dam. Although I spent a lot of time with Fermín, I probably spent even more with his sister and with his parents, who were always at home; his mother had a small shop that she took care of, and his sister was a housewife. The group of houses that made up the extended family of the Muñoz – houses that were built around a shared patio – therefore, turned into a central site for my fieldwork here, and taught me much about what it meant to live in a family in Chicoasén. Also worth mentioning are my contacts with the extended Estrada family, who also had a couple of members participating in the negotiations.
Over time, I became particularly close with the couple Jairo and Perla, who later on became my compadres.9

I stayed in Chicoasén for almost four months; half of the time at Fermín’s house, and the other half in the small locality of La Represa, where I worked with the members of a cooperative of anglers that I had met during one of their protests against the Federal Commission of Electricity for not paying the compensation that they were entitled to since their fishing rights would be infringed upon with the new dam. In La Represa, I would go fishing a couple of times per week, mainly at night, and otherwise spend time with some of the anglers or their relatives. Otherwise, I simply stayed in the informal restaurant near my lodging, where I would talk to its owner, Fernanda.

My last stop was in Mezcalapa, first in the town of Malpaso, where the offices of the OPEZ were found, and then in the village of Los Guayabos. I stayed here for another three months. At the beginning, I slept at the office, before I moved in with the family of Martina. At the office, I helped out with administrative work, and accompanied the leaders when they had to go somewhere. I also spent a considerable amount of time at a gelatería – the only ice-cream parlour in the town, where the regional leaders, Hever, Uriel and Mariano also gathered to talk about a range of issues. In Los Guayabos, in turn, I mainly worked with Manuel, one of seven brothers who dominated the locality numerically and politically. Manuel’s brother, Mariano, was a regidor (a councillor) of the municipal government, as a representative of the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) – a position that he had gotten through the OPEZ. It is worth mentioning that my entrance to this area was facilitated by my friendship with the leader of the OPEZ, Pablo César Gómez, whom I had gotten to know when I started working on the Rural City in Mezcalapa, in 2013. In Los Guayabos, I would help out on Manuel’s farm, and otherwise conduct interviews in the area regarding the experiences of the Sustainable Rural Cities, but I also spent a lot of time with children who apparently found my presence very interesting (too interesting from their parents’

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9 The term compadre originally refers to the institutionalized relation between the parents and the godfather of one of their children. The term has, however, been extended to a wide range of moments; Jairo and Perla for example became my compadres (the female term is comadre) because I was the godfather, or sponsor, of one of their children at an event when he finished primary school. However, “compadre” (or the short form “compa” – which both can refer to compadre and compañero) can sometimes be used even between people who are not compadres in any formal way.
perspective). They would take me swimming in the river every day, and often convinced me to go with them to capture cicadas – which they then played with – or to try to find some honey. I would show them how to take photos; the photo below, to the left, for example, was taken by one of them, Jonny, Manuel’s son. With the adults, I would normally hang out outside Manuel’s house – as they showed up to buy something in his little shop – or during the basketball games that took place every other day.

![Figure 5 and 6. Manuel watching cartoons after a hard day in the fields. To the right, a basketball game with a team from a neighbouring village that was part of the OPEZ.](image)

**Development and political forms along the Grijalva river**

As I moved back and forth along the river, it became clear that different issues were important in different places. These issues would all, at one time or another, connect to development, or say something about it by *not* connecting to it in any direct way. These issues were not only something that people talked about, but things that had organized the places along the river in a material way. Through the things, these issues had gained some degree of independence from the people who used them, and to move within these forms was also a physical endeavour. On the other hand, these forms also tended to involve long histories, even if they did not always point in the same direction. Indeed, an important aspect of these forms was their high degree of ambiguity, which in turn constituted the centre of their political dimension: the struggle that the “political” of the concept refers to has to do with the different perspectives on a particular act, event or thing, which often had to confront each other more or less openly to establish a particular, moral understanding of the issue at hand. It was then this materiality that
made a term like “issue” a bit too abstract, and the reason why I have preferred to refer to them as “political forms”.

The most evident political forms when focusing on the Grijalva River related to land and water – two intertwined forms that, for example, had divided the landscape along the river into plots of different sizes, but also the space of the river that had been tied to fishing or transit rights. Just as visible were also gender politics and labour politics, which were both part of the organization of the spaces along the river, and were especially important for the way that people read and acted in them. Another historically deep political form was constituted by the ethnic politics, which had re-organized the landscape along the river in a profound way – although it was not always as immediately visible, or easy to delimit, as for example the land politics would normally be. Another crucial, yet more subtle form was found in the pueblo politics, which was opposed by the population politics. These forms, as already indicated, contrasted a kind of politics that had strong connections to gender and kinship politics (the pueblo politics), to a project that built on ideas about rational conduct in accordance with certain economic theories (the population politics). These two forms were particularly important for the way that “the public” and its spaces were built. Finally, we have a political form which was fundamental for the ideas of development, but still surprisingly disconnected from the projects made in its name: the politics of movement. This kind of politics had been part of a long process, which – in connection to ambitious development projects, like the construction of the dams – had centralized much of the control over resources as well as the moral obligation to offer poverty relief. People’s movement would therefore easily be read as failures of development, and/or as an issue that the state had to do something about. However, certain forms of movement – and particularly the aspirations of those movements – did not fit well within the discussions about development.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Political form</th>
<th>Material reality</th>
<th>Field of conflict</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Land</td>
<td><em>Ejidos, fincas, etc</em></td>
<td>Individuals vs collectives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>Spanish and Indian villages, and contemporary ethnic divisions of different kinds</td>
<td>Indigenous population vs Spaniards or mestizos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pueblo</td>
<td>Municipalities, <em>ejidos</em>, countries, social differentiation</td>
<td>Inside vs outside</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population</td>
<td>Unions, political parties, governmental institutions</td>
<td>Reason vs custom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment</td>
<td>Nature, as in the form of Nature Reserves</td>
<td>Human vs nature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Movement</td>
<td>State borders, urban/rural divide</td>
<td>Development vs migration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Division of labor, spaces, etc</td>
<td>Male autonomy vs kinship solidarity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 7. Table of political forms that are important for this study.*

Drawing on these political forms, I will then argue that development along the Grijalva River appears through the networks of things that constitute these political forms, and thus constitutes a complex category that is not possible to reduce to any single political project. This does not mean that development *really* is all about political forms, which would repeat the mistake of the “new functionalist sociology” that Mosse
(2005) referred to. Drawing on Latour’s (1999:21) work, the argument is instead that development is present precisely *because* it is constructed through these forms. This presence is, on the other hand, much more complex than has been presented by development agencies.

It is worth stressing the gendered nature of the research and the analysis that I carry out. While I set out to explore the local experiences of development, the deep gender divides in the field made it much easier to access the perspectives of men than those of women. Although I found similar ideas about development and politics among the men and women that I worked with, the importance of the local experiences and local concepts also restricted my own analysis, as I therefore did not focus as much on places where development and politics were not considered to be present locally. The most significant consequence of the strategy that I employed, and of the restrictions found in the field, is thus that women’s experiences of development and of politics is not adequately represented. While a female researcher of course would have had more access to these kinds of experiences, it would also be possible to expand the spaces of the research into areas that are not necessarily understood as political, and related to development, locally. Towards the end of the thesis, I however dwell more on the gendered character of politics and of development, from a perspective that takes a step away from the issues stressed by the actors involved in the negotiations about particular development projects.

**Organization of the thesis**

The way I have chosen to present this work is by starting with an archaeology of some important political forms that I perceived along the river. I will do so by discussing the problems facing one of the directors in charge of the construction of the new dam in Chicoasén. While the director was well aware of the challenges he faced, what he did not mention was the presence of the different political forms that saturated the river with a wide range of interests and perspectives that often challenged the way the company had presented its plan for building the dam. It is then on the history of these forms that I will focus here. In the chapters that follow, I will describe these forms with
more detail, one by one, starting off at the centre of the negotiations that appear alongside the different development projects that I will deal with: the Sustainable Rural City in Mezcalapa and the construction of a new dam in Chicoasén. Already when approaching the efforts to clean the garbage in the Grijalva River, we will however start moving away from the most immediate concerns that are discussed explicitly in relation to development projects, and rather focus on the changing character of the Mexican State, and the ways that development is used to create the effect of development and of the State – that is, the effect of an existence that goes beyond particular institutions, politicians, projects, policies, objects, infrastructural structures, and so forth. Development as a way to create a coherent State becomes more pronounced when moving further away from the explicit negotiations concerning particular development projects, as I will do when I focus on the movement of people living along the river. In the final chapter of the thesis, no specific development project is at the centre of the discussion: instead, the discussion revolves around the way that gender, and especially masculinity, is thought of and enacted along the river. In this way, the thesis moves little by little from the most immediate concerns expressed by the actors involved with different development projects, to the contours of development as a resource tied to the modern, sovereign State, and the gendered bias that it relies on locally. If the different bits and pieces that are involved in the making of particular development projects are difficult to put together into a coherent whole – which is the main argument of the thesis – I also draw attention to the way that certain political forms – first and foremost the politics of gender, but also the broad form of the State sovereignty – are sufficiently broad as to create the effect of development and of the State as having an existence beyond the particular things, people, institutions, and so forth, that make it up.

After the introduction and the chapter outlining the background of the rest of the thesis, I will thus start off, in chapter three, focusing on the different perspectives on the Sustainable Rural City that was supposed to be built in Mezcalapa, and its relation to the contemporary politics of land. My intention is to show how the project was perceived locally, as part of a longer struggle, with a context marked by the construction of the dams. At the same time, I will show how different understandings
of land politics clashed, as academics and journalists writing about the area often read this struggle in the light of the policies of the EZLN, and how development appeared in different ways. In chapter four, I will turn to the construction of the new dam in Chicoasén, where the tension between pueblo and population politics became evident – which in turn related to categories such as participation, public sphere, but also appeared in the relation between development and labour politics. The focus here will be on the attempts to delimit the pueblo – an important enterprise since the company in charge of the dam claimed that the pueblo was the beneficiary of the development projects. In chapter five, the focus is instead on the garbage in the Grijalva River. By analysing the different perspectives relating to the garbage, it became evident how we here were dealing with a political form centred to the tensions between development and nature, which was a quite different conflict compared to what is discussed in the previous two chapters. What we will see in chapter six is then how certain movements – as the relocations that were planned as part of the Sustainable Rural Cities – let us perceive development from an angle where it becomes clearer how entangled it is with border politics and national sovereignty, but also with development desires. What I will stress in this chapter is however the kind of movements that become “illegible” (Scott 1998) from the perspective of the politics tied to the State – and which also were effectively excluded from the discussions about the Rural Cities. In chapter seven, I will in turn concentrate on the difficulties acting as a man along the river, which relates to gender politics, and particularly to the “threshold masculinity” – a kind of masculinity that not only points to the important ambiguities facing men trying to act as such, but also traces the foundation of the way that the idea of “politics” was commonly used along the river. What was so particular about this form was that it offered a basis also for the other political forms, which – despite of evident ambiguities – was understood as stable ground for the ways that they looked. In the last chapter, I will finally draw out the conclusions of the thesis, with a focus on how development appeared as a complex category through the political forms that it was part of.
2. Background

Political forms and the new dam in the Grijalva River

*Figure 8. A jaguar costume in the museum of the abandoned amusement park Amikúu.*
Figure 9. Map of the old and the new dams in Chicoasén, together with the towns of Chicoasén and Osumacinta.

Figure 10. A model of the dam Chicoasén II, to which I have added the names of some central parts of the dam. The curtain is what initially raises the level of the river found upstream from it, forming the reservoir. It is at this moment that the floodings are caused at that side of the dam. (Behind the dam, no flooding is caused by the construction.) The energy is produced through the turbines, which will rotate faster the higher the fall from the reservoir. From the perspective of the production of energy, it is therefore desirable to have as much water as possible in the reservoir. If it gets too full, it can, however, risk damaging the dam because of the pressure, and the spillway is then used to level the reservoir. However, this can cause floodings downstream. To be able to balance between these opposing interests, those controlling the dam rely on weather forecasts.
Introduction

In this chapter, I will focus on some conflicts that related to the construction of the new dam in Chicoasén, their relation to existing dams, and the broader history of which the dams are part. More specifically, the chapter deals with a group in Chicoasén that called itself the Comité Ejidal – a group that had just taken its form during my fieldwork, although it built on much older conflicts and alliances. What I will highlight about their activities is how they related both to the State owned company in charge of the dams, the CFE, and to actors from outside of the municipality that they had invited for legal and political support. In this way, the chapter introduces a set of political forms that are also useful to analyse the struggles that are at the centre of the following chapters, and which thus are important to understand how development appears as a lived reality along the Grijalva River.

The histories tied to the river and the dams are particularly apt for the purpose of introducing different political forms, because of their far-ranging connections to people, things, creatures and ideas. As already indicated, these comprehensive connections are indeed the reason why the infrastructural system of the river and the dams is so interesting for the argument of this thesis. What the complexity of the river and the dams shows is precisely how difficult it is to single out a particular political direction to development as a phenomenon that it is possible to withdraw from contradictory, local contexts. As I will show in this chapter, the different dams that have been built in the river since the 1950s can, for example, be seen from the perspective of the important policy changes of the federal State from the middle of the twentieth century until the present. As we again will see in this chapter, the dams have also constantly given rise to a range of local mobilizations, which in different ways have related to actors that have mobilized or supported people in other areas of the state and beyond. At the same time, the conflicts sparked by the new dam point to regional differences, but also show their similarities. While there are significant, and historically deep differences that thus appear between the region of the river (the Central Depression) and those that have occupied most of the academic and journalistic attention in Chiapas (the Highlands and the Lacandona Jungle), the struggles related to the dams show their similarities through important institutions, like the ejido and the
finca, as well as in the notion of the pueblo, and concerning gendered relations. The infrastructural system of the river and the dams have therefore been crucial for the local experience of development and of the political, as it has come to condense and connect a range of political forms that have not necessarily started along the river. As already mentioned in the introduction – and as I will come back to with more detail in chapter seven – the way that development and politics are thought of locally for example privilege a connection to male ideals, which draw on ideas that go back much further than to the construction of the dams.

Figure 11. The reservoir of the dam Manuel Moreno Torres, seen from the perspective of the statue of the man with the same name (depicted in figure 28, p. 144).

Political forms along the Grijalva River

It was still early when I reached the offices that the Federal Commission of Electricity (CFE) was setting up for the administration of the construction of a new dam in the municipality of Chicoasén (see map on p. 52). The CFE, as already mentioned, is a State owned company in charge of the dams in the Grijalva River, and was also responsible for this new one – although they had subcontracted large part of the construction to a group of privately owned companies from central Mexico. Despite the early hour, several smaller groups of men had gathered outside the gates, waiting for an opportunity to get a job. Minimal infrastructure had been put in place to make this waiting more bearable, which consisted of a shop so small that it fit on a plastic
table, where sandwiches, bags of crisps, and sodas were for sale. As the director I was supposed to meet had not shown up yet, I also sat down to wait.

In front of the gates, the curtain of the first dam was visible, together with the amassment of water that had made the river spread out like a calm lake between the green hills in front of them. Still, no boats were moving on the river; the daily tours from Chiapa de Corzo – which turned back just at the curtain – were yet to begin. On the other side of the reservoir, where the relocated village of Osumacinta was to be found, two boats that sold crisps, beer and sodas to the tourists were still visible in their harbour. Watching over this calm landscape were not only the potential workers and the anthropologist, but also an oversized statue of the engineer Manuel Moreno Torres, the director of the CFE when the dam was built four decades earlier and namesake of the dam, standing as a reminder of the drastic changes that had occurred here (see figure 28, p. 144).

Since the construction, the dam had become part of the landscape, and had been incorporated into the lives of those living in and off the river. The anglers working at the dam of Chicoasén, for example, had adapted their working hours to the closure and opening of the dam, as the calmed waters that were caused by the closure made it easier to spot and approach the fish that were trying to get some sleep in the caves on the bottom of the river. They had therefore learnt how to recognise the barely audible sound of the dam closing its gates at night, as well as the frightening sound of the gates opening again – which made the water start moving quickly, dragging everything in its way with it. The anglers had also soon noticed that the fish would gather precisely at the most dangerous place in the river, just at the gates, which – because of the dangers – was a prohibited area to fish. Over time, however, the anglers had also figured out what kind of fish the guards appreciated, to be able to fish there anyway.

The dams had not just transformed the river and the beings living in it and from it, but also stretched far into the households of people living along the river. In Chicoasén, many houses had, for example, been built with money that had been earned during the construction of the first dam – houses that in turn had facilitated certain marriages, since the men were supposed to provide a place for the new family to live. Traces of the dams could also be found in details in Chicoasén, like old shirts from the
CFE hanging on a nail on the wall, as if they were just awaiting a new excuse to be used.

However, what had brought me to the offices of the CFE that day was not the presence of the old dams, its traces, and the different adaptations made to live with it. Instead, it was the plan to build the new one, and all the movement that because of it had started in the municipality. If the river in front of the offices thus seemed to be calm, the plan had stirred up things in the municipality – as if the gates of the dam had suddenly opened again. Old histories of injustice surfaced, old worries, together with old hopes about a better future. New marriage plans were made, and dreams about new houses also emerged with the possibilities offered by the dam. Yet people in Chicoasén also had started mobilizing to avoid making the same mistakes as the last time, four decades back, when the first dam was built. With the plan for a new dam, even the anglers stopped working as always, as they had to speak out against the CFE on behalf of the fish and on behalf of themselves, to have the possibility of going back to some normality once the dam would be in place. What I thus hoped to learn from the director was nothing less than how the CFE addressed all these concerns, all the histories, and all the dreams that had been put in motion by the new plan. How did they in fact go about building the dam?

Figure 12. An altar to the Mexican patron saint, the Virgin of Guadalupe, at the entrance of the construction site to protect the workers from accidents.

**Water politics: building dams, constructing the federal State**

Considering the history of the dams that were already in place in the river, it is evident that they had never been just about the dams themselves; they were simply not separable from the landscape where they were built, and the beings living there, nor
from the State policies and the institutions involved in planning and building them. Only by looking out over the landscape from the gates at the office, it was possible to get a glimpse of the breadth of the State projects behind the construction of these dams. After all, the project of the dam of Chicoasén had made a whole canyon disappear to the naked eye.

Although I have already in the introduction briefly mentioned certain events that have been important for the historiography in Mexico, and although I will come back to these events with more details further ahead in this chapter, and in the rest of the thesis, for readers who are not familiar with the Mexican historiography, it is worth outlining some of these events in a general manner. In this way, I hope to make it easier to follow the policy changes involved in the changing nature of the dams, but also to understand the historical references that were made through the official names that were given to the dams – names that, however, were seldom used in everyday speech during my fieldwork.

When the construction of the dams in the Grijalva River started, the Mexican State had practically become consolidated as a one-party State, which had managed to bring together a range of different groups and factions that had participated in the events known as the Mexican Revolution. In the State’s historiography during the 20th century – taught through textbooks used in schools all over the country – the Mexican Revolution could probably be best described as the last crucial event of the nation. The Revolution was basically described as bridging not only the period from the fall of the Mexica (or Aztec) empire and Mexican Independence in 1821, but also as a struggle that would have surpassed the conflicts between Liberals and Conservatives – epitomized by the Reform War that they fought between 1858 and 1861. The Mexican Revolution, in short, would have given the country its (imagined) unity back, and finally would have enabled the country to move forwards, by being clearly anchored in a pre-Columbian past, which however would have reached a new level through the emergence of the “cosmic race” – the mestizo – who had gotten the best of the two worlds who met during the Spanish Conquista.10

10 On Mexican nationalism, see for example Bartra (2003); Lomnitz (1992); and López Caballero (2017 [2012]).
While this nationalist historiography is important to keep in mind when interpreting the narratives offered through the policies surrounding the dams, which showed in their names, the construction of the dams could hardly be understood outside of the internationally significant political policies, at the time of each dam. Worth stressing here is above all the import substitution industrialization (ISI), which had dominated the macropolitical policies in Mexico, as in many countries throughout Latin America, since the Second World War, as well as the struggle over political systems that was a crucial part of the Cold War. Important to keep in mind is also the so called neoliberal turn, which is usually connected to the oil crisis of 1982-83, and to the presidency of Miguel de la Madrid. This turn implied the abandonment of the ISI model, and a new macro economic policy influenced by ideas about free trade. This turn was consecutively important for the Mexican participation in the North American Free Trade Agreement, which entered into force in 1994.

If neoliberal doctrine was very much about rolling back the responsibilities of the State, this clearly showed in the case of the dams in the Grijalva River. Before the neoliberal turn, the dams in the river were massive – the one in Chicoasén is still among the biggest in the world – which expressed the political importance of the federal State. With the neoliberal policies, the construction of dams halted; only one small dam was built during the 1980s, and no further dams were built until the construction of Chicoasén II started in 2015.

11 This policy had started off as the production of weapons for the war made industrial goods scarcer, and thus saw prices rise. At the same time, many countries with a pronounced primary production – like Mexico – would see rising exports, and thus more incomes. It was this combination that started to make the production of industrial goods profitable in countries like Mexico, and soon become institutionalized through the policy of Import Substitution Industrialization (ISI). The production of energy was, of course, an important condition to be able to sustain these new industries, and in this way, the dams were tied to this policy. During the 1960s, Mexican economists had already started seeing problems with this model. The main problems, as Antonio Aspra at the Mexican Ministry of Finance would point to towards the end of the 1970s, were the “geographic concentration of new ISI industries and their capital intensive nature. This high degree of capital-intensity”, he continued:

has caused the new industries to have little effect on Mexico’s chronic unemployment problem. These problems, coupled with the tendency of ISI to produce inefficient plants which require continued protection, has led to a search for alternative policies (Aspra 1977:110-111).

What Aspra suggested was to make a more pronounced effort to support the export promotion schemes that had appeared in the 1960s.
From the modern to the postmodern dams

The construction of the first major dam in the Grijalva River started relatively shortly after a visit that the Mexican President Miguel Alemán paid to the United States in 1947, which included a visit to the Tennessee Valley Authority (Robinson 2007:80). This institution was in charge of the transformation of the valley, and a central part of the U.S. effort to prove the superiority of state-led programmes within a liberal, capitalist framework – and as such constituted a model for that liberal development the United States were aiming to extend over the globe (Ekdahl 2010:47–86; see also Culvahouse 2007, and Katz 2007). The Tennessee Valley Authority was not only in charge of 16 dams that were in place when the Mexican President visited, but was also involved with a series of projects which were supposed to develop the region. It was this “multi-purpose development plan” that inspired Alemán to start up a range of Commissions along the main rivers in Mexico – as in the Grijalva River – with loans from IMF and the World Bank group. Not only did the President envision these Commissions as motors that could modernize backward rural areas, but also as elements to be inserted into a broader project aimed at centralizing the management of resources in Mexico. In so doing, Alemán sought to strengthen a federal power which historically had been weak, especially in places far away from Mexico City, such as Chiapas (Robinson 2007:21, 80–89). Thus, his government also echoed the centralizing efforts in the United States, where “big labour, big capital, and big government” (Harvey 1990:142) were supposed to take the country out of the Great Depression of the 1930s, and prevent similar situations in the future.

Crucial to this multi-purpose development was thus the construction of dams. In the basin of the Grijalva River, two minor dams had in fact already been built by the government of Chiapas: the dams of Bombaná and Belisario Domínguez. However, they were nothing compared to the major dams that were then built as part of the Grijalva River Commission. While the first dams had a capacity that did not surpass 10 megawatts, the four dams that were built one after the other during the 30 years between 1958 and 1988 generated almost 5,000 megawatts all together.

All of these dams indeed contributed to the increasing power of the federation, as they were controlled by the federal government through the Federal Commission of
Electricity, and thus to the construction of the Modern and Postmodern States. The dams, however, would not follow the same model that Alemán had in mind as he started the Grijalva River Commission, and the way that these dams were framed politically was also quite different from dam to dam, depending on the changes of federal policies over the years. The representatives of the federal State also did their best to connect the dams to contemporary policies through carefully chosen names, thereby suggesting that they were part of larger projects. To move through the different generations of dams is therefore also a quick tour of the ways that the Mexican State has changed certain important policies during the last few decades – changes that have been overshadowed by the turn from a modern to a postmodern State.

The multi-purpose development that was so important for President Alemán, to start with, translated into the official name of the first dam, Nezahualcóyotl. This dam was built next to the town of Malpaso, which was where I conducted part of the fieldwork with the Proletarian Organization Emiliano Zapata (OPEZ); I also worked with the OPEZ elsewhere in the municipality of which Malpaso was the administrative centre: Mezcalapa. In everyday conversations, the dam was called Malpaso. The official name of the dam referred to the multi-tasking pre-Hispanic ruler who – besides his statesmanship – became famous for his poetry (one of his poems appears on the 100 peso bill today), as well as for his philosophy, architecture and skills as a warrior. When the second dam was built, further upstream, the multi-purpose development would not have the same influence, nor the same design of development projects directed at the affected inhabitants. The focus this time was more clearly on the progress of Mexico, and was also put forward by the State representatives as the next stage of the Mexican Revolution (Palerm 1973; Robinson 2007:26). This was also present in the name, Belisario Domínguez, which referred to a martyr from the town of Comitán, in Chiapas, who had participated in the Mexican Revolution. The unofficial name of this dam was Angostura. It is worth mentioning that I did not focus on the places close to this dam, in this thesis.

The third dam – Manuel Moreno Torres, where I was waiting for the director to show up – tapped into a similar rhetoric as the previous one, although profound changes were now on their way in the country. While economists had perceived certain
limits of the ISI model during the 1960s, it was evident that something had to be done towards the end of the 1970s – that is, when the dam of Manuel Moreno Torres was built. The new, uncertain situation was also reflected in the name of the dam. Instead of using references to a glorious, pre-Hispanic past or to a national symbol of the Mexican Revolution, this time the choice was the engineer in charge of the construction – which in other words did not point at anything else than the planning and construction of the dam itself. During my fieldwork, this dam was usually referred to as Chicoasén.

When the last dam was built in the river, two severe oil crisis had hit the Mexican economy hard, and caused difficulties paying back the massive loans that had been taken from the World Bank at a moment when no signs were in sight that Mexico’s heavy reliance on oil would be a problem. The World Bank mandated the Mexican government to adopt a neoliberal structural adjustment program, which was also echoed in the name of this dam. Ángel Albino Corzo, which was its official name, was a politician from Chiapa de Corzo who had participated in a range of fundamental liberal reforms during the middle of the nineteenth century, including the formulation of a new Constitution. In that way, the neoliberal turn in Mexico was connected to its domestic, liberal tradition, despite the important differences between the two liberalisms; as the Tennessee Valley Authority showed, the classical liberalism did, for example, not have the same issue with State-led programmes, including welfare efforts and taxation, as has been found in neoliberalism (cf. Harvey 2005:77). This dam was built further down the river, passing by Malpaso and the first dam of the river. Its unofficial name was Peñitas.

Although it is difficult to know what changes would have occurred in the region without the construction of the dams, it is safe to say that the local impact of these projects was massive, and more so when shifting perspectives to other species. For some species of fish, the changes were devastating, as they did not survive in the new landscape. The situation also became much more difficult for the spider monkeys, who, because of the dam in Chicoasén, could not cross the river as easily as before, and therefore saw their territories decrease, as did their possibilities to find food. The dams also meant that the floodings decreased, which not only had the positive effect of preventing human disasters, but also meant that the nutrients from the river did not
reach the soil, reducing the forms of life that were found there, including, for example, the dense network of micro-organisms that are crucial for the growth of trees and bushes, and other plants. From a human perspective, the soil thus became less productive; indeed, some of the most fertile soils were found precisely in the areas that had to be flooded to make way for the new dams in the first place. From a human perspective, again, the increased trade that came with the new roads built for the construction sites also made it less profitable for people to continue cultivating the land as they had been done before. The use of the soil thus changed, at the same time as many more people – mainly men – used the new roads to migrate to other areas in the state, in the country, or to the USA. This also implied changes regarding kinship relations, and the connection to the place of birth.

For some people, plants, and animals, the construction of the dams however meant new possibilities. The new roads, and even the new natural borders that emerged with the new level of water in certain parts of the river, made it easier for people to settle in areas which earlier had been too remote, or too difficult to protect if occupied illegally, which also benefitted the species that accompanied them – such as the dog, the corn, the cows, and the beans. This was for example the case of the conglomerate of people, plants and animals that occupied new areas in Mezcalapa, that we will turn to in the next chapter, and which benefitted from the roads and the new configuration of the river that had followed the construction of the dam at Malpaso, in the 1950s, and then the one informally known as Peñitas, built in the 1980s. The roads that came with the dam in Chicoasén had on the other hand made it easier to travel to the capital or elsewhere, to study at the upper secondary schools or Universities that were found there. This was in turn important for the formation of new leaders, as the ones that occupied the most important positions in the Movimiento 16 de septiembre, as we will see in chapter four. As we will see in chapter five, the dam in Chicoasén also offered new opportunities for people in Chiapa de Corzo to make tours in the river, which had not been possible before that part of the river was flooded by the dam. The tours had in turn been significant for other species in the river, such as the crocodiles, who, because of their importance as a tourist attraction, counted on institutional support from the CONANP – beside the support that they got from the boat companies. To be able
to increase the population of crocodiles, the fish had also gotten some protection by the CONANP and the state legislators. To ensure that the prohibition of fishing in the river was followed, some people in Osumacinta – a village that had been resettled when the dam of Chicoasén was built – were involved with development projects managed by the CONANP, such as the construction of a small park with crocodiles.

**The entrance of revolutionary politics**

If the dams in the river then were saturated with State policies, and local experiences of development, the river had turned into a marginal place in the political landscape of Chiapas since the Zapatista uprising in 1994. With the construction of a second dam in Chicoasén, the political frames that had come to dominate in Chiapas since the uprising however clearly made their way into the conflicts in the municipality, as both people from the municipality and from elsewhere started trying to connect the construction of the dam to other political struggles in the state. Besides the anthropologist, reporters now showed up, as well as representatives from an NGO, and a lawyer involved in a case relating to the dam. The encounters with these newcomers, and the more intimate relation to the frames connected to the EZLN, were not always easy. These difficulties were not the least visible in the relations between a group of people who called themselves Comité Ejidal, and a human rights centre from San Cristóbal de Las Casas which they had turned to, to get compensation for the construction of the dam. What the group initially wanted were pensions from the CFE – a claim that they related to their status as inhabitants of a municipality where the company had made a lot of money. Alternatively, they wanted to renegotiate the terms of the dam with the CFE, which was an even more complicated endeavour. It was however worth trying, they thought, since several of its members had land that the dam would flood, and feared they would not get any compensation for it; the reason was that the money would be paid to the authorities of the organization through which they held the land – the *ejido*, a type of organization that I will discuss further ahead – and the members of the Comité Ejidal were in the minority there. In fact, not only were they the minority, but in fierce opposition to the authorities of the *ejido*, who they accused of having committed fraud.
in the latest elections of the ejido. To renegotiate the terms with the CFE, the Comité first of all wanted to cancel the latest elections of the ejido, then make the agreements with the CFE invalid because they had been done with authorities that had taken power fraudulently, and then start the negotiations all over again. As a first step, they had occupied the offices of the ejido, and that was where they sat throughout my fieldwork in the municipality.

It was then with the objective to move their case forward that the group had contacted a lawyer from Mexico City, as well as the human rights centre. While the lawyer acted according to the wishes of the group, the relationship with the NGO was more complicated. Its representatives made the members understand that they could only offer their support if the group decided to oppose the dam, in defence of their land. This was definitely not what the Comité wanted. Keeping the land was far from as lucrative as selling it to the CFE, and opposing the dam would also be very unpopular locally. There were not any jobs to speak of in the municipality, and, as already mentioned, many people, above all men, would therefore work elsewhere. For them, the dam was an opportunity to come back to Chicoasén for a while, and to live with the wives and children that had often remained there. Yet, this was not the only change the NGO wanted to see in Chicoasén. Preferably, the members of the Comité should claim that they were Zoques – an indigenous people that existed in the area. The problem here was not only that nobody could remember any Zoque in Chicoasén, but also that the indigenous population was not always viewed as something that people wanted to associate themselves with locally. While there had been a certain shift in this regard over the last few decades, they would often still be referred to through the contemptuous term caseros.

What the Comité would find out over time, however, was that their

*Figure 13. Members of the Comité Ejidal.*
political capital was extremely weak. When the lawyer from Mexico City was imprisoned, accused of instigating a riot, they therefore chose to adopt the strategy proposed by the NGO, thus opening the door to the revolutionary politics that had made Chiapas known after the uprising of the EZLN.

Trade and the politics of ethnicity in Chiapas

The adoption of the revolutionary politics was in fact not an easy choice to make. The regions where the EZLN were present, the Highlands and the Lacandona Jungle, had been something of a historical antipode to the area along the river. Since ancient times, the river had been used as a trade route between political centres in central Mexico and Guatemala, while the Highlands were at times used as an alternative route by the enemies of those controlling the river. The Lacandona Jungle, in turn, did not even appear on political maps as an interesting territory until the beginning of the nineteenth century (De Vos 1988). The trade along the river, together with the fertile soil that came from the constant floods, made the area along the river the incomparably richest part of Chiapas for centuries, even millennia, which in turn translated into an impressive population density (Viqueira 2002:111; Lee 1998; Ortiz Díaz 2009; Navarrete 1973). In the upper basin of the river alone – that is, the one closest to Guatemala – 211 different pre-Columbian sites have been found, with settlements or constructions every kilometre and a half (Rivero Torres 1993:164-166 and 173). In fact, the area was so attractive that almost all the languages spoken in Mesoamerica were present in the region at the time of the Conquest (Viqueira 2011). This population was indeed dense enough to profoundly transform the flora and fauna along the river, above all through the introduction of corn (Rivero Torres Op. Cit.).

Before the constructions of every dam – including the latest one, Chicoasén II – old pyramids and a rich variety of objects were dug out. In the Valle El Sumidero, closer to Chiapa de Corzo, 17 sites were found, and 32 at the Valle de Osumacinta, where the dam of Chicoasén was build (Martínez Muriel 1990). Close to Malpaso, the density of archaeological findings however rises considerably again: in only one month of recognitions in 1965, as the dam there was to be built there, more than 100 archaeological sites were spotted (Lowe 1998:26-27). There are various indicators that are used to sustain the thesis of the connection between different parts along and beyond the Grijalva River. The similarity between the types of settlements and pottery that have been found along the Grijalva River are part of that (Lowe, 1998:32), as well as
Due to the importance of trade, controlling the trade route was a valuable economic and military advantage that gave rise to an important regional power concentrated close to the town of Chiapa de Corzo (see maps on pp. 17 and 141)\(^\text{13}\) – a settlement that gave the state of Chiapas its name. The rule of its inhabitants, the Chiapanecas, lasted for about one thousand years, and would not fall until the Spanish conquest.\(^\text{14}\) Juan Pedro Viqueira (2011) has even argued that the Chiapanecas were so powerful that they probably were among the few groups that were never subdued by the Empire of the Mexicas. This would prove to be historically significant, particularly from the perspective of the divide between the Highlands and the Central Depression. Because of the Chiapanecas’ control of an important part of the river, the imperial officials of the Mexicas were forced to use alternative routes over the Highlands to charge their taxes in the rich western coastland of Chiapas. A detail that turned out to have long-term effects of their use of this alternative route was that they established an alliance with the Zinacantecos (among others) in the Highlands, with whom they shared an enmity toward the Chiapanecas. These relations were later on inherited by the Spaniards, as the Zinacantecos feared the breakdown of the Mexica Empire would give the Chiapanecas a possibility to attack them. Among other reasons, these relations probably also played a role in the decision to change the colonial capital from Chiapa de Corzo to San Cristóbal de Las Casas, because of San Cristóbal’s proximity to Zinacantán – although the main reason most likely had to do with struggles between different groups of Spaniards (Viqueira 2002:113-17; Viqueira 2011).

\(^\text{13}\) In Nahuatl – the language of the Mexicas – the place was called Chiapan or Tepechiapan, that is, “the place of the chía” (*Salvia hispanica*, a kind of seed that was used as a food crop, probably as important as corn before the Conquest). Alternatively, the name can be interpreted as “water below the mountain”, which echoes in the name of the Sumidero Canyon: “Sumidero” comes from the verb “sumergir”, which means “to submerge”.

\(^\text{14}\) Just where the locality was found, there was an important vade of the river, at the entrance to the Canyon – a vade that was flooded at the construction of the dam of Chicoasén (Lee 1998:241-2). This passage made it easier for the Chiapanecas to maintain control of the trade route, despite the stiff competition.
If the Grijalva River then hosted the highest concentration of settlements, people and resources in the state before the Spanish conquest,\(^\text{15}\) it is precisely therefore that it today is the part of the state with the lowest population density, and where the indigenous population is practically absent.\(^\text{16}\) The deadly germs brought by the Spaniards were a fundamental reason for this change, which was aggravated by the formation of the new Indian villages (pueblos de indios) that the Spaniards had created as a counter point to their Spanish villages (pueblos de españoles). This division was thus not only important to give rise to new identities, both relating to the term “indigenous”, and to the new communities that emerged in this way (Gledhill 2008:485),\(^\text{17}\) but also made the inhabitants in these new villages more vulnerable to contagious diseases. Where they had previously lived more scattered over the territory, closer to their plots of land, the new pueblos brought them together in settlements where the diseases spread more quickly.\(^\text{18}\) The constant traffic in the area – now with roads adapted for horses and carriages – therefore exposed the inhabitants to a whole range of new diseases in a way that had not been the case if they had continued living more dispersed. Part of the story of the disappearances of the villages along the river is also to be found in the establishment of encomiendas, large properties that were given to the participants of the Conquest, which not only implied dispossessions of the land, but also a harsh exploitation of the people forced to work there. The result was that half of the 34 Indian villages that were founded by the Spaniards in the area completely

\(^{15}\) Besides Chiapa de Corzo, it is at least worth mentioning the port in Quechula, close to the place where Malpaso is located today, as well as the influential town of Copanaguastla.

\(^{16}\) Besides the recent migration of Tsotsiles from the Highlands (Ruz 1995:15), there are still Zoques, descendants from the first inhabitants of this area, in five of 17 municipalities in the region (Viqueira 1995:34), and a certain number of Tzeltales in Venustiano Carranza.

\(^{17}\) As Gledhill (2008:485) notices, terms “indigenous” or “Maya” are normally not as important as the identity given by the village, or pueblo. The indigenous population thus distinguish between themselves depending on their pueblos – and thus for example refer to each other as Santiagueros (from Santiago el Pinar), Zinacantecos (from Zinacantán), Chamulas (from Chamula), and so forth. This would also be the case along the Grijalva River, although the indigenous presence was scarce. People from Chiapa de Corzo were thus Culopintos, and those from Chicoasén presented themselves as Chicoasenejos.

\(^{18}\) For more detailed discussions about the complex process of the introduction of new forms of organization and institutions, see for example Menegus (2006) on the encomienda, the cabildo indígena, and the repúblicas de indios; von Mentz (1988), on the different kinds of villages that were created, and the ambiguities they implied. For the same process in Chiapas, see for example Ruz (2002), Viqueira (1997) and Lenkersdorf (2016).
disappeared. In this way, the trade route also lost its importance, while the alternative routes over the Highlands began to flourish (Viqueira 1995:31).

One of the few Indian villages that survived was Chiapa de Corzo, which remained the economic and cultural centre of the state throughout the Colony (de Vos 1985). Worth mentioning is also the survival of Tuxtla Gutiérrez, another important Indian village close to the river, which was to become the capital of the state in the middle of the nineteenth century. The character of these villages, however, changed after Independence, in 1821, as the legal concept of Indian village was taken away.19 Although the division between Indian and Spanish villages had not been clear cut during the Colony (von Mentz 1988), it is not an accident that it was precisely at this time that the indigenous languages spoken along the river also disappeared, as in the case of Chiapaneca, or lost its relevance, as happened with Zoque (Viqueira 2011).

The combination of a low population density and fertile soil however attracted new settlers, especially after Independence, when new laws were put in place which opened up the legal possibility to acquire lands that had been part of these villages (Toledo 2012:38-39). To this, the failure of small scale production to live up to the necessities of the quickly changing state gave way to State support of the formation of fincas – large, private properties aimed at producing for different markets.20 The poverty found in many places that had formerly been Indian villages made the conversion to fincas rather common (Toledo 2012:38-39). With these new settlers along the Grijalva River, the population density remained stable throughout the nineteenth century; the significant change that had taken place as the Indian villages

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19 On the continuities and differences between the Colony and the newly independent Mexican State, particularly from the perspective of the indigenous population, see Escobar Ohmstede (1997).

20 For an analysis of this process, see Kroeber (1994:17-33).
gave way to the *fincas* was that the inhabitants, at the turn of the twentieth century, would not view themselves as part of the indigenous population (Viqueira 2011). This was not only important for the ethnic politics, the division of people into different racial or cultural groups, but also showed to be crucial for the development projects that were directed at the different areas throughout the twentieth century. While the Highlands, which still had an important indigenous population, became the centre of the *indigenista* projects, the Grijalva River was instead incorporated into the post-revolutionary State through the construction of the dams.

When the human rights centre thus appeared in Chicoasén, and proposed the members of the Comité present themselves as Zoques fighting for their land, the historically deep differences between the Highlands and the Central Depression were bracketed for a while.

**Indigenous rebels: ethnicity, nationalism and post-colonialism in Chiapas**

The human rights centre, on the other hand, was not the only one that tried to expand the histories related to the Highlands to the river. The same was the case of an organization that emerged during my fieldwork, the so-called Movimiento 16 de septiembre. As I sat outside of the offices of the CFE, waiting for the director to show up, I soon got involved in a conversation with some people who were part of the Movimiento. It was clear that they were upset by the corrupt politics of the CFE, and now tried to come up with a way to make the CFE and “the government” listen to their demands. Some of these men in fact appeared to have lost the hope getting a job at the construction site, and instead seemed to be waiting outside the gates to see if something else would happen. On a previous occasion, the offices had indeed been occupied by the frustrated men who had gotten tired of the politics of the CFE. This occupation, however, had not led to much more than the police arriving and forcing them out of the gated area. The conclusion that the men I was talking to had drawn from the occasion was that they had to act more like the indigenous population in the Highlands. There, they told me, people did not fear the government, and thus had more force to push it to act as the people wanted to. If the government dared do something against the
mobilizations in the Highlands, they claimed, the situation would become known all over the world.

If members of the Movimiento also wanted to bring the Highlands to the river, their strategy for doing so looked somewhat different than the one proposed by the human rights centre. The lesson they had drawn from their interpretation of things in the Highlands was that there was something about the indigenous population that made it particularly successful in negotiations with the government. In Chicoasén there were also a couple of villages that had been formed by migrants from the Highlands, who had arrived since the 1930s, when the *ejido* of Chicoasén was formed. One of these villages, Las Pilas, had also recently managed to force the corresponding government official to promise they would build a road to their village. What the inhabitants had done to put pressure on him was to retain (or kidnap) him after a meeting that was held in the village. The recipe for the successful negotiations, as it was explained to me, was that the indigenous population was extremely united, and even though particular individuals might disagree on a decision made by the village, they would act as if they stood completely behind it. The positive appraisal found locally of this bold form of negotiation had in fact turned one of the informal leaders of the village into the leader of the Movimiento. The Movimiento, however, did not stop with indigenous leadership; some of its representatives also started using ideals of the EZLN – such as “lead by obeying” (*mandar obedeciendo*) – to explain what the Movimiento was all about.

Still, the Movimiento seemed to miss what the human rights centre had stressed: the importance of identity politics, and of connecting to the struggle of the Zapatistas. The complicated position of the Movimiento could indeed be boiled down to a contradiction that was not visible in Chicoasén, but which quickly appeared when placing it in the schemes formed around the EZLN. One of the most vocal leaders of the Movimiento, who often stressed particular ideals of the EZLN, was at the same time one of the local leaders of the party against which the EZLN had directed its rebellion: the Party of the Institutional Revolution. This meant that the Movimiento worked within the established institutions, and many of its members, including the leader from Las Pilas, were also members of the established parties. In the revolutionary politics
that had emerged in relation to the EZLN, the struggle against government initiatives, on the other hand, was supposed to take place outside the established institutions, and aim at constructing a parallel, autonomous government. This was in a sense similar to what the semi-autonomous, colonial, Indian Villages had done, although the Zapatistas did not, for example, want to maintain the figure of the cacique, the indigenous rulers that were recognised by the Spanish crown during the Colony.\footnote{The caciques – as in the case of Charles Gibson’s classical study from 1964 – have often been portrayed as mediators between State and community. For a recent critique of this rather instrumental and functionalist interpretation of the cacique, see Dutt 2017. On caciques in Chiapas, see Lenkersdorf 2016.} The historical experience of the indigenous population was thus crucial, and the incorporation of indigenous leaders of a mestizo organization like the Movimiento was simply not enough. The image of a rebel in Chiapas, after the Zapatista uprising, was of an indigenous collective rather than an individual, or of mestizos that had become part of the forms of organizations considered indigenous. This image did not only relate to the history of ethnicity politics referred to above, but also to the particular place that the indigenous population had occupied in certain schemes deployed in government programmes throughout the last century, first and foremost through indigenismo. These programmes were in turn entwined with academic discussions referring to Chiapas, a history that reached much further back than to the EZLN uprising, and which is important to consider to understand the difficult position of the Movimiento.

Although a more detailed account of the research and the development projects made in Chiapas is beyond the scope of this thesis, in general terms, I want to stress two overarching questions that have been discussed, and which have been involved in different political projects, including important development policies. The longest lasting question, posed initially by Alfred Tozzer, and taken over mainly by the Chiapas Projects carried out by the Universities of Harvard and Chicago, related to life during the civilization of the ancient Mayas, a question that was part of U.S. nationalist interests in American Civilizations (see Palacios 2015:167-171; cf. Tozzer 1907:164-7).\footnote{For a recent discussion about the project of the University of Harvard – emphasising the work of its founder, Evon Vogt – see Escalona (forthcoming). For the project that the University of Chicago had in Chiapas, see Medina (2013).} This question was approached through archaeological research or through
anthropological fieldwork among speakers of the different indigenous languages found in the state, who were centred precisely in the Highlands and the Lacandona Jungle. The idea was to look for pre-Columbian practices, which were thought to be able to give a hint of life before the Conquest. This led to a focus on “world views”, which included analyses of different rituals, agricultural techniques and so forth, and which presupposed an important divide between mestizos and the indigenous population. On the other hand, we have the question that directed the activities of indigenismo, and which was later on to be taken up in a new form by the authors analysing the uprising of the EZLN. This question dealt with the liberation of the indigenous population, or how the population itself tried to be liberated from the domination that they had been suffering since the Conquest. The focus here was generally on economic relations, first from a perspective that emphasised the relation between regional, mestizo centres and the indigenous Hinterland, and later on from one that located the indigenous communities within a global, capitalist market, mediated by the Mexican state.

The objective of the indigenista anthropologists who first formulated this question, was to promote national integration through a particular kind of “community development”, which was carried out through the local indigenista centre. The objective with this policy was to break free from the colonial division of the society between the traditional, indigenous periphery and the modern, ladino centres – an order that had “taken refuge” from the modern world in regions as the Highlands (see above all Aguirre Beltrán 1991 [1967]:31-32).23 What these studies were accused of missing, when an influential Marxist critique of them was formulated in the 1970s, was that the Mexican State itself was excluded from the analysis, despite its important role in the historical oppression of the indigenous population. The ideal of “acculturation”, defended by indigenismo as a way to break with the colonial heritage, was also questioned for the way that it would destroy indigenous cultures.

In hindsight, indigenismo indeed appeared highly contradictory when it came to its understanding of indigenous culture. It both celebrated the indigenous as historical figures connected to the impressive pyramids scattered over the country,

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23 See Fábregas (2015) regarding anthropology in Chiapas seen from the perspective of national institutional frameworks.
which were thought to have made an important contribution to the mestizo nation, and represented the contemporary indigenous population as backwards and unhygienic, and therefore in need of being “Mexicanized” (Gledhill 2008: 487).

With the critique of indigenismo, the attention was instead drawn to the importance of the capitalist economy and the place of the indigenous population in it (see Warman et al 1970). In other words, the impetus of liberation was still present, but the problem had shifted from the regional differences between centre and periphery, to the articulation of different “modes of production” on a global scale.

This liberationist impetus was in turn inherited by the supporters of the EZLN, who took a step further to distance themselves from the idea of making politics through State institutions, by promoting a liberation through experiments outside it, represented by the Zapatista autonomy. The politics relating to areas outside the autonomous communities was on the other hand directed at the “civil society”, rather than aimed at taking over the State.24

Over the years, both of these questions have been part of heated political conflicts, which are still very much present in contemporary research in the state. While several authors now complain about how politically saturated much of the texts about Chiapas have been (see for example De Vos 2002; Lewis 2012; Gledhill 2008; Baschet 2005), others have argued for the importance of an even more explicit political agenda (Aubry 2011; González Casanova 2011; Mora Bayo 2011).25 However, less attention has been drawn to the way these two questions have dominated academic discussions, and, since the uprising, especially the one about the domination of the indigenous population. In fact, the question about worldviews has come to be incorporated into that of domination, as when Escalona (2009) gave issues earlier framed as worldviews

24 The policies of the EZLN, however, have shifted over time. In the declaration of war from 1994 (EZLN 1994a), the outspoken goal was to take over the State. This quickly changed into the idea of instead working with the “civil society” (EZLN 1994b; 1996; 1998; 2005). For the presidential elections in 2018, the EZLN has chosen to support a candidate selected by the National Indigenous Congress (Congreso Nacional Indígena), that the EZLN is part of. See also the discussion between Pitarch (2004) and Baschet (2005), and Guerrero-Chiprés’ (2004) analysis of the strategy of the EZLN, which ties it to Gramsci’s ideas about war of positions.

25 Aubry (2011) thus argued that the goal of the research he defended was to obtain “a change of the social consciousness, a collective step in the transformation of our society”, which he exemplified with the work that some social scientists had done with the EZLN during the negotiations with the government. Aubry claimed that “the specialists [during these negotiations] did not talk as experts but as compañeros”, at the service of the rebels (Aubry 2011:61-63).
a new direction by putting them forward as parts of a “language of power” – a particular way to talk about local relations and wider political events. A similar tendency can be found in Hernández’, Mattiace’s and Rus’ (2002:17-20) “combination” of culture and power, which they nonetheless did in a way that prioritized defending the project of the EZLN rather than trying to put forward a model that could help analyse contemporary relations in the state. What this has implied is that even those criticizing the simplifications expressed in politically motivated accounts of recent events have had to struggle hard to formulate a proper agenda. An important risk, for example, has been to convert this kind of research into mere complements of well-established “macrohistories” (see for example Estrada & Viqueira 2010, and particularly Estrada 2010).26 A strategy that has been employed to undermine this risk and to “‘decenter’ the EZLN” (Gledhill 2008:483) is to establish a different theoretical frame – as Gledhill did when proposing the study of “the interplay of state power and popular [power]” (Gledhill 2008:484; see also Agudo 2008; Escalona 2008 and 2009; Trench 2008). This project has indeed opened up a space for new approaches to Chiapas, although the authors referred to did not move from the regions where the EZLN was centred.

As follows from this brief discussion, navigating a political organization in relation to these discussions and histories of important political projects is not an easy affair. While the Movimiento had an important local presence, when moving outside Chicoasén, their struggle quickly lost relevance. Part of the reason for this was that the leaders did not know how to adequately connect to the struggle of the EZLN. Quite the opposite was in fact the case with the Comité Ejidal. While it had evident difficulties

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26 Estrada and Viqueira (2010) edited a volume where a number of authors put forward a series of microhistories from different places in Chiapas, to balance the accounts that they perceived as detached from people’s daily life. This conflict between the macro and the micro, however, points to a complicated methodological problem of scalar models, which did not permit the microhistories to break free from the macro frame that they criticized. When, for example, Marco Estrado (2010) summed up the contribution of the volume, he claimed that the scientific research “should first distinguish between the two levels of analysis [the national and the local processes], and then reconstruct the ways that they are intertwined, and how they modify eachother” (Estrada 2010:434). This kind of thinking presupposes the possibility of separating different kinds of processes – an idea which faces several problems. On the one hand, it implies clear difficulties of adequately drawing the boundaries between the local and the global. On the other hand, the local quickly becomes authentic in a way that the global can never be compared to; “foreign” terms, Estrada for example suggested, are used in pragmatic ways in local struggles (Estrada 2010:434), as if they had no direct relations to processes on the ground. Certain aspects understood as part of the macrohistories thus do not enter the local realm more than as “frameworks of meaning” (marcos de sentido) (Ibid).
being relevant locally, they started to have much more presence outside the municipality, as it became part of the kind of history that has dominated research in Chiapas. Rather than dealing with pensions, re-elections in the ejido, and renegotiations with the CFE as they initially had done, the Comité had now become yet another example of indigenous struggle “In Defence Of Mother Earth And Our Territory”, as they explained in a declaration made together with organizations that the human rights centre had connected them with (Dorset Chiapas Solidarity 2016).27

Pueblo politics

If both the Comité and the Movimiento thus faced different problems when trying to connect to the revolutionary politics in Chiapas, there were still evident similarities between the Highlands, the Lacandona Jungle, and the Central Depression that made this kind of politics relevant in Chiocasén as well. This was first of all the case with the category of pueblo, around which politics in the municipality circled – a category that was also crucial for the EZLN and the revolutionary politics in the state. The pueblo was, for example, a category that the EZLN had invoked in their declaration of war, by referring to Article 39 of the Mexican Constitution (EZLN 1994a). The very same article was also used by the leader of the Comité Ejidal to legitimize their struggle. “National sovereignty”, the leader of the group thus read out loud to me on one occasion, quoting the article that the EZLN had used in their declaration of war:

> resides essentially and originally in the pueblo. All public power stems from the pueblo and is instituted for its benefit. The pueblo has at all times the inalienable right to alter or modify the form of its government.

An important detail here was that both the leader of the Comité Ejidal and the EZLN chose to leave out the procedures to change the government that were laid out in

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27 In fact, a particular detail in the document makes it hard to believe that the members of the Comité Ejidal were involved in drafting it: the document misspelled the name of the neighboring town of Osumacinta, and instead spelled it as the second largest river in Chiapas, Usumacinta – a common mistake by people who are not from the area.
the rest of the chapter in the Constitution, with its focus on the way that the elections were to take place, and the importance of the political parties for the representative republic in Mexico. In this way, the pueblo of reasonable citizens acting within the established political structure, which appeared in the Constitution, was replaced by the local understanding of the pueblo as existing and acting outside of the institutional space, and of the political parties.

By using the category of pueblo, there was then the potentiality to connect the struggle of the indigenous population in the Highlands and the Lacandona Jungle to the struggles in Chicoasén, but also to different struggles all over the world. Articles like the one in the Mexican Constitution are found in similar documents all over the world.28 The category of pueblo also connects a whole range of different experiences and struggles. As Paul Eiss (2010) has argued, the term has been widely used to pin down different ethnic groups as pueblos, which has been used in different struggles. Historically, there has also been a link to rural settlements, which easily feeds into urban/rural conflicts; the term was first brought to America by conquistadores and priests who used it to refer to rural settlement and its inhabitants; on the Iberian peninsula, this meaning had been established at least since the twelfth century. At the same time, the term has a connotation of popular sovereignty, which goes back to the American decolonization in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century – and which had found its way into the Mexican Constitution. It appears again in Marxist influenced readings of social relations at large, as based on a division between the working pueblo and the capitalist elite (Eiss 2010:2-4); this interpretation was also clearly part of the rhetoric of the EZLN, which modified the intended meaning of the Constitution.

What draws these different pueblos together is then not only the category as such, but also their position in a range of similar dichotomies, thus offering a term that could translate between groups that could claim to have something in common. The pueblo as opposed to the State, for example, easily connects to different churches in Mexico, which, as happened in Chicoasén, often shared the opposition to the faith in

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28 See for example Article 3 of the French Constitution; Article 6 of the Algerian Constitution; Article 2:2 of the Vietnamese Constitution; the preamble of the South Afrian Constitution; the first article, first chapter of the Swedish Regeringsformen.
the State individual (the citizen), and instead stressed the importance of kinship ties.\footnote{After the Mexican independence, the Mexican State, influenced by liberal ideals, expropriated property of the Catholic church; this conflict deepened after the Mexican Revolution, and even lead to a war – the Cristero War – that involved large parts of the country, especially the centre of it.} There is again a class dimension to this opposition worth stressing. As Larissa Adler (2003 [1975]) has argued in her study of a neighbourhood (barrio) in Mexico City, those who have the resources will tend to physically move from the extended kinship and friendship relations of the barrio, to form other alliances, where kinship played a much more marginal role. In this way, they also stress the economic status connected to the category of pueblo. Particularly important for the context of this thesis is, however, the relation between finca and ejido, which repeats the scheme of the pueblo as opposed to the elite, but in a rural setting. In its broadest form, and despite historical and practical ambiguities, the ideals of the finca and the ejido have indeed come to stand for different social models. The finca has thus worked as a symbol of large, private landholdings, related to an individualist project that cherishes personal effort and freedom, but also to the exploitation of rural workers. The ejido has in turn come to stand for a communal project of the pueblo, including its common form of land tenancy, at the same time as it is often represented as a space for democratic decision-taking process through large meetings (asambleas) between its members, where equality and solidarity are central values (see for example Wilson 2009).

Despite historical differences like those found between the Highlands and the Central Depression, the category of pueblo thus offered a common ground, which, among other things, implied an historical link between the difficulties facing the indigenous population and peasants.

\textit{Fincas, ejidos and gender politics}

While working as a glue between quite disparate struggles, the kinds of schemes linked to the pueblo also offered practical difficulties in Chicoasén, which, as we will see, in fact show clear similarities to the contradictions that were incorporated into the legal
concept of *ejido*. Again, these difficulties appeared in the encounter between the human rights centre and the Comité Ejidal.

The primary problem was that the collective character connected to the *ejido* was something that did not translate as easily into concrete practices. As already indicated, the Comité feared that they would not get any of the resources that were to be paid to the formal representatives of the *ejido*. How the money was to be used by the members of the *ejido* was legally considered to be the internal responsibility of the *ejido*, and although the members claimed that their land would be flooded, the formal holder of that land was the *ejido*. Considering the political differences within the *ejido*, it then appeared unlikely that they would get anything at all.

This kind of practical issues, however, were not something that appeared in the political project promoted by the human rights centre, and thus created an odd encounter between its representatives and the members of the Comité. As the members showed the representatives the land that would be flooded, one of its members commented on their difficult situation by saying that “none of this would have happened if only we had accepted PROCEDE”. PROCEDE, the Program for Certification of *Ejido* Rights and Entitlement of Plots, was a program that followed the implementation of NAFTA, to make formal trade with land possible. The trading of *ejido* land was a common practice also before that reform (Nuijten 2003:70-90), and still was during my fieldwork. Without legal support, it could nevertheless be particularly complicated for companies to buy land, but also, as was argued to promote the reform, for the *ejidatarios* to get loans; the *ejido* land has no market value because of the legal restrictions on trading with it. The public critique of the certification program, however, claimed that the judicial transformation of *ejido* land into a commodity would concentrate land ownership, particularly considering the difficult situation in small scale agriculture. Peasants, the critics claimed, would often feel compelled to sell their land to get out of pressing economic situations, and thereby lose the scarce patrimony that they had, making the situation worse for the next generation. There was also a gender dimension to this reform. As only one person got the new entitlement, it broke with the formal order of the *ejidos*, where the plots belonged to husband and wife; this person turned out to almost always be the man, leaving women
without formal possessions (Cameras 2015:108-9). To this, there was a deeper political reason for the critique, which could loosely be related to the important role occupied by the figures of the campesino and the indigenous population, i.e., the pueblo. The human rights centre for example, was one of a wide range of actors who in 2003 declared that PROCEDE was “part of neoliberal politics that responds more to the interests of transnational companies than to the interests of the indigenous population and the Mexican campesinos” ("Declaración pública del Encuentro Nacional Contra PROCEDE y PROCECOM"). As the program was not mandatory, there was, however, the possibility to remain an ejido, which the critics had worked hard to make clear for the people the program was aiming at, and this possibility had also been used in Chicoasén, as well as in the vast majority of ejidos in the country. In 2011, only 2.6% of the total land that made up the “social property” – i.e. ejidos and comunidades\(^{30}\) – had been privatized through PROCEDE, which corresponded to 12% of the ejidos and comunidades (Secretaría de la Reforma Agraria, 2011).

Instead of accepting that the effects such as the one in Chicoasén actually occur, the representative of the centre told the man who had claimed that things had been different if they would have accepted PROCEDE, that he was wrong, and that PROCEDE would not have been a good thing for them – despite the fact that it would then have been legally impossible to exclude individual owners of the land from the negotiations with the CFE, which was not the case when it came to the “tenants” of ejido land. In that way, the representatives of the human rights centre inscribed the ejido in a different struggle than that first imagined by the members of the Comité: between the ejido and the finca.\(^\text{31}\)

What the human rights centre addressed was then a discussion that had been crucial in Mexico throughout the twentieth century. This conflict was in fact what the post-revolutionary Mexican State practically built its whole legitimacy on – by restricting the power of the fincas, and by creating ejidos all over the country through the Agrarian Reform. Along the Grijalva River, the majority of the fincas were thus closed down, while others were drastically diminished. According to its owner, the

\(^{30}\)Comunidades referred to the rather unusual settlements whose possession had been recognized during the Spanish colony.

\(^{31}\)Finca is a common name for haciendas and ranchos; Toledo 2013:13.
finca of Santo Domingo, in Chicoasén had for example comprised 1700 hectares before the Agrarian Reform. 800 of these had then been redistributed to new ejidatarios, who would become his neighbours and – as odd as it might seem – friends. Four other big fincas in the municipality had not faced the same fate, and had all disappeared. As elsewhere in the country, the Agrarian Reform was also an important way for the new one-party-State to incorporate large parts of the population into the State and the party structures. This did not mean that the groups formed in this way would always be loyal to the leaders of the party (Rus 1994), but the Agrarian Reform was nonetheless an important mechanism for the ruling party to stay in power throughout the twentieth century. In fact, the PRI lost the federal elections for the first time just years after cancelling the Agrarian Reform. The intimate relationship that had been built over the years between the revolution, the ejido, and the Agrarian Reform thus easily made the cancellation of the Agrarian Reform point to the definite end of the Revolution; it was also just two years after the abandonment of the Agrarian Reform that the Zapatista Army tried to start the revolution over. Emiliano Zapata, their namesake, was furthermore one of the front figures of the Revolution, and intimately connected with the figure of the ejido.

The Agrarian Reform and the ejido, in other words, were widely understood as the main achievements of the Revolution, and its end would imply the return of the finca if nothing was done about it. What disappeared in this narrative were not only the kind of conflicts facing the members of the Comité, but also the contradictions of the legal concept of ejido, which is important to consider the complicated situation facing the members of the Comité when negotiating their status with the human rights centre.

The idea of the ejido can in fact be best understood as an attempt to unite the different demands of the groups that were part of the armed struggles and the projects that in hindsight would be conceptualized as the Mexican Revolution. What the ejido managed to do was to bridge the deep differences between the individualist character of the proposals of small-scale private properties as a constitutional right, made by Francisco Villa and his followers, and the idea of re-establishing colonial forms of

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32 Rus’ study deals with the State involvement in the formation of a powerful group of leaders in the municipality of Chamula, in the Highlands of Chiapas, which throughout the years would cause considerable trouble for the governments when not paying attention to their demands.
collective property, which Emiliano Zapata’s group defended. Hence, the important differences between these two front figures of the Mexican Revolution would not threaten to break up the idea of the Revolution as being enacted through the alliance between groups with the same cause (Kouri 2015). When the events of the Revolution unfolded, they actually often appeared to have little in common (Knight 1990). To gather the contradictory ideas of the different groups into a single concept was therefore a considerable achievement, although it was done by incorporating the contradictions between the groups into that concept: the ejido would thus recognise individual tenancy, but within a frame of corporate tenancy (Torres-Mazuera 2012:75).

The contradictions of the concept, however, were not the only difficulty that it had. The ejido also presented considerable gaps between the legal concept and the everyday use of the term prior to the legal reform that it was part of. The term ejido was originally brought from Spain, where it referred to areas of common use, such as the woods and meadows found at the outskirts of the villages. The land used for agriculture was on the other hand divided between private owners. In Mexico, this was also how things were organized when the events now known as the Mexican Revolution started. While this distinction was clear for the peasants in Mexico at the turn of the twentieth century, this did not appear to be the case with the legislators who started working on proposals to resolve the issue of the constant rebellions in the countryside. What they proposed was the “restitution” of the “agricultural ejidos” (ejido agrario) – a contradictory term since the ejidos had previously been used for anything but for agriculture. Therefore, the legislators transferred the common character of the ejidos to farming in general (Kouri 2015).

In contemporary Mexico, a widespread understanding of this “restitution” is that it re-established the traditional ways of farming, which supposedly had been destroyed during the liberal reforms at the middle of the nineteenth century – an interpretation that above all is tied to a particular understanding of the use of land in the indigenous pueblos, as immanently egalitarian and collective. While this representation is a caricature of the complexities of the reform, what it indeed did imply, as already indicated, was a “deindianization” of large parts of the Mexican countryside (Gledhill 2008:486). In the Agrarian Law from 1915, however, there was
an article stating that this would in fact not be a way to revive old communities, but a
transitory measure that would be followed by a complementary law in which the formal
establishment of individual plots would be regulated (Kouri 2015). Many
revolutionaries as well as the post-revolutionary rulers also shared many of the ideals
about modernization that had dominated the political policies since the middle of the
nineteenth century (Gledhill 2008:487), and did not want a return to colonial forms of
land tenancy. The law that was supposed to replace the initial norms about ejidos,
however, would never appear, and when a somewhat similar process was initiated
through PROCEDE towards the end of the century, it was indeed part of the reversal of
the Agrarian Reform. The critique that actors as the human rights centre formulated –
where PROCEDE was tied directly to neoliberalism, and understood as being against
the interests of the indigenous population and the Mexican campesinos – the
indigenous population would however again come forth as a group of essentially
collective beings who were not interested in owning land, and who were believed to
live and die in the same place. In this sense, Wilson (2009) has for example argued that
owning land would be an absurd idea for the indigenous population.

When considering the history of the ejido, but also, as I will turn to next, its
actual configurations along the Grijalva River and elsewhere, what appears as an
absurdity is rather how the legislators who gave rise to it had mixed up the
differentiation between the pre-revolutionary form of ejidos and the private plots, but
also how it has been used by urban revolutionaries, academics, NGO workers,
journalists, government officials, and so forth, as a symbol of the “profound Mexico”
(Bonfil 1990 [1987]). As Aguilar, Díaz and Viqueira (2010) have shown, one of the
main problems facing the EZLN in San Andrés Larráinzar, in the Highlands, was also
that they tried unsuccessfully to force their members to work collectively, without
internal divisions of the commonly held land, apparently drawing on the ideal of
common tenancy found in the law on ejidos.

Along the river, the figure of the finquero, the owner of a finca, was in a
similar way much more complicated than it appeared in the dichotomist schemes that
 contrasted it with the ejidatario, the member of an ejido. To be able to pay workers for
tilling the land was for example a clear symbol of prestige among the ejidatarios, which
however had more in common with the practices of *finqueros* than of those of the common *campesino*. The same was the case of the widespread attempts to constantly acquire more land, to have large amounts of cattle, and to be able to impose the own will through the use of force. While these would all correspond to certain ideals of a successful man that many tried to emulate, when somebody was understood to be exaggerating in these terms, others would make explicit that what the person was understood to be aiming at was becoming a *finquero* – an accusation with unfavourable implications. On the other hand, it is worth stressing, as Toledo (2012) has also done, that actual *finqueros* could often be understood in very positive terms, as caring and loving father figures. This was, for example, the case with Don Laco, the owner of the *finca* Santo Domingo, in Chicoasén, whom the inhabitants of the neighbouring village of La Represa held in high esteem. Don Laco, they told me, would always help out if they needed it, and he was also a *compadre* (see note 9, p. 44, for an explanation of this term) of several of them. Even the inhabitants of Los Guayabos were not necessarily hostile to the formal owner of the land that they occupied. They were rather upset with the government officials for not solving the problem between formal and informal owners of the land. The leaders of the Proletarian Organization Emiliano Zapata also stressed that their conflict with *finqueros* and the government was not personal, but political. The problem they pointed to was instead the harsh inequalities found in the state.

**Political forms and the new dam**

As the director finally showed up in his white truck at the gates of the CFE, the heat had already gotten so intense that the shade offered by the trees along the road was not enough, and it was therefore a relief to get into his air-conditioned office. I explained that I was interesting in knowing how they went about building a dam, and he started telling me about the procedures for shifting the course of the river – to be able to construct the curtain – and how to choose the correct material for the curtain, and the most efficient and cheapest turbines. However, the director had noticed that these technical aspects were only part of the construction of the new dam. The problems they
were facing, he explained to me, did in fact have little to do with the material for the curtain and so forth, but rather were due to their complicated relationship with the people living in the area. From his perspective, there did not seem to be an end to all the claims people made against the CFE. Besides the unemployed men sitting outside the office, there was of course the Comité Ejidal and the emerging Movimiento, but the director even had to deal with the shy nature of the fish, which the anglers had drawn into the discussion as a way of sustaining their claim for compensation during the phase of the construction. How were they supposed to deal with that?

In a sense, the different political forms I have drawn out in this chapter are a way to offer an answer to that question. I have stressed how the CFE participated in the water politics as an actor that effectively moved power to the Mexican federation by exercising control over the water. This struggle, however, did not only take away power from the state government, but also reduced the influence over the faith of the river from the people living in the area. I have also dedicated much space to how those who had benefitted the least from this transition of power tried to change the terms of exchange between the State, the CFE and the different groups of inhabitants. In this way, I have discussed the political forms involved in these struggles, at the same time stressing both the difficulties formulating effective positions in relation to the CFE outside the revolutionary politics in Chiapas, and how the revolutionary politics faced several practical problems in the municipality. I have thus not only highlighted the importance of water politics, but also of ethnic politics, as well as land and gender politics.

What I therefore have shown is how these political forms can make things appear as calm as the reservoir I observed while waiting for the director to show up, giving a stability to relations along the river much as the curtain of the dam supported the reservoir. However, I have at the same time shown how they can just as often open up the floodgates, stir up the waters, and indeed threaten projects such as the construction of a new dam in Chicoasén. To avoid that kind of outcome, which was what worried the director, the short, and scarcely helpful answer was then that the CFE necessarily had to address the co-existence of different political forms, together with the histories, dreams and beings that it was also part of.
3.

What happened to the Sustainable Rural Villa Emiliano Zapata?

*Figure 15*. The destroyed model house built by the members of the OPEZ.
Figures 16 and 17. Maps of the area between the dams of Malpaso and Peñitas, and of the area of the camp Emiliano Zapata, the Rural Villa, and the locality of Los Guayabos.
**Introduction**

If certain political forms along the Grijalva River then had long histories, and development projects such as the dams have had a lasting effect on the life along the river for generations, there were, on the other hand, projects that would turn into ruins before they were even finished. This was the case of the Sustainable Rural Villa of Emiliano Zapata, which we will turn to in this chapter. Notwithstanding its importance at a certain moment, here we will see how a development project can quickly become irrelevant in the everyday life of the people who have been involved in it. The conflicts and practices behind its cancellation, however, lived on, and appeared again as I looked closer into how development appeared in Mezcalapa during my fieldwork with the Proletarian Organization Emiliano Zapata (OPEZ).

By approaching the way that development acquired a material form through these practices and conflicts, which directly related to the political form that I have referred to as “land politics”, we can learn more about the way in which development was dealt with as a series of objects that were exchanged to form alliances and hierarchies; the organization in place to do so; the strategies employed to control both that organization and the objects which it moved; the particular histories that influenced the shaping of the whole process; how development was embedded in “supernatural” struggles; and the male domination in the negotiations about development projects in this place. At the same time, we will see how the public discussion about the project gave it a coherence that was practically impossible to find on the ground. Through this analysis, I thus want to offer an answer to the main practical question of the chapter: why the project of the Sustainable Rural Villa Emiliano Zapata was cancelled.

**The rise of the Sustainable Rural Cities**

As already noticed in the introduction, the construction of dams in the river had several purposes. Besides producing energy and giving the federal government control over important resources, they were also meant to avert floods; before they were built, 300,000 hectares of land were affected by rising water every year, although heavy rains
increased this number considerably. The floodwaters in 1944, for example, extended 500,000 hectares, and were an important argument for speeding up the process of building the dams. In that instance, more than 100 people died as a direct consequence of the flooding, and many more were to pass away in the following months, because of the unsanitary conditions that it had caused (Robinson, 2007:84-85). The construction of dams did not, on the other hand, constitute a guarantee for completely avoiding these kinds of scenarios, and there can sometimes be an unequivocal tension between the aim of avoiding floods and the objective of producing electricity.  

The most serious flooding that has occurred in Mezcalapa during the last decade, in November 2007, however, had little to do with these inherent tensions. Instead, there was a massive landslide that blocked the river close to the dam of Peñitas. According to the official account of the events, it was caused by the exceptionally heavy rains in October and November that year (Hinojosa-Corona 2011). The landslide caused an enormous wave that, together with the landmasses, struck the village of Juan de Grijalva, killing 25 of its nearly 500 inhabitants. The blockage then formed a natural dam, which made the water level rise upstream, and slowly flooded the houses there.

During these dramatic days, the governor at that time, Juan Sabines, came to the area and offered to move those that had been flooded into new cities that the state government would build. The programme that soon was formulated for this purpose, the Sustainable Rural Cities’ Programme, was supposed to relocate settlements at high risk for natural disasters, but also those who lived in areas with a low population density. Low population density, in fact, was put forward as the central cause for

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33 The first tension between the production of energy and the interest in avoiding floods appears when planning for the construction of a new dam. The electricity is produced as the water falls through the generators: the higher the fall, the more energy that is possible to produce. The higher the curtain of the dam, however, the higher the possibility that more land will be flooded by the construction of the dam. In this sense, the Canyon that ran from Chiapa de Corzo almost all the way to Malpaso was quite an ideal place (and much better than the Usumacinta River, the other sizable river in the state, where no dams are yet to be found), since the high walls on both sides of the river significantly delimited the floodings of the land that lay on that side of the dam. The second tension is related to changes that are much more difficult to foresee than the height of the curtain of the wall: the weather. During the rainy season, the dams have to amass water to assure the production of electricity for the rest of the year. If it rains much more than usual, and it has not been possible to predict, this accumulation, however, becomes problematic – as the water level can then theoretically surpass the level of the curtain. The dams therefore have to open tunnels that let the water through the dam, without producing any electricity, and this can lead to floods further down the river.
poverty in the state (Gobierno del Estado & Instituto de Población y Ciudades Rurales, without date). These cities would count on the basic infrastructure necessary to meet the goals laid out in the United Nations’ Millennium Development Goals, such as achieving universal primary education, promoting gender equality and empowering women,\(^{34}\) which in turn would improve the poor development indicators of the state (UNACH, CEDES & UD 2008:23-26).

It was never quite clear what the contradictory idea of “rural cities” actually meant, but it might have related to a number of projects that were planned for, and which had to do with agriculture – such as making cheese, planting roses and habaneros. The “urban” elements were, however, much more salient. They did not only include houses, schools, roads and churches (both Catholic and others), but also – more importantly – factories assembling chairs and tricycles, which were used in other development projects run by the state government.

To get a clear picture of the funding of these cities was not that easy, since the investments in the Rural Cities were made through the municipalities, and did not appear separately in their budgets. Where the resources were easy to follow was nevertheless in the case of the tiny municipality of Santiago el Pinar, where practically the whole budget of the municipality could be related to the programme during the two years that the city was built (2010-2011). There, eighty-eight percent of the funds came from the state government, while 10.2% of the total investments were made by the federal government. The municipality in turn participated with 1.6%, while private foundations contributed with 0.2%. The cost of that entire project was about 400 million pesos (Larsson 2012:176). During the first years of the programme, 2.5 billion pesos were spent for the whole programme – an amount that turned it into the state’s main development scheme. For this sum, the state government managed to inaugurate four out of the 25 “cities” it had planned for. The following administration was not very keen on continuing with a project so connected to the previous governor, and which

\(^{34}\) Some of the Millennium Goals were already met in Chiapas, or were not relevant. This was the case of eradicating extreme poverty and hunger, and the goal concerning global partnership for development. The achievement of primary education was probably also met. According to the INEGI, 81.6% of the population over 15 years living in Chiapas were literate. See http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/ and http://www.beta.inegi.org.mx/app/areasgeograficas/?ag=07, downloaded on the 28/9/17.
furthermore had attracted so much critique. Although the programme was not cancelled, no more of these cities have as of yet been finished (December 2017).

The Rural Villa Emiliano Zapata

One of the cities that started being built, but which was cancelled before completion, was the Sustainable Rural Villa Emiliano Zapata in the northern municipality of Mezcalapa (see maps on p. 86; the town was supposed to be built close to the village of Los Guayabos, which I have marked on one of the maps). At the site where the camp had previously been found, a model house from the project still stood at the entrance during my fieldwork. It was empty, and showed signs of an attack that it had suffered just as the project was cancelled, during a violent confrontation between two groups that had formally been members of the same organization: the OPEZ. Otherwise, the settlement looked practically empty, with only a couple of houses here and there scattered over the asphalt where the rest of the temporary houses had been standing before. Why had this happened? Where were

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35 At that time, the area was part of Tecpatán. The municipality of Mezcalapa was founded in 2011.
everybody to be found? And what were they doing now?

When I made a first attempt to answer this question, I had only been able to rely on articles in newspapers and some academic writings, which turned out to be of little help when trying to solve the mystery of this project. While they made me understand more or less whereabout the construction of the Villa had started, much of the information in the papers would confuse more than they helped when I got to the place. In a newspaper article from 2011, in one of the most prestigious newspapers in the country (the left-leaning, pro-Zapatista La Jornada), the journalist, a well-known correspondent who had covered Chiapas at least since the Zapatista uprising, for example, wrote about the problems facing the different “neighbourhoods” involved in the project – instead of calling them “villages”, “settlements”, or something similar. The journalist had also written that the project had been paused because the new city would not be safe, but without mentioning why. Furthermore, the inhabitants were reported to have occupied the local offices of the United Nations with the obscure reason “of the Objectives of the Millennium” (“por aquellos de ‘los Objetivos del Milenio’”), which again made it difficult to understand what this conflict was all about (Bellinghausen 2011).

When comparing the academic writings about the place, it was indeed difficult to understand how the project could have been cancelled at all. Japhy Wilson (2009), one of the most articulate critics of the programme, for example, traced the whole idea of the programme to the Plan Puebla Panamá – a comprehensive development plan that encompassed the whole area from Puebla, in central Mexico, to Panama, and which showed clear neoliberal influences in its proposals. On the other hand, he pointed out the apparent similarities with the concentration of people in Indian villages, which had been carried out during the colonization of Mexico (Wilson 2009:72; cf the discussion in chapter 2 of this thesis). He thus understood the Sustainable Rural Cities, as well as the Plan Puebla Panama, as a capitalist project, with important cultural implications which ran contrary to the ideals of the EZLN and to the autonomous practices he thought took place among the indigenous and campesino populations in the country. The Rural Cities project, he claimed – echoing the basic Marxist idea of primitive accumulation – aimed at separating the campesinos from their land, inserting them in spaces
“planned, produced, and controlled by the state”, and turning them into cheap labour, thereby finally incorporating them and their spaces into the state and the capitalist mode of production (Wilson 2009:89, 198, 224-227). The same argument was also to be found in the work of Antoine Libert, who went one step further by insinuating that the landslide and the flood of Juan de Grijalva had been provoked by explosions. This was in fact an idea that was widespread in the area. Libert also inserted it into the Plan Puebla Panama, and more specific development plans for the area, including the construction of the dam Chicoasén II, which we will come back to in the next chapter. The interest in provoking a landslide would thus be to build another dam at the site (Libert 2012:116-120).

The important interests that were supposedly behind the Sustainable Rural Cities made it appear to be just too important to be halted. Notwithstanding, as it became clear that the Villa in Mezcalapa would be cancelled, new explanations were put forward by academics and journalists who had written about it. Now, the unexpected outcome was explained as a result of “corruption”, which involved both the government and the OPEZ, although the main responsibility would fall to the government. This, it was added, should be understood in the light of the political choices of the OPEZ, who were said to have “abandoned the struggle for the right to land, and the defence of traditional crops”, as one academic expressed it (Camacho, quoted in Bellinghausen 2013; cf Wilson’s comment on the limits of the strategy of the OPEZ compared to his faith in the model of the EZLN: Wilson 2009:214-227).

At the same time, there were also texts which pointed in a different direction. Just as the project was being cancelled, Miguel Pickard (2012) for example claimed that the OPEZ had managed to negotiate the terms of the Rural Villa, for which they would have been punished since the government supposedly did not want the example to be imitated elsewhere. Pickard also quoted Dolores Camacho, an academic from the local research centre PROIMMSE-UNAM (later CIMSUR-UNAM), who argued that the term Villa in fact was a way to start excluding the Project from the Sustainable Rural Cities Programme. Luis Rodríguez (2010) also wrote in a similar vein, arguing that the OPEZ presented an “alternative project” which radically opposed the governmental project. The government’s “development without respect for communitarian
“differences” would, for example, contrast with the alternative project’s “development with identity”, in the same way as “human development” would be opposed to “social well-being”, and “development planned from above” would be antithetical to a “development planned from below” (Rodríguez 2010:13).

How did all these ideas relate to the way that development was brought about in the area, and to the reason why the project had been cancelled?

The OPEZ after the Rural Villa

To find an answer to these questions, I started working at the local offices of the OPEZ in Malpaso, a town that was intimately connected to the dam found there (Nezahualcóyotl/Malpaso). The house where I stayed was located in an area called “Zone C” – a technical name given by the Federal Commission of Electricity (CFE), as if it were an extension of the dam that needed a clear name to make sense in a logical scheme. As I got to the office of the OPEZ, there was much less time to talk about the Rural Villa than I had imagined. A first trace of why the Villa had been cancelled was however to be found precisely in this lack of time.

During the project of the Villa, the OPEZ had constantly organized protests in different parts of the state to put pressure on the government to accept a whole series of demands. These would range from the place of construction of the Villa, to the productive projects they wanted the government to support, the design of the houses and the materials that were to be used, and the companies and workers to hire. These protests had been particularly visible in the municipality, where the OPEZ was well-known. The first time I took a taxi from Malpaso to the area around the Villa, where many members of the OPEZ lived, the taxi driver refused to enter certain villages because of their reputation for being violent. Considering the small size of the municipality (around 20,000 inhabitants, but with only about 11,000 over the age of 18, i.e., who could vote), the OPEZ also had a relatively strong presence (about 1,100 members in the municipality). Together, this gave the organization a good position to negotiate with the local government. In fact – and as already mentioned in the introduction – one of the local leaders was even part of the local government, as a
representative of the PRD. Votes were an important capital in Mezcalapa – as indeed all over the country. To be able to promise a particular amount of votes, which organizations such as the OPEZ would do, meant that they could ask for something in return.

As I started working at the office, this influence was cashed in, in the form of construction material, which the members of the OPEZ got from the municipal government, as part of its funds for development projects. During my first week at the office, the organization was to receive 8,000 metal sheets, 23,000 brick stones and 136 tons of cement, which had to be received, carried, counted, guarded, and distributed among the members, who then would use them as they pleased – and without any further governmental funding or involvement.

To receive all of this building material, a considerable amount of administration had to be carried out, and the little computer that I brought to the field was a welcome contribution to all the physical and digital forms that had to be filled out with the names and personal numbers of the those who were supposed to receive it.
– all members of the OPEZ. Besides the administrative work – a form of outsourcing from the municipal administration – the members had to take turns carrying the material from the trucks that slowly made their way into the municipality, and placing it on a piece of land that the organization had hired for storage. Then, they had to count it to make sure that they had gotten what they had been promised. To protect it from being stolen, they also had to take turns watching it night and day, until the members picked it up. At this point, they had to take a photo of the people who received the material. The final step was to meet up at the municipality to show support for the *presidente municipal*, and thank him for the material.

“**It’s not about money**: the visit to Plan de Ayala

While the members would then receive these benefits for being part of the OPEZ, all the movements that were necessary to do so were costly, especially for those living far away from the seat of government. This was not least the case of the small settlement of Plan de Ayala, which therefore had not participated as much as others. For the organization, this absence was sufficiently important for the regional leaders to pay them a visit, which turned out to be a good indicator of the political strategies of the OPEZ, and some practical problems that they faced.

Plan de Ayala lies about 40 minutes from the dock of Malpaso by boat, on a strip of land that breaks the rather straight line of the river. A small peninsula stood out from the main piece of land, forming a round and calm bay, where it was easy to land. A small house was standing on the peninsula, like a lonely lighthouse, in front of a cage for fish, the cultivation of which is very common in the area.

What interested the leaders of the OPEZ was however the main square, found between a broad tree which stood on one end of the square opposite a rather big brick house with a metal fence that separated it and the concrete slab outside from the square. On the two other ends of the square, there were a small shop next to the access from the river, and a free-standing, wooden kitchen on the other side. Here, the meeting with the local group was to take place. The OPEZ was organized as a confederation of rather independent groups like this one, of different sizes. In Mezcalapa, they had 24 groups,
which all had their own leaders who represented “their people”. These group leaders had practically formed their own groups – often through kinship ties connected to place of residence, but also through governmental programmes as Oportunidades which built this kind of structure as well – and had not been elected through procedures of the organization. Additionally, they had considerable power over “their people”, and could basically move them from one organization to another – including the official parties among these organizations, which all appeared to share this organizational structure.

As we arrived at the square, the leaders and their accompanying anthropologist were seated on chairs outside of the house, and the leader of the local group started calling out names that he had on a list. He seemed nervous, because several of the people on his list were not there. Things did not get any better for him as the meeting started. A drunken man kept shouting, always in support of the OPEZ, repeating what the leaders had just said. Every time the leaders ended their discourses, he would go up with decided steps – as if he was part of a scene of a political theatre broadcast on TV – and shake the hands of the leaders, using both hands.

The first hand he shook was that of Uriel, one of the three regional leaders, who started the meeting by putting forward a basic explanation of some central principles for political struggles in the area. The first metaphor he used for this explanation was taken from the everyday situation of buying something in a shop – as in the shop that he stood right next to. When you need to pay for your item, he said, and you say that you have 50 pesos, you also need to hand them over. It is not enough to say that you have 50 pesos to buy what you want for that money: you have to have them in your pocket. The same, he continued, goes for the members. When the OPEZ coordinates events, the organization needs to show that it actually has as many members as its leaders say it has, since the number of members gives the leaders a better or a worse position when it negotiates the resources for its members. It is like a flock of sheep, he continued, shifting metaphors: they can walk around and eat their grass, but when they have to drink water, the owner wants them all there at the same time. If they do that, the organization will get more resources, and the members will also get more. He finished off with a third metaphor, which he built around a tree – like the one in front of him that the local members of the organization stood under to protect
themselves from the burning sun. The organization, he explained, was like a growing tree: the bigger it gets, the more shadow it can give, and more people will get room under it.

The conclusion from these three examples was easy to draw: the members of the OPEZ in Plan de Ayala had to show up at their events, otherwise the power of OPEZ would diminish, which would be against the interests of its members. As if explaining why the tree of the OPEZ were the best tree in the wood, he reminded them of the different things that they had gotten through the organization during these three years: a package of fertiliser, five metal sheets, and now ten more sheets. “As you can see”, he finished up, “we are getting more and more, so we should be able to get even more the three years to come” (i.e., during the next governmental period in the municipality).

The following speaker basically repeated what the first one had said, only adding his connection to the people living in Plan de Ayala by claiming that he was working for them, and that he was like them; although he was a councillor, he said, he wasn’t a licenciado.36 The third one, in turn, told them that the local leader had been crying at their office because they had scolded him several times since “his people” never showed up.

As the regional leaders had stopped talking, the participants started pointing out important details not found in the metaphors and discourses given to them. The reason why they didn’t go to the events, one man told them, was because it was too expensive to go to Malpaso, but also that it was too much work. When they were asked to send five men to help carry, it meant a third of the group had to go. This was much more than five people from the bigger groups, which had more than one hundred members. “That means that you have to work harder to become a larger group”, one of the regional leaders replied, adding that if they did not show up on the day that they were supposed to receive their supplies, they would not get anything. What if somebody gets sick, another man replied. In that case, the same leaders answered, it was fine, but stressed that you could not be sick all the time. Another person proposed that the leaders could just tell the members when all the work was done, so that they

36 A person with a university degree, even if the term often is most commonly used for lawyers.
could come and pick it up. “That’s a great idea”, the regional leader exclaimed ironically. “We work all the time, and you just receive. That is just excellent”. Somebody finally proposed a fine if they didn’t show up, but the regional leader did not want that, because, he said, it was not a question of money. It was all a question of presence.

A history of land politics in Mezcalapa

What was so interesting about the visit to Plan de Ayala was precisely that it showed how important the physical presence was for the kind of land politics that the OPEZ had been involved with over decades, and which it also used when engaging with development projects. When looking into this history, it was also evident how this presence was directly connected to different political projects, like the one that at this moment had caused the regional leaders to go to Plan de Ayala, but also – and above all – to land occupations that were inspired by the Agrarian Reform and the EZLN’s attempt to revive it.

This latest project of steel sheets, cement and brick had, in other words, been far from the most important one for the OPEZ, as was indeed the case with the Sustainable Rural Cities. The project that instead stood out was the construction of the dam Peñitas, as it worked as an entrance point for the peasant organizations of which the OPEZ was part. From the mobilizations that had emerged to deal with issues related to the dam, the MOCRI (Movimiento Campesino Regional Independiente) became an influential actor in the area, and it did not take many years before its members became involved in the state wide occupation of land in collaboration with the EZLN; while the EZLN was a central player in the uprising, it operated in alliance with different peasant organizations all over the state.37

37 In Mezcalapa, this collaboration took place through the UMOI, (Unidad de Movimientos de Organizaciones Independientes). UMOI – according to Villafuerte et al, 1999:74, note 8 – was made up of the Unión General Obrero Campesina Popular (UGOCEP), MOCRI, the Organización de Productores Indígenas del Estado de Chiapas (OPICH), and the Organización Campesina Emiliano Zapata (OCEZ; the organization from which OPEZ emerged after the assassination of its leader, Arturo Albores Velasco, in 1989; see González Esponda 2001:147, note 12).
The land that was first invaded was owned by a man called Gabriel Lastra Pedrero. Lastra was an influential lawyer from the neighbouring state of Tabasco, who had close ties with its government. According to one of those participating in the occupation, this was only one of five ranches that he had in the area – something that constituted the moral ground for the take-over. It is worth stressing that the members would not therefore stop worrying about the judicial consequences their actions could lead to, or in fact that they would be clear about what a land occupation implied. When Conrado, one of the participants of the occupation of the ranch of Lastra, explained his experiences from this time to me, he also emphasised that he had not known of any similar events before. However, when he heard about the take-over, Conrado quickly decided to take part of the moment, and left his job at the substantial plantation of a fruit company in Chontalpa, in Tabasco. His wife was not as keen on the idea initially, but later on joined him as he had settled:

She had never seen any of these take-overs; I didn’t know about take-overs: what you do, what there is, that there is movement, but once I got there, I understood that there are sit-ins, that there are demonstrations, and all the rest of it. What could we do? We had to be there, to help out there, so that the government would listen.  

Conrado knew the Lastra’s ranch very well, since he had lived close to it during his youth. Although Conrado was born in the municipality of Pantepec, relatively close to Malpaso, he had come to a settlement called Unión Progreso together with his family when he was 13 years old. This settlement, however, was relocated with the construction of the dam of Peñitas, and since then, Conrado had only had different short-time jobs for more than two decades. Apparently, Conrado’s family had no legal right to the land in Unión Progreso, and would therefore face difficult times. These difficulties would not end when joining the occupation, but rather take another course as his personal problems became part of a political conflict. This was quite different from how Conrado initially had imagined it to be. He had thought that he would just have to ask for a membership, as in the ejidos, and they hopefully would

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38 “Ella nunca había visto ninguna toma de estas; yo no sabía de tomas, qué cosas se hace, qué hay, qué hay movimiento, pero ya estando en el lugar, sí... que hay plantones, que hay marchas, y todo eso. Ni modo, tuvimos que estar ahí, apoyar ahí, para que el gobierno escuchara.”
give him a piece of land. Instead, they had told him that nothing was sure there, and that it was a struggle they had to go through together. This struggle, they told him, would take time. Compared to his job at the plantation in Chontalapa, he considered it to be a better option.

Not surprisingly, Lastra took legal action against the occupants, and three of them also were caught by the police in 1998. If Lastra then had the sufficient influence to mobilize the state authorities in such a politically delicate case as the take-over of land during the uprising, the occupants could, on the other hand, count on the political strength of the peasant organizations at that time. These organizations could mobilize thousands of people, thereby exercising considerable pressure on the government. Besides, with the Zapatista uprising, they counted on significant support from important sectors of the population in Mexico at large, as well as internationally. In this context, the three occupants that ended up in jail were also defended as political prisoners by the OPEZ (which had started replacing the MOCRI in this area) and their actions were related to the ongoing, armed conflict, which had followed the uprising. One year later, the prisoners were released – among them the regional leader who, during the visit to Plan de Ayala, had argued that the best protection from the sun was a broad tree.

**Why had the Rural Villa been cancelled?**

With this background, we now have a better ground to stand on to answer the question about the cancellation of the Rural Villa – and even to understand how people talked about the project locally. The most direct explanation that I received, however, was formulated by a man who happened to take a rest in the shade of a tree outside his house in Limoncito when I arrived to try to understand what had happened to the Rural Villa:

- If things had continued as they were supposed to, maybe I wouldn’t be here right now. I would be there in my house, maybe a bit better off, because we would have better services, health and all […]. There was going to be a primary school there, maybe even a secondary
school… […] But that is not what happened, because people from the government and people from the community started managing the budget [of the construction of the Rural Villa]. This started a discussion within the pueblo. Now we say that maybe this discussion was provoked by the government, because of the issues regarding the housing and all the rest of it. There were issues… so people started to divide. To divide, and divide, and divide, to the point that the people cracked, and from the 240 families [that were originally involved], only half of us stayed. Then there were disagreements, and disagreements, and disagreements, and we were never able to reintegrate the group as it was before, because some asked for one thing, and others asked for another. Some did not want the houses any longer, and others did.

- Why did they start saying that they didn’t want the houses any longer?

- Because there were people who suddenly appeared in the camp, who bought [houses in] the camp. I don’t know who sold them. Some teachers [arrived], and I don’t know what [other jobs the newcomers had]. They started injecting a series of things that were not like that. They started telling people that there was money that they could get from the government, that the authorities were stealing money… well, a series of things, and that was how the people were divided. It was divided, and after that, it was not possible to reach an agreement. At this point, there were death threats between the compañeros. And people started opting for something else. Different groups went to talk to the government, and the government gave them both time and talked to both of them. What was decided… I am here telling you the very end of it, just quickly about the trajectory of the camp… At that point, it wasn’t possible to stand the tension. People died there. Two guys hung themselves out of despair. They just went to a tree, and… one of them was the brother of my wife… he just took off, put a rope around his neck, and there he died. The other one was found in the camp, also hanged. There were people who died because of diseases, and those who died because… there was a time when the people would start seeing that they would get sick, but as if they had lost it. One man alone could not stand the force of the women, as if something possessed them… something supernatural.39

39 Worth mentioning here is that the Rural City in Santiago el Pinar was also built right on the mountain where it was believed that the spirits of the dead would appear at night (Larsson 2012).

- Si las cosas hubieran seguido su marcha, ya no estaría yo aquí quizás; ya estaría yo allí en mi casa, a lo mejor un poquito mejor, porque habrían más servicios, de salud y todo […] iba a haber una escuela primaria, igual y hasta una escuela de secundaria… […] pero no se da. Porque se otorga un presupuesto, y lo empieza a manejar gente de gobierno con gente de nuestra misma comunidad. De ahí se empieza a generar una discusión entre el mismo pueblo, que ya nosotros dijimos que a a lo mejor
What was decided at this point was to accept a proposal that the state government had made, to pay them 120,000 per person, and cancel the project.

Why, again, had this happened? The simple answer was that the OPEZ wanted to do things on their own terms, which did not correspond to the way that the planners of the Rural Cities had envisioned the process.

From the perspective of the OPEZ, the Rural Villa offered an opportunity to transfer power from the government to popular assemblies, and to thereby give practical knowledge about bureaucratic formats among its members – much in the same way as demonstrations and land occupations were considered to constitute an important organizational experience to effectively occupy spaces and direct the movement of people and things. What the OPEZ aimed at was, in other words, to use the state to move forward its position in the “war of position” that it saw itself as being part of, which even included controlling the kind of forms that I was filling out at their offices. While this could be read between the lines of the way the OPEZ acted, this strategy was spelled out in the internal material of the National Liberation Movement (MLN) that the organization belonged to. Here, they included a commentary that Lenin made of a letter by Engels, where he argued that “the State is not necessary for liberty, but to...

la discusión fue provocada por el mismo gobierno por las contradicciones que había en torno a la vivienda y en todo lo demás. Había contradicciones... entonces se empieza a dividir la gente. A dividir, y a dividir, y a dividir, a modo que de 240 familias se cuartea la gente, y quedamos mitad y mitad. De ahí hubo desacuerdo, y desacuerdo, y desacuerdo, y nunca pudimos volver a reintegrar el grupo como era antes, porque unos pedían una cosa, y otra pedía otra cosa. Ya no querían vivienda, una parte quería la vivienda, una ya no.

- ¿Por qué empezaron a decir que ya no querían?
- Porque hubieron personajes que de la noche a la mañana cayeron en el campamento, que compraron campamento. No sé quién se lo vendería, pues. Unos maestros, y no sé qué. Ellos empezaron a injetar una serie de cosas que no eran así. A la gente le decía que había dinero para repartir, que las autoridades se estaban llevando dinero, bueno, una serie de cosas, al grado que se dividió la gente. Se dividió bien dividido, y ya no se pudo llegar a ningún acuerdo. Ya habían amenazas de muerte entre los mismos compas. Se opta ya por otra salida, y subía un grupo y subía otro grupo a hablar con el gobierno, y el gobierno pues le daba viada [¿cuerda?] a los dos, platicaba con los dos grupos. Se opta... ya te vengo hablando casi al final, así rápido de cómo fue la trayectoria del campamento... Ya no se aguantaba la tensión. Ahí hubieron muertes. Hubieron dos chavos que se ahorcaron de la misma desesperación. Solos se iban al árbol, y... incluso uno es hermano de mi esposa... el chavo nada más agarró, se fue, se puso un hilo en el cuello, y ahí murió. El otro lo encontraron dentro del campamento, también colgado. Hubieron muertes de enfermedad y muertes así como que... hubo una época donde la gente iba a ver que se enfermaba, como que se les iba la onda. Ya ni uno de hombre les aguantaba la fuerza a las mujeres, como que les posesionaba algo... algo sobrenatural.”
subdue the adversaries of the proletariat”. The state, Lenin went on, could thus be used to “teach and educate the proletariat” (Lenin 2014; italics in the original).^40

To take over State functions required a significant “presence”, as the leader of the OPEZ had put it, and this was where they had failed according to its leaders. To use a metaphor put forward by one of the regional leaders, they seemed to have experienced it very much like the surprise of somebody who thought they had 50 pesos in their pocket, but who – at the moment of the transaction – realizes that it is not the case. If, as mentioned above, the OPEZ had previously been able to get their members out of prison on political grounds, the case of the Rural Villa showed that things had changed. When the governmental representatives noticed that their returns in economic and political terms would be close to nil, they started trying to cancel the project. They did so, one of the leaders told me, by offering the leaders a large quantity of money (5 million pesos), and a smaller amount of money to the members (200,000), in exchange for the cancellation. According to this leader, the mistake that they had made at this point was to not accept the offer, and to think that they had sufficient support from the members to force the government to continue with the project. At this time, the OPEZ had 25,000 members, which the leaders also put on the table of the negotiations. Besides, they had alliances with other peasant organizations in the state. When the principal leaders were arrested, accused of misappropriation of funds, they therefore thought that the members would participate in massive protests that would force the government to release them, drop the charges, and take up the construction of the Rural Villa again. Instead of 25,000 members, only about 5,000 showed up to protest in San Cristóbal de Las Casas, and only about 300 remained after two weeks.

More importantly still was that the other organizations did not show any support for them. According to the OPEZ, that would – paradoxically enough – be related to the force that they had had earlier, which had translated into closer ties with the government since the instalment of the PRD in the state government, in 2000.^41

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^40 Gramsci’s idea of “war of position” was on the other hand included in the same material with a text by Gramsci (2014), and analysis by Isabel Rauber (2014).

^41 The government of the PRD would also win the elections of 2006, with a candidate – Juan Sabines – who however had closer ties to the PRI. In 2012, it was instead the so called Green Party that won, supported by Juan Sabines.
These ties were mainly secured through a range of development projects, which these organizations were not prepared to risk for the OPEZ and the project of the Rural Cities.

Nonetheless, part of the explanation was also to be found in the way that development was perceived in the governmental institutions involved with the project. To start with, the programme might not have been as important to the government as authors such as Wilson expected, at least not in the terms he imagined. What the leaders of the OPEZ thought had upset the governmental representatives was that the organization had forced them to use the money set aside for the Villa in an efficient way, which implied excluding the companies that the government normally turned to for materials and workers that it required for the public works. The pressure on the government that the OPEZ had exerted, and their comprehensive participation in the planning and construction of the Villa – they believed – had also made it difficult for the governor to present this particular project as a successful government intervention. These issues were something that in turn related to the explanation that started to become more present in the media after the cancellation: corruption. However, what the explanations put forward by the OPEZ implied was that the project was cancelled not because of corrupt practices, but because of the lack of them. This would become a problem as the quality of the Villa would be much higher than in the other Rural Cities. In that way, it would become evident that the public funds used by the government were not employed in the most efficient way, which in turn would give rise to suspicions about the actual use of these funds in other projects.

When comparing the two first rural cities, in Nuevo Juan de Grijalva and in Santiago el Pinar, it was indeed difficult to understand how the money had been spent. The extremely poor material used in Santiago el Pinar was precisely one of the reasons why the new neighbourhood that had been built would remain practically empty of inhabitants, although local hierarchies also played a role – as the local leaders made themselves the tenants of more houses than they could live in. Notwithstanding, one of the companies in charge of the construction was reported to be “in its best moment”, despite the “year of crisis” of 2010, thanks to their participation in the Rural Cities and the reconstruction of the Senate (Fernández 2010). Employees of private companies working on the project also did not make any secret of the important friendship between
government officials in charge of the public procurement and the owners of the companies, nor did government officials consider certain irregular payments to inhabitants in Santiago el Pinar to be something that they needed to hide (Larsson 2012).

Still, there were moments when the project as such had to be presented as strictly following formal rules, and this idea of formalities was a fundamental part of the explanation to the cancellation that some government officials would give. According to one government employee I interviewed, and who had been involved with the Rural Cities, the reason for the cancellation was found in the legal status of the flooded villages; the question that needed an explanation, from this perspective, was instead why the project had managed to survive as long as it had. The villages where the members of the OPEZ lived, she claimed, had no legal right to the land – which at that time was true in the case of Los Guayabos, but not when it came to the other four settlements involved in the process. This legal situation, she argued, would have caused difficulties for the state administration, as they could not get funds from the federal programme for natural disasters, FONDEN, if they were not able to provide evidence of the legal tenancy of the land where the disaster had occurred. While this might be true, it is worth remembering the fact that the Rural Cities were funded mainly by the state of Chiapas, and not by funds from the federal government. However, the reason that the project had not been cancelled, according to this employee, was because of internal differences within the government, related to electoral agendas and political alliances. The director of the Department of Agriculture, she claimed, had political ties with the OPEZ, which made him take on the project. Due to internal struggles within the government, this director quit to become a senator. It was at this moment that the project would have been cancelled.

While the man that supposedly would have become a senator did not appear among the official list of senators at that time, the leaders of the OPEZ confirmed their close relation to the director of the Department of Agriculture, and how things had changed as he left. In this way, both this government official and the leaders of the

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42 That is, Rubén Jaramillo, Ricardo Flores Magón, Genaro Vázquez and Nuevo Limoncito. Bellinghausen (2013) wrongly claimed that it was Rubén Jaramillo that did not have a legal title.
OPEZ mentioned the lack of relations that went beyond the particular project as a reason for its cancellation – relations which, as in the Rural City in Santiago el Pinar, could make certain actors benefit from it in a way not foreseen in the official documents. Thus, they both also pointed to the difficulty of relying too heavily on development documents and political policies to formulate explanations of the Sustainable Rural Cities Programme as such, and why it was cancelled.

From this perspective, the project was more intimately connected to the political relations that would hold a project alive. The base line would then suggest that the government only continue with a project as long as it rendered some kind of political capital – in the form of alliances between beneficiaries and particular political players, or between these players and companies that could offer them economic support. To force the government to continue with a project despite the absence of these benefits would, on the other hand, require the capacity to organize efficient protests, which the OPEZ did not count on any longer.

**The experience of development**

By following the organization that was required to bring about development in Mezcalapa during my fieldwork there, what I found were central aspects of the way that the OPEZ was involved in the project, and how they experienced the abandoned Rural Villa. Something that was particularly striking here, and which had not been mentioned in the interpretations at hand when I got there, was how their take on development was part of a broader strategy that apparently had developed in close relation to land politics, which in turn was embedded in the particular history of the Agrarian Reform. An important aspect that we now have to add to the discussion about the Agrarian Reform in the previous chapter is that it was only encouraged by the Mexican state during its first decades. After that, peasant organizations took on the role of occupying land with the hope of subsequent legalization, but also as a way to move their own political projects. While organizations like the OPEZ had continued with this strategy despite the formal ending of the Agrarian Reform, what attracted much attention to Chiapas was the new path established by the EZLN. This new path meant
that those carrying out land occupations would not attempt to obtain legal recognition, but instead be part of a project of creating communities and municipalities that would be formally autonomous from the different levels of the government. This new stance would make it difficult for journalists and academics to perceive the long established strategy used by OPEZ, where the occupation of land and of all the different aspects of the Rural Villa were part of the same attempt to occupy the State. Crucial to this process were both having political ties within the governmental institutions, and the capacity to put pressure on them when those ties were not strong enough, or did not exist.

At the same time, by following the organization around the building material, it also became clear how development items were used in exchanges aimed at forming alliances and hierarchies, both by the OPEZ and by government officials – relations that in fact appeared to be more important than the completion of the official project through which these objects were channelled. Precisely what kind of relations and interests would be involved in these informal objectives was often difficult to perceive, although rumours would make it clear that the official version of the project was far from all there was to it.

By analysing the conflicts behind the cancellation of the Rural Villa, we have also lined out how development was given a particular form. What I want to argue is then that development here would appear through:

1) objects that could be used for different kinds of exchanges.
2) the disputes over the different networks and places that the actors involved in the particular project are part of.
3) discussions about development and modernity.
4) political analyses and discussions about the order of things in a more abstract way, driven by different political values.
5) “supernatural” forces.

What the critics of the programme above all pointed to could in this sense be interpreted as relating to the first two aspects outlined above, that is, as a worry that the government would use the development project to occupy relatively autonomous
spaces of peasants and of the indigenous population – as Wilson, Libert, Camacho and Bellinghausen stressed. Considering the difficulties facing the OPEZ to get support from other organizations, the realization of development in this area could indeed come forth as an indication of a demobilizing (rather than depoliticizing, as Ferguson argued in another context) effect tied to development, which would emerge as a result of the ties made with the government through the development objects. This would then confirm the idea of development as a counter-insurgent machine that co-opts divergent actors, where the objects offered through different projects establish the terms and forms of “participation” – thereby effectively avoiding a more “genuine” political involvement (Green 2014:71). On the other hand, it is important to stress that it was not only the different levels of government that would use development projects to form and maintain political ties, and thereby deepen their influence in the networks found around them. As pointed out in this chapter, the OPEZ also managed to keep the project alive because of good relations with an important government representative, which at least partly relied on electoral interests. To understand the cancellation of the project, one would then also have to take into account the internal struggles within the government, and not let it remain an antipode to the campesinos or the indigenous population (as implied by the analysis of Rodríguez, quoted above).

The analysis offered by authors such as Camacho and Wilson about the OPEZ and the Rural Cities would therefore miss this important point, as they saw the “collaboration” with the government as giving into co-optation. As the strategy used by the OPEZ points to, it is not always that easy to pin down when a particular relation can best be described as involved in co-option or resistance (cf. Ortner in Gledhill 2009:20).

The exclusive focus on development as an object of exchange that could establish and maintain alliances would nonetheless miss the third basic aspect referred to above: of development as something that appears in international discussions about development. The programme explicitly addressed the eight Millennium Development Goals; in Santiago el Pinar, they even put up eight huge signs just above the new neighbourhood built through the project, which informed about eight goals. The Programme was in fact only part of a policy called “Agenda United Nations”; Chiapas
was allegedly the first entity in the world to incorporate the Development Millennium Goals into the state Constitution (Secretaría de Hacienda del Gobierno del Estado de Chiapas 2011:91).43 The Sustainable Rural Cities could in this sense be understood as an attempt to participate in a “common visual and conceptual paradigm of what it means to be modern” (Larkin 2013:333) – an aspect of development which is repeated in different parts of the world (see for example Namba, 2017).

Although the effects of these kinds of projects would not necessarily be seen in the terms formulated in the projects themselves, this does not mean that they are “fake” (cf. Namba 2017). An important outcome of the Sustainable Rural Cities was, for instance, the deeper collaboration that started with them, between the government of Chiapas and one of the main businessmen in the country, Ricardo Salinas; the foundation tied to his group of companies was above all involved in the construction of the first Rural City, Nuevo Juan de Grijalva. Again, the most important business that Salinas was later on involved with had little to do with the places of the programme – which again the critics of it, and the private participation in it did not imagine (see for example Zunino & Pickard 2009). The economic participation of the foundation tied to Salinas, and which contributed to the programme, was also quite modest. According to Martha Martínez, the foundation donated 12 million pesos, which should be compared with the total cost of 2.5 billion pesos reported for the programme as a whole (Gobierno del Estado & Instituto de Población y Ciudades Rurales, without date).44 Yet after this, the business group was involved in a series of economic and political transactions with the state government. These included the purchase of a football team that had belonged to the state (sold for 35 million pesos, which was 25 million pesos less than the state had bought it for two years earlier), the construction of a skyscraper where the government administration was centred, a number of development projects, and the one-billion-peso project of building a wind power plant on the west coast of the state (Martínez 2012). Rather than a direct interest in the Sustainable Rural Cities.

43 It was then also in this context that the protests reported by Bellinghausen, outside of the local offices of the United Nations, are to be understood.
44 The participation of private foundations made authors as Zunino & Pickard (2009) suspect that it was the private companies that would be the real beneficiaries of the project. Zunino & Pickard however imagined the programme much as Wilson, and therefore did not consider the possibility that it would be part of a broader set of exchanges, like those Martínez pointed out.
as a way to make way for companies interested in the land from where their inhabitants were supposed to come, the involvement then was part of a broader exchange between the government of Chiapas and certain businessmen. On the other hand – as also Maia Green (2015:633) has noticed – this participation by philanthropic foundations tied to private companies supports a particular narrative about development, where the management of large commercial corporations is presented as a model also for governmental programmes. As Green put it, “business is presented not simply as a committed partner in development but as inherently developmental” (Ibid), turning development into something similar to an investment that should give returns. As in the case of the Rural Cities, philanthropic foundations invest relatively small sums in development projects also globally – between three and five billion dollars annually, out of approximately 100 billion dollars per year (Marten & Witte 2008:12). Still, their participation gives a specific flavour to development.

If the critics of the Rural Cities then had missed a range of important issues because they stuck too closely to the development documents, they would in fact also take the rumours in the area just as literally. This was above all the case concerning the interpretation of the rumours about explosions that would have occurred before the landslide. By focusing on the plausibility of these rumours – as especially Libert did – what was then missed was how the message of the rumours could also be read as clear indications of the low level of trust that the government had in the area. From this perspective, we can instead read the rumours as a historically grounded comment on how the government was understood to always count on an informal, and more important project running alongside the formal one – an interpretation which is easier to align with the discussion that I have made above. The rumours, in other words, could be seen as part of the broad political discussions about the configuration of the relations that the State was part of – and which constituted yet another aspect of the execution of development. The same is true regarding the presence of “supernatural” forces, which can be understood as a way to discuss a very complicated situation, that was not possible to control.

In public discussions, the Sustainable Rural Cities Programme would however be analysed first and foremost in the terms put forward through its documents, where
the actual places involved with the programme were of a subordinate importance. In the case of the Rural Villa, abstract and politically interested accounts were not delimited to state documents, but also appeared in the analyses made by pro-Zapatistas engaging with the issue – paradoxically enough, as these authors also criticized the practices of abstraction that they perceived in the programme and in the texts produced by the World Bank. As in the case of the Comité Ejidal discussed in the previous chapter, we can therefore see that a basic problem with much of the critique of both the Rural Cities and the OPEZ – as well as the explanations of the cancellations of the project that I have referred to – was that it was made from a perspective embedded in a political compromise with the EZLN.\(^45\) Therefore, a particular image of development was produced, which had little to do with the way in which it was experienced in this place. What this chapter then draws attention to is a crucial argument of the thesis, which consists of the observation that the public discussions about development create a coherent project out of a multiplicity of histories involved with the practical making of particular development projects. It is worth stressing that the multiplicity referred to here only deals explicitly with one single political form: land politics. The complexity of course increases when adding new political forms. At the same time, the negotiations about the Sustainable Rural Cities point to another important aspect of the local experience of development: its male bias.

\(^{45}\) Indeed, the narrative that put forward the EZLN as the only viable option in Chiapas would even lead to a propensity to publish rumours which fitted the theoretical frame set out, without even the most basic journalistic source criticism. This was particularly clear in an article written by Hermann Bellinghausen in 2013. One of the men that he interviewed, and who lived in the land of the Rural Villa, claimed that he could not live in the village that he came from, Nuevo Limoncito, because it was completely flooded. This would have been easy to check by visiting the village, which was located and inhabited only a couple of hundreds of meters away from the Villa. The importance of this detail is that the man said that he was living in the Villa because he could not live in Nuevo Limoncito due to the flooding, while the real reason must have been something else; according to the OPEZ, as Bellinghausen also mentions in the same article, the inhabitants were considered to be illegitimate occupants of the land, and they had even had violent confrontations. According to the OPEZ, this confrontation occurred as the group that had occupied the Villa also tried to invade the more than 100 hectares of the camp where the members of the OPEZ had lived while waiting for the construction of the Villa to finish. Bellinghausen also chose to publish a rumour about one of the former leaders of the OPEZ who had 500 cows and bulls at his ranch – a piece of information that he used to support his argument about the corruption within the OPEZ. The “ranch” in Buenavista was also located at the same distance as Limoncito, and the rumour could therefore easily have been checked (and refuted). The history of the localities that were affected by the flooding, which he also referred to, finally, built on clear misunderstandings – which were more understandable considering its complexity.
4.

Development negotiations in Chicoasén
Pueblo and population politics

Figure 25. The first public meeting of the Movimiento 16 de septiembre in the town of Chicoasén.
Why did the Movimiento fail?

While land politics have been crucial for the struggles taking place during the last century in Chiapas, they are however difficult to understand without considering another set of political forms: the pueblo politics and the population politics. While this dichotomy was important in Mezcalapa – where the Rural Villa was supposed to be built – it was in Chicoasén where the dichotomy appeared more clearly during my fieldwork. In this chapter, I will focus on these political forms and their contradictions, which add new pieces to the complex experiences of development that I describe in this thesis. I will also draw attention to an important aspect of the political forms: their material embeddedness, which make it relatively irrelevant whether people in a particular place believe that they are legitimate or not. As in the previous chapters, also here, men dominate the narrative and the representations of how development and politics were experienced (and enacted) locally.

The contours of these forms emerged as I tried to formulate an answer to a practical question posed by Fermín, one of the leaders of the Movimiento 16 de septiembre. This organization had emerged in the municipality out of the widespread complaints about the compensation given by the CFE for the construction of the new dam, which was supposed to be built between 2015 and 2018 – that is, about four decades after the first dam was being built. The members of the Movimiento – a mixture of representatives from political parties, churches, organizations of the parents of school children, the ejido, and so forth – above all complained about needless projects, such as a visit by a number of odontology students; the forced painting of the schools; and a course on how to make tamales. These kinds of projects, they argued, were only ways to justify payments of resources that primarily benefitted people outside of Chicoasén. What the Movimiento aimed for and formulated in a counterproposal to the Planes de Desarrollo Integral (the Integrated Development Plans) of the CFE, was instead free electricity for the inhabitants of the municipality.

46 A tamal is a corn dough filled with meat, which is something that has been cooked in the area for thousands of years – therefore the annoyance.

47 While the discussion always circled around the Plan in singular, the CFE in fact had made six plans: five for the localities that were to be directly affected by the dam, and one concerning those that would only be indirectly affected.
and a water treatment plant. High up on their list was also the construction of new roads. What Fermín was trying to figure out was then why the organization had not managed to move their claims forward. What had happened?

It was indeed quite surprising that the Movimiento had not been able to do more with the wide support it had locally. There was a considerable number of attendees already at the first meeting (see the photo above), in November 2014, but there were not as many as at the last public meeting, in March 2015, when about 1,500 persons showed up. Compared to the size of the municipality, this number was quite impressive; according to the latest census carried out by the National Institute for Statistics and Geography (INEGI), there were about 5,000 inhabitants – of which 3,300 lived in the town of Chicoasén, where the meetings were held.

This support would however prove to be insufficient in the face of the division between pueblo and population that appeared during the negotiations that took place, and which related to established political routes, procedures and conflicts that went far beyond the locality of Chicoasén. Following Michel Foucault’s (2004:46) elaboration on this distinction, I will suggest that the pueblo – which the Movimiento was embedded in – built its politics on local boundaries and kinship moralities. The population, on the other hand, refers to people that have learnt to act according to economic theories of individual, “rational” interests, and it was this kind of population that the CFE tried to bring about.

When Foucault drew out this distinction, he discussed the governmental forms that emerged in France and England in the 18th century, where the direct control over the pueblo was replaced by the government over things that act on the population. The aim of the administrative techniques used for this purpose was to understand, form and discipline the desires of the population; what they should desire, according to the economists of the time, was to search for personal interests. In Chicoasén, these kinds of tensions were still very much present, but rather than indicating a process in which the population was to replace the pueblo, what appeared was the conflict as such, which made it difficult to move forward a project like the one formulated by the Movimiento.

An important aspect that made the pueblo/population divide interesting for the discussion of this thesis, in relation to these political forms, was how it gave a clue as
to how development was experienced through techniques of participation, different public spheres, and through the relation between development and labour politics. These issues have indeed all been present in discussions that relate to development projects in one way or the other. In a broad analysis of labour policies in India, David Picherit (2012) has for example argued that “State policies [in southern India] silence capital/labour issues in favour of development/poverty perspectives”, at the same time as they move from a model of formal employments to “the promotion of informality, responsibility-making guilty of the working poor, and self-help” (Picherit 2012:143-4). This kind of analysis links quite well to the literature on development that has stressed how a series of techniques are used in development projects to undermine political conflicts. As noticed in the introduction, several authors have understood development as something that turns political issues – such as labour politics – into technical issues to be handled by development experts (Ferguson 1990; Mitchell 2002; Green 2014). A similar argument has also been made from the perspective focusing on brokers – as the study of Mosse (2005) referred to in the introduction – where the politically significant move is thought to occur in the translations made between different actors “participating” in development projects. From this perspective, Maia Green has argued, for example, that by using participatory methods, existing multiplicities are narrowed down to a single voice which relate to central concerns of the particular project (Green 2010:1258). Also, in the conflict over the dam and the development projects in Chicoasén, this intention of forming adequate desires was clearly visible. At the same time, however, the attempts to shift political arenas and reduce the political multiplicity – in short, to turn the pueblo into a population – made the differences and conflicts between political forms stand out. While this visibility related to a kind of transparency that has been celebrated by the World Bank as part of “good governance” and as a way to avoid “corruption” (Tidey 2016:672),48 in Chicoasén, this visibility hardly implied any significant political changes.

To contextualize the pueblo/politics divide, and describe how it caused problems for the Movimiento, this chapter is divided into three parts. In the first one, I

48 Cowen & Shenton (1996:8) have indeed argued that “corruption” corresponded to the meaning of “underdevelopment” in theories on development before 1850.
will show how the CFE acted as the subject of the process of the planning of the new dam, although they tried to negate that through ideas about participation. A crucial part of this position was their attempts to form certain desires among the inhabitants of Chicoasén – desires that would coincide with the will of the CFE. The second part addresses the desires that fell outside of the schemes of the CFE, and the efforts made to organize these desires in an effective way. There were several difficulties that appeared here. First of all, the established political routes caused a division between development and labour politics, which thus delimited the scope of desires that the representatives of the pueblo would take on. Secondly, the pueblo consisted of a multiplicity of actors that had different agendas. The major problem was, however, the well-established local public sphere, which made it difficult for the leaders to consider contradictory demands simultaneously. In the third part, we will turn to the negotiations per se, carried out during the autumn of 2014 and the first months of 2015, through the analysis of a particular meeting. Central here is the difference between the local public sphere and the State public sphere, which are part of the distinction between pueblo and population. I will end by showing how this difference made it difficult for representatives of the pueblo to move into institutionalized forms of representation of the pueblo.

I

The reversal of the subject-object dichotomy

As the responsible party for both the new and the old dams, as well as for the series of development projects that were planned for the municipality, the CFE was the subject that everybody else had to relate to when trying to move particular claims forward relating to the compensation for the new dam. Most of the time, this unequal relation was expressed through men waiting outside certain offices or other spaces. Those looking for a job at the construction site waited in large groups on the side of the road outside the CFE offices – like Joaquín, the engineer we met in the introduction, and
who complained about how everything was about politics. Those waiting for re-
elections for the *ejido*, and then re-negotiations – the members of the Comité Ejidal we
met in chapter 2 – waited outside of the empty (but occupied) office of the *ejido*. Those
trying to negotiate the development plan that the CFE had formulated – the members
of the Movimiento – in turn spent much time waiting at the basketball court where the
public meetings were supposed to (but most often did not) take place.

This obvious position as the subject was however something that the
development department of the CFE questioned. In the Integral Development Plan for
the town of Chicoasén, the authors working for the CFE referred to a long-standing
discussion about the possibilities of including the “objects” of development – the
“developees” – into the planning and execution of projects through participatory
methods. In the Plan, the contribution that Kurt Lewin had made to this discussion was
emphasized, but what apparently impressed them more was the work of Rodrigo
Contreras (2002), which they chose to plagiarise. What Contreras discussed was
precisely the relationship between subject and object, and how the “Participant
Research Action” (*Investigación Acción Participativa*) supposedly could “revert the
dichotomy subject-object” (Contreras 2002:12/CFE n.d.:8), that is, turning the
beneficiaries into the main actors of the development projects. By using this discursive
 technique, what the authors of the Plan claimed was thus that the CFE was the servant
of the pueblo of Chicoasén, rather than the other way around.

To carry out this discursive operation, first of all they had to establish the
dichotomy between subjects and objects as such. In the Integral Development Plan
referred to, the authors also started off carefully outlining the “object” by drawing the
boundaries of the “community” or “pueblo” of Chicoasén. They did so by employing
certain fundamental aspects to create “imagined communities” (Anderson
2006[1983]), namely by using maps, censuses and histories that connected people to a
particular piece of land. The pueblo of Chicoasén in this way appeared as distinct to
the expansive *fincas* and their owners that had existed in the municipality – thereby
reproducing the basic conflict of the land politics – and was observed through censuses
that showed how it had grown and diminished with the rhythm of the projects of the
CFE. The pueblo of Chicoasén, which emerged through this operation, was then put
forward as the one that the CFE had engaged both by working closely with the municipal government, and – more importantly – by forming groups that had participated in workshops where the development plans reportedly had taken shape, and where the final plans had been validated.

In this process, the authors implied, they had connected the distinct entity of the pueblo of Chicoasén to the development department of the CFE, to then invert the hierarchies of their relationship. Through the participative methodology used by the development department, their words would accordingly have to be read as a service that the CFE had offered to organize the ideas and desires of the pueblo. Consequently, the mediators from the CFE would also pretend to be mere “intermediators” of the pueblo, that is, those who “transport […] meaning or force without transformation” (Latour, 2005:39) – and not as “mediators” (Ibid), which intervene in the process.

Something unsettling about the pueblo that appeared in the documents of the CFE was that it had the capacity to analyse its own problems and propose plausible solutions, but still was in need of constant expert support (cf. Green 2010:69). This paradox was in fact also addressed in the Plan, but in a quite particular way. The authors of the Plan argued that the different government institutions and programs that existed in Chicoasén presented an obstacle for its inhabitants, which appeared to be consequential with the idea of the capacity of the pueblo to solve their own problems. On their list was everything from the National Commission for the Development of the Indigenous Peoples (CDI), and the Ministry of Social Development in Chiapas (SEDESOL), to the economic support for people over 64 years that was given through the program Amanecer, and the support for agricultural production through PROCAMPO. The problem that the authors of the Plan pointed to was that all of these programs and institutions created a dependence on the government. What the Integral Development Plan on the other hand promised to do was to create independent “subjects of law and actors of their own development” (CFE without date:8), by a:

“permanent accompaniment which propels and creates local capacities of organization and participation. This reinforcement of capacities could permit the increase of the capacity of self-management [autogestión] to obtain support for training [capacitación], technical assessment, participation in programs and
development projects that are apt for their environment, and linked to their reality, which minimize the processes that generate dependency” (CFE without date:56, my emphasis).

All the different forms of capacities referred to were in other words supposed to give rise to people who could ask for government projects themselves, and not wait for the government institutions to act. This ideal fits well within the emerging aid paradigm referred to by Green (2015), where individuals are supposed to lift themselves out of poverty, rather than relying on the State, civil society and social development (Green 2015:633 and 640). At the same time, it echoes the idea of the population, as discussed by Foucault (2004), where the people have learnt what to desire. This ideal would, however, have evident difficulties being translated into concrete practices, not the least since it would mean that those at the development department of the CFE would “work themselves out of a job”, as Michener (1998:2115) put it. This contradiction is indeed nicely captured in the idea that the developees should get a permanent accompaniment to constantly learn what is possible to desire, and what political routes can be taken. What would distinguish this permanent accompaniment by a government institution from the those that only offered dependency was not very clear.

You should want this

Besides the contradiction between the inherent capacity to analyse their own problems and the need of a permanent accompaniment, the most important paradox in the Plan was that the decision to build a dam and to carry out a series of development projects had already been taken before the participatory methodology was employed (cf. Harvey & Knox 2015:x; Nustad 2015:30-31). In this way, the participation was reduced to a form of consultation, rather than the transfer of control over the projects (cf. Deshler and Sock in Michener 1998:2106, and Brett 2003:5). Still, the

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49 Deshler and Sock distinguish between “genuine participation” and “pseudo-participation”. While the former can take the form of citizen control or delegated power, where developers and developees are partners, the latter refers to consultation, therapy or even manipulation (Deshler and Sock...
relationship the CFE had created through its practices turned the development workers into spokespersons of the desires of the pueblo, and the CFE could now claim that it had documented proof of that will. In fact, some of the development workers even told people what they should want, based on previous agreements made in their workshops.

This kind of order was precisely what appeared in relation to the painting of the school in the village of La Represa. As already mentioned, the painting of schools was so controversial that it was part of the issues that had sparked the emergence of the Movimiento. It was not only the necessity of painting schools that was questioned, but also its high cost, and – above all – the fact that the CFE only paid for the paint: it was the parents of the school children that had to do the work. While this arrangement was supposed to be an example of the local participation in development projects (as the kind of “voluntary labour” that is common in these kinds of projects; see for example Vengroff in Michener 1998:2106), those who had to do the painting were not very happy about it, and indeed did it without much care. The reason they accepted painting the school at all was to be able to obtain other projects that they were really interested in – such as roofs for the basketball courts.\(^{50}\) This, however, did not take away the idea that it was an outrageous demand by a company as rich as the CFE to have people to work for free in an area where they had made so much money. Their slogan, “a world class company”, was often used to criticize their actions, and the issue of the paint was no exception. “We are talking about a ‘world class company’”, a friend in La Represa also told me, “and they can’t pay us for painting the school!”

The anger of the villagers of La Represa was captured quite well in the hasty and careless way that they had painted their school. The problem was only that their anger was a bit too visible. The paint barely covered the walls, and what was worse still was that the bucket of paint the CFE had paid for also disappeared. This situation motivated a visit by the coordinators of the project from the CFE, who showed up in their big, white truck at the driveway of the contact person for the project in the village.

\(^{50}\) This detail is significant, as the basketball courts with roofs – as we will see further ahead – were used for local meetings. Without a roof, this kind of use was impossible, as the sun always burnt too much, or the rains were too heavy.
The leader of the project in La Represa explained the obvious, that “the people” (*la gente*) did not accept the whole arrangement of the project, but added that if the CFE wanted them to improve the work that had been done on the school, they would do it. “You are not doing this for us”, the coordinator exclaimed, visibly upset. “You should want this!”

II

“*It is all about politics*”: *intereses, development and labour politics*

While the reversal of the subject-object relation needed to make the “objects” desire that which the CFE had already decided – and thereby become the “subjects of rights and actors of their development” (CFE n.d:8/Contreras 2002:9) – the practical difficulty was then that people did not always desire what the CFE wanted them to desire. This, of course, did not appear in the Integral Development Plan. Here, the participants always desired the appropriate things – including, for example, the desire of “transparency” (CFE without date:54) – and performed rational analyses. They not only identified a series of problems, such as the lack of potable water, high energy costs, and insufficient medical services, but were also part of organizing these problems into different “axes” of action (CFE without date:94-5). What did not come out of the workshops was, on the other hand, the kinds of problems that faced Joaquín – the engineer who sat outside of the offices of the CFE complaining about how it was “all about politics”. His most immediate problem was that he was not able to obtain employment at the CFE that matched his academic training, but the way that he formulated the reason for this problem made it fall outside of the schemes employed by the development department of the CFE. While a job was not the kind of desire that was promoted through the Plan, his aspiration appeared to be clearly in line with those expressed through the practices of the development workers (cf. Green 2012b:315). The development workers at CFE’s department of development were hardly themselves
“actors of their development”, since they “depended” on a State institution for their employment; still, they could drive around in the kinds of trucks that Joaquín desired. There was, however, a twist to his wish that made it seem irrational, compared to the desires that the population should have. Joaquín thought that he had a right to employment, not because of his merits – as a reasonable member of the population would have claimed – but because he was part of the pueblo of Chicoasén. This was in fact precisely the same idea as the people in La Represa had expressed in relation to the paint. Implied in this idea was that the CFE owed the pueblo of Chicoasén compensation in the form of development projects and jobs, because the pueblo had given them the right to exploit their land.

While this kind of reasoning was actually not that far from how the CFE understood the relationship, the great difference lay in how they understood the representation of the pueblo. While the CFE engaged with the pueblo through workshops and through collaboration with the municipal government, the pueblo that Joaquín had in mind was something else. Indeed, when it came to his aspiration to get a job at the CFE, “the pueblo” – meaning the inhabitants of the municipality – was not even the interlocutor that they considered to be appropriate: here, the pueblo was supposed to be represented by the Unions. The problem for Joaquín was not only that the participatory workshops hardly represented his will, but that the municipal government and the Unions also did not represent him, nor his idea of the pueblo.

The municipal government had historically occupied a complicated space between the one-party State and the local conflict between two leaders – or caciques, as they were referred to locally (see note 21, p. 71). With the first dam, more parties were allowed to participate in the elections in Chicoasén, which had occurred simultaneously as the power of these caciques diminished. The municipal governments nonetheless still depended financially on the State of Chiapas, which in turn depended on the federal government. In other words, the space for local initiatives was still small, independent of the quantity of political parties. Furthermore, the inhabitants of Chicoasén had gotten used to seeing their leaders getting co-opted by the CFE to make way for their different projects, and struggling against the CFE could therefore not be done through the official channels.
These official channels also included the Unions, who were just as immersed in national politics as the government institutions and the local parties. The two Unions that existed in Chicoasén, the Sole Union of Electricity Workers of the Mexican Republic (*Sindicato Único de Trabajadores Electricistas de la República Mexicana*, SUTERM), and the Confederation of Workers in Mexico (*Confederación de Trabajadores de México*, CTM, which the SUTERM was officially tied to) had been part of the cooperative one-party State since its formation. The CTM back then was one out of the four “sectors” of the party, representing the workers; the other three were made up by the peasants, the military, and the “popular sector” (Benusán & Middlebrook 2013:24, note 14).

It was then against this background that Joaquín’s claim that it was “all about politics” had to be understood. Politics here referred to a type of domination which excluded any form of legitimate representation, and which was thought to go against the interests of the pueblo; the politician therefore corresponded to the image of the local, indigenous authorities, who were part of the Spanish rule: the caciques. More concretely, politics was understood as a form of embezzlement, or related to the buying of votes, which would be done to promote personal interests.

Also those involved in formal politics were aware of this image of politics, and it was common for local politicians to be under a lot of pressure in this respect. For example, I was told that a politician in Chiapa de Corzo allegedly had a heart attack after two weeks of intense disputes regarding new water pipes. Rodrigo, an acquaintance in the town, who had earlier held a position in the municipal government, did not show any mercy even in a moment like that, and instead explained to me that:

> Politics is the dirtiest thing you can get into. Will you put up with it? They will say that you have robbed, and if you have, they will find out. They will say all kinds of things about you, all the time. Will you put up with it? You have to! Otherwise you have nothing to do in politics!

Acting against practices of “politics” was not an easy task, not the least since attempts to do so ran the evident risk of themselves becoming part of it. To make a particular problem “legible” (Scott 1998) for the State implied using the government
institutions and formats, which in turn implied a risk that the desires expressed through these actions would take the form promoted through the governmental infrastructure. For instance, when the Comité and the Movimiento started trying to negotiate with “the government”, it quickly became clear that they had to approach it through a complicated network of institutions, which all had specific limits that they could not (or did not want to) exceed. At the same time, the problems that mattered the most to people – such as the harsh poverty facing many of the members of the Comité – always appeared to be out of reach of the institutions. The Movimiento, for example, also soon noticed that their main claim, to get free electricity, was something that nobody in practice could decide on. To negotiate with the government was, in this sense, like taking part in the participatory workshops of the CFE: the most important decisions were already made.

To be successful in the negotiations with the CFE and the different levels of the government, it was then necessary to desire the right things, and in the right form. The idea that it would be possible to establish a relationship between the CFE and the pueblo, as Joaquín had wanted, was clearly not part of these established routes and formats. As he sat outside the CFE offices, he nonetheless still had the hope that this kind of “naked” relationship was possible, where the established routes and formats would not have to be involved. Indeed, he assured me that things were finally happening in Chicoasén, which could move this kind of relationship forward. “Do you remember the uprising of the EZLN?” he asked me that day we sat in the shade at the CFE office, waiting for something to happen. Although he hardly expected me to answer that question, I said I did. “Well, this time, it’s happening here”.

No colours: development and labour politics

What Joaquín was referring to was the Movimiento that had just started in Chicoasén, led by a Tsotsil from the village of Las Pilas, who was to organise the desire of the pueblo that had not made it into the documents of the CFE. The Movimiento still did not have a very concrete form when Joaquín told me about it, but only a few weeks later, he invited me to its first public meeting. While the focus of the meeting was
supposed to be on the Integral Development Plan and the alternative that the leaders had prepared, there were not really any clearly established routes at hand yet, and issues relating to labour politics were also still open for discussion – something that interested Joaquín the most. This kind of all-encompassing attempt would however soon start to crack. Ironically enough, it did so in the name of unity.

The first signs of the difficulties encompassing the whole pueblo became apparent at that first meeting. It started as a representative of the CTM – who was not from the town – all of a sudden started to scream, and then ran up to the pavilion at the centre of the main square of the town. There, he grabbed the microphone, and enthusiastically proclaimed that the CTM had won the right to be the only Union at the construction of the new dam. In his hand, he held up a document which would prove this, and said that he had been begging his bosses for months to get their permission to tell the pueblo of Chicoasén about it. This, he claimed, was great news, since it meant that the President of Mexico, Enrique Peña Nieto, was on their side. Peña Nieto, he exclaimed, was a good man who would not do anything against other members of the PRI. He got a strong applause as he went off the stage, but as he left the pavilion, one man asked the Movimiento to stick to what its representatives had said at the beginning of the meeting: that the Movimiento should not have any “colours”. The Movimiento, he continued, was supposed to defend the interests of the pueblo of Chicoasén. What this comment implied was not very clear at the moment. While colours usually referred to political parties, the limits of the CTM were sufficiently blurred so as to consider the Union another “colour”. What soon emerged, however, was a differentiation between labour politics and development, which not only excluded the Unions from the Movimiento, but also labour politics as such.

A representative of the Unions would appear again at a meeting of the Movimiento, albeit this time an internal meeting, where only the leaders and the anthropologist were present. This time, the place of the Unions was discussed with much more detail. Unlike before, the Union representative had now been invited by one of the members, and this representative was from Chicoasén, and therefore well-known by the leaders that were present. The reason why he had come was because forty people had just been sacked from the CFE without any explanation, and he now wanted
to see if the Movimiento could help them with that issue. These circumstances made the case quite different from that of the other man from the CTM who had shown up in the park, and this time, the discussion about how the Movimiento should act took up almost the entire meeting. On the one hand, several members stressed the importance of unity of the pueblo to argue that the Movimiento should support the Union and the sacked workers. Their argument built on the ideas that a hand (the Union) could not do anything without the body that it is part of (the pueblo), or that the parents of a family (the pueblo) had to support their kids (the Union) even if they do stupid things at times. On the other hand, there were those who considered that the Movimiento should not include demands relating to the labour relations at the construction of the dam, since the group had been created to improve the development plan. From this perspective, the question should not be what the Movimiento could do for the Union, but what the Union could do for them. This side won in the end, which resulted in the foreseeable outcome of the Union choosing not to join the Movimiento. At the same time, it made the members of the Movimiento have a clearer idea of what their group was all about.

For Joaquín, who was also present at this meeting, this division between labour politics and development was not very promising. Although he also wanted to get free electricity, running water, new roads, and so forth, he was above all interested in getting a job. Given the route that the Movimiento had chosen in this case, a group of young, high-school educated men – but also a couple of women – therefore created a parallel organization, outside the Movimiento, the CTM and SUTERM. Together, they were supposed to negotiate with the CFE to get jobs for its members. The evident problem here was that they lacked the force of the formal Unions. When it turned out that the CFE decided to only hire the three leaders of their group, the little pressure that had existed, disappeared.\textsuperscript{51} While the other members – some forty people – got upset, and even stopped talking to their former leaders, these kinds of individual protests did not do much to change the situation.

\textsuperscript{51} One of the workers at the CFE told me that they did not want the people from Chicoasén to have access to information about the dam because of their political engagement. The only ones that they hired were workers who did not handle any significant information about the dam or about the development projects that were supposed to be carried out in Chicoasén.
The pueblo of the Movimiento

The Movimiento clearly made some gains by more explicitly choosing the political route of development instead of also getting involved in labour politics. First of all, it did not have to join the confrontations between the CTM and the CFE, which quickly could have made it more difficult to reach the agreements about the development plan that the leaders were aiming for. On the other hand, they also avoided facing legal and extralegal action by people interested in the completion of the dam. Considering the controversial role of the Union, and its close relation to the PRI, they would furthermore have risked losing many supporters in Chicoasén by siding with the CTM. At the same time, the decision also implied that they would have managed to maintain an image of a united pueblo. There was, however, an important problem that emerged from this decision. By excluding labour politics from their agenda, the Movimiento accepted the divisions found in the population politics between the tasks of the government and of the companies/Unions, and thus started to exclude certain desires of the pueblo from their agenda.

However, the pueblo did not become much more coherent because of this exclusion, as the leaders of the Movimiento had hoped. To hold together the pueblo as a discursive entity had in fact been complicated from the very outset; both the Movimiento and the pueblo that it hoped to represent were, after all, quite colourful. As already indicated, the Movimiento was a coalition of all the political parties in the municipality, together with self-proclaimed representatives of different “sectors” of the pueblo. Then there were of course the different groups that existed outside of the Movimiento, but which belonged to “the pueblo” (in the sense of the inhabitants of the municipality, that were part of historically deep kinship relations), such as the cooperatives of anglers, and the Comité Ejidal. Indeed, immediately after the reminder of the idea of the Movimiento as working for the interests of the pueblo – which was pronounced as the trade unionist left the stage during that first meeting in the central park – another man got up in the pavilion to quickly proclaim that the whole pueblo was not present at this meeting. While people were silent around the pavilion, and the leaders quickly asked to get the microphone back, the handful of members of the
Comité Ejidal who were sitting outside the offices of the ejido that they had occupied in a corner of the park, gave him an enthusiastic applause.

To draw out the interests of the pueblo was thus at least as difficult as it had been for the CFE to produce one in its documents, and the leaders of the Movimiento would also use a similar, discursive strategy to make the pueblo come into being as a political subject. Fermín, the leader of the PRI that I have referred to, for example often stressed how the leaders of the Movimiento attempted to be a link between the pueblo of Chicoasén and the State authorities. Hence, he not only separated the CFE from the pueblo, but also the leaders of the Movimiento from it. While this separation between the CFE and the pueblo was retained, the one between the Movimiento and the pueblo was practically broken down by repeating EZLN’s ideal of “leading by obeying”. If the leaders of the Movimiento thus were distinct from the pueblo, they would supposedly still be obeying the pueblo – which was not the case with the CFE.

From the perspective of the Movimiento, the existence of a united pueblo made it possible to argue that the development projects were not gifts, but rather rights, which corresponded to the permission to construct the dam. The importance of pueblo relations was also actively promoted through arguments stressing how the unity of the pueblo had to be restored and/or protected to be able to achieve better results in the negotiations with the CFE.

**The public sphere and the paradoxes of transparency**

Both the exclusion of labour politics, and the attempts to form a coherent pueblo then resembled the strategies used by the development department of the CFE. Despite these formal similarities, there really was a considerable difference between them that could not be bridged that easily. The main agenda of the CFE was, after all, to build a dam, and not to represent people’s interests in Chicoasén. The Movimiento, on the other hand, did not have any apparent, pre-established project that they wanted to move forward, more than the wish to re-negotiate the development projects for Chicoasén. The leaders were also embedded in the complex kinship and friendship relations that made up the pueblo, which was not the case of the representatives of the CFE. In fact,
the CFE tried to maintain this distinction by not hiring anybody from Chicoasén who could get access to sensitive information about the development projects or the dam.

This difference, however, established a quite delicate dilemma for the leaders of the Movimiento. While the interests of the CFE were relatively “transparent”, and their alliances were clear, the leaders of the Movimiento had to face constant suspicions that they were trying to move their own, personal agendas forward – to “do politics” (hacer política) – rather than obey the pueblo. These suspicions were very difficult for them to deal with, not only because of the particular power of rumours, but also because they could not stick to “impossible” desires of the pueblo – such as the wish to get free electricity – if they wanted to advance the negotiations. At the same time, those who made up the pueblo would not consider themselves represented if the leaders decided to go against the popular will. Even when the leaders were considered to be aligned with the pueblo, they could still be accused of just using the negotiations to get support for their political campaign for the upcoming elections. While people in Chicoasén also perceived the differences between the kinds of politics played in the name of the pueblo, and that which moved within a political form where the pueblo had been replaced by the population, there was still no easy way out for their leaders.

The public nature of the meetings hardly helped the leaders in their efforts to navigate between contrasting demands of the pueblo politics and the population politics respectively. Indeed, the meetings that the Movimiento carried out took place in a local public sphere that was something of a textbook case taken from the documents of the World Bank. They were held in open places, where anyone from the pueblo of Chicoasén was allowed to talk, and the explicit aim of the discussions was to formulate ideas that would benefit what the Bank called the “public good” (World Bank 2009:2) – and not to benefit particular interests. Several informal “sites of everyday talk about public affairs” (World Bank 2009:3) were also in place. These included a newly opened cafeteria where members of the Movimiento met over a cup of coffee or a tequila, as well as the church and the public square where people gathered at night, when the heat had subsided. At the same time, the many political parties, more or less formal organizations, and churches that were present in the small town also indicated the
presence of the kind of “vibrant civil society” (World Bank 2009:2) that the Bank had in mind.

It is worth mentioning that the pueblo – in its meaning of inhabitants of towns or villages – in fact has a much more rooted tradition of popular representation than the higher levels of government, which historically have been designed first of all “to aid kings, presidents and regional elites to wrest resources and power from local hands” (Lomnitz 1995:25). According to Claudio Lomnitz, the rural villages were indeed the only ones to develop a local public sphere during the Colony; this was not the case in the haciendas and ranches, nor in the mines or urban workers, where public life instead was dominated by rituals that were used to display clear symbols of alliances and hierarchies (Ibid:32). As Gledhill (2008:485) has stressed, the relative autonomy that these local public spheres indicate also relates to an interest of the Spanish colonial government to secure their tribute. On the other hand, the pueblo has been an important figure for post-revolutionary national elites to sustain a link between government, people and territory, which – as discussed in chapter 2 – connected to the pueblo through measures such as the Agrarian Reform.

The kind of public sphere that existed in Chicoasén in other words had a sufficiently deep history to be overridden by excluding labour politics, or by using similar forms like the CFE did to turn the pueblo into a political subject. The problem with this effective and deeply rooted public sphere was however that it did not leave much space for the leaders of the Movimiento to carry out any translations between the pueblo and the CFE: everybody was there to hear what was said. Without the possibility of creating a gap between what was said and what was done, the leaders were caught in an insurmountable dilemma between privileging the ties with the pueblo, and displaying the kind of desires that the CFE expected – instead of letting them co-exist in a colourful complexity that a gap would permit (cf. Mosse 2005:231).
The negotiations with the CFE

Given the nature of the local public sphere, the Movimiento then had obvious difficulties negotiating with the CFE, and instead of being able to come to some kind of compromise through the meetings that the Movimiento organized, they would instead constitute a space of confrontation between the pueblo, the CFE, and the state and municipal governments.

The meetings organized by the Movimiento followed a very similar pattern every time, starting with a woman from the Catholic Church occupying the microphone to welcome the people arriving, repeating that they had new information to share, and inviting the people to express their opinion about it. Normally, this information would consist of a letter written by the CFE or the state government, explaining why they were not be able to attend as they had promised, after which the frustrated participants would start suggesting that the attempts to dialogue were not working. After some discussion, one of the organizers would sum up what had been said, and what had been agreed upon – a process which was not always easy to follow, since the organizers seemed to have a veto against some of the more violent agreements that the people apparently had made by making affirmative sounds when the proposals were put forward.

When the counterparts did indeed show up, the meetings looked a bit different. To mention one example from a rather important meeting, the introductory remarks made by the woman from the Church were this time followed by the Catholic priest of Chicoasén, Father Galileo, who asked the participants to listen honestly to each other, and address each other with respect. After that, the representative of the state government was given the floor, and used it to make a long speech that focused on the name Galileo, and how even the Church can make mistakes, finishing up by saying that he agreed with the ideals that Father Galileo had described. What followed was an opportunity for the presidente municipal to explain why he earlier had proposed a meeting with the CFE on a date that coincided with a meeting that the Movimiento had planned with the same institution; the effect of his action was that the CFE had
cancelled the meeting with the Movimiento. The *presidente* argued that he had talked to the CFE and the state government because his lawyers had noticed that he had not signed the Integrated Development Plan of the CFE. He had therefore called the authorities of the different localities and asked them to bring the two main petitions of the inhabitants in their area. He then showed a number of signatures, from people in the village of Las Pilas. That this was a very risky manoeuvre became clear as a woman from Las Pilas said that those signatures were taken by the CFE a year and a half ago to validate the development plan. The *agente municipal* of Las Pilas – a local representative of the municipality, hired by its council (*ayuntamiento*), but who was close to the leader of the Movimiento – also said that the *presidente municipal* was lying. He told those participating in the meeting that he indeed had been contacted to hand in the main petitions of Las Pilas, but without understanding that they would be used in a parallel negotiation with the CFE. The *presidente municipal* decided not to respond to these comments.

The Movimiento then asked the CFE and the state government to present their answers to the petitions of the Movimiento, particularly regarding the one about being exempted from the payment of electricity. This was probably the most popular demand that had been formulated at the previous meetings; one man even had a sign on a long stick at this meeting saying “free electricity” (*tarifa zero*); another group, at the back of the stands, had formulated another widespread wish on a banner that said that they did not want any more lies and tricks. The representative of the CFE who had to answer the question about the petitions picked out the words on this banner, saying that he agreed with the people being upset with lies and tricks, and that he was also against that. He then went on to explain that there were very important cuts in the federal funds for the CFE and the State owned oil company, PEMEX. These cuts, he outlined, were related to the weak economy, particularly the low price of petrol – a central commodity for the finances of the Mexican State. This implied that there were less funds for their operations, but when it came to the point of the extension of payment, even if they had the resources, the CFE did not have the faculty to exempt anybody from payment. What they could offer, he said, were workshops to demonstrate how to use less energy. People started to scream as they heard this, and Father Galileo intervened to calm the
situation. The floor went to Mario, the leader of the Movimiento, who said that it was incredible that they had been waiting for two months to hear that nothing had been done concerning their petitions. They wanted answers, he said. He was very upset, and the representative of the government also asked him to calm down if he wanted the discussion to continue. At this moment, a man suggested that the pueblo of Chicoasén should stop paying the electricity bills until their petitions were solved. Yet, due to further interventions of Father Galileo, the meeting resulted in an agreement to form a committee between the CFE, the state and the local government, the ejido and the organizers of the Movimiento to work together with the Development Plan.

This committee was indeed formed, but had clear difficulties advancing the demands of the Movimiento, and as the municipal elections approached, the support of the Movimiento started to decline quickly, which made it even more difficult for its members to put pressure on the CFE.

The collision of public spheres

The complication that surfaced at this meeting was in fact not that the representative of the CFE did not give any answer, as the leader of the Movimiento claimed. What was so complicated was, in actuality, his answer. What it did was to point to the deep difference between the Movimiento and the CFE, which related to the difference between pueblo and population, and indeed to different public spheres.

We have already seen how the public sphere of the pueblo was expected to take place outside the State institutions – quite the opposite of the public sphere connected to the State, which built on those very institutions. This showed not only in the particular interpretation of Article 39 of the Constitution made by the members of the Comité Ejidal and the EZLN, but also in the way that different people imagined the compensation for the dam. While the pueblo politics would claim that the compensation was to be given to the pueblo directly, the population politics followed by the CFE claimed that it should be given through the established institutions. As I have shown above, these institutions were however not thought to represent the pueblo, and this lack of representation was the very reason why the Movimiento started in the
first place, as well as the small and informal Union that was formed by the group of high-school educated people in the municipality. While the pueblo thus has a long history of a proper public sphere, where the pueblo was directly present, it also has to be related to the exclusions made through the established institutions. The frustration witnessed at the meeting referred to had to be understood against this background. While the Movimiento had managed to organise a public sphere that more or less followed the expectations of representation of the pueblo, this did not mean that the representatives of the CFE and of the State governments would act according to the pueblo politics. As we have seen, both the representative of the CFE and of the municipal government indeed deferred to the institutional complexities and formal regulations to deny the Movimiento its claims. None of them denied the fairness of these claims, but rather put forward formal obstacles for them. Most important here was that the representative of the CFE said they did not have the faculty to exempt the inhabitants of Chicoasén from their electricity payments.

In a schematic way, we can see that the public sphere of the State followed “the realm of morality and emotion and that of rational activity” (Davidoff & Hall 1987:13), which is at the heart of the liberal public/private divide, and hence of the public sphere of the population. The idea of the pueblo politics was quite different. Here, as already indicated, the idea was rather that the CFE was to be considered as another, independent pueblo, which should have the faculty to act as it pleased. From this perspective, the CFE could not withdraw from its moral obligations by referring to formal institutions and procedures. The pueblo politics, in other words, implied a continuity between the public and the private moral and rationality. This was in fact stressed by the alliance with the priest, who was used as protection against the State – but also who made it easier for the leaders to align with the pueblo, as they then did not have to take on the role of appeasing the participants of the pueblo. The moral focus of the pueblo politics, and its focus on kinship ties, also made the pueblo politics connect so well to a Church that also emphasized the importance of a particular notion of family.

Following the above descriptions, instead of accepting the liberal division between the public and the private, what the members of the Movimiento perceived
was a division between the rights and obligations given by kinship and friendship relations on the one hand, and “politics” on the other. The public sphere of the State was, in other words, understood as a space of “politics” (i.e., as something that does not represent the pueblo, its moral, and interests) that did not have any place in the public sphere of the pueblo – and against which they needed the protection of the priest. It was then this deep divide that the representative of the CFE pointed to when he said that he could not do anything about their demand for free electricity.

The mediators’ dilemma

Yet, maintaining the difference between the morality of the pueblo and the (State) “politics” – or, to use Foucault’s terms, between the pueblo and the population – was not that easy. Even in the midst of the optimism that things would be different this time – which pervaded Chicoasén throughout my fieldwork – there were certain basic ideas that made people doubt the actual possibilities of achieving something that would benefit the whole pueblo. On one occasion, when I talked about the history of the pueblo with Don Gil Estrada, a man who had worked on the construction of the first dam, this pessimism was revealed in between the lines:

The people before were… how should I put it… half interested. The people nowadays… if you give them food, you give them money, you give them all sorts of presents, they will be with you, and if you don’t, you’re nobody. Before, it was not like that. The people were loyal to the one they supported. At that time, they would even give their lives for their leaders [as in a case of an assassination in the municipality].

The question that Don Gil implied was how “the people nowadays” could achieve something that would privilege the interests of the pueblo over the personal ones. This question was also something that the leaders of the Movimiento had to give an answer to. To do so, however, became more and more complicated as the municipal

52 “La gente de antes era como… ¿cómo te diré? …medio interesados, la gente de ahorita, si les das comida, les das dinero, les haces todo tipo de regalos, están contigo y si no haces eso, no eres nada. Antes no, eran fieles al que le iban, en ese tiempo perdian hasta la vida por sus líderes”.
elections got closer, not least because several of its leaders tried to become candidates of different parties. As already mentioned, the political parties, just like the Unions, had significant difficulties claiming that they would defend the interests of the whole pueblo, above all since they were part of important kinship and friendship relations that clearly did not extend to the whole pueblo. Instead of protecting the pueblo from the CFE, the suspicion was then that the leaders would become as their “other”, and – just as they believed the CFE to be doing – start stealing from the pueblo. If their credibility had not been undercut before, their candidacy was often taken as proof that all along they had just been trying to promote their own petty interests, and those that had been involved as leaders in the Movimiento would also turn out to have little success in the elections.

What instead won was in fact the idea of the pueblo existing outside of the institutions. The office of presidente municipal was won by a young man who had not been involved with politics before, and who was the candidate of the newly started Movement for National Regeneration, MORENA – a party that had been founded by people who wanted to renounce the corruption of the PRD, which in turn had started at the end of the 1980s as a way of leaving the corruption of the PRI. While this kind of cycle might appear to point to the impossibility of breaking with certain patterns, it can just as well be read as proof of the enduring force of the ideals of the pueblo, which do not disappear despite recurrent tribulations. As Sian Lazar (2008:262) has argued, the refusal to accept things as they are does not only warn present and future leaders of how they would lose prestige in the pueblo if they repeat this pattern. It also reaffirms the morality of the pueblo as a collective that is more important than the individuals, and as opposed to the State (cf. Gledhill 2009:18, on the ways that “resistance” also construct “fantasies of the state”). If successfully managed, it could indeed also work as a way to prevent new leaders from focusing too much on their own interests.

At times, things also do change – as the very leadership of the Movimiento shows. Without the EZLN uprising, it would definitely be difficult to imagine an indigenous person in this position. On the other hand, as I finished my fieldwork, the conflict over the dam and the development projects that were supposed to come with it was far from over. While it certainly did not look like it would be as different this time
as people constantly told each other, the history of this dam hardly ended with my departure from Chicoasén.

Conclusions

In this chapter, I have described how the pueblo and population politics appeared in Chicoasén through the negotiations over the new dam and the development projects that were supposed to compensate for it. We have seen how the idea of a self-helping population prescribed in the Development Plans, as well as CFE’s reliance on government institutions and Unions, established certain political routes that excluded the morality and the representation of the pueblo. By so doing, it stressed the differences that existed between the pueblo and the population – despite the ambiguities that also existed within the pueblo, and the difficulties that its leaders faced in representing it.

While we have seen that the population politics organized the struggle of the Movimiento, it did not, however, make the population politics the predominant form in Chicoasén. The intervention of the agente municipal from Las Pilas in the preceding meeting, was a good example of the multiple spaces of participation that a single person could be involved in. While he was hired by the municipality, he also participated in the Movimiento, and had furthermore been involved with the participatory groups formed by the CFE. If the participatory methods at times, as Green (2014) has argued in a study in Tanzania, might lead people to draw the conclusion that “the only avenues through which engagement is possible are those defined as legitimate participatory techniques” (Green 2014:71) – something that also appeared to take its form in the separation between development and labour politics – this was clearly not the case here. Rather, the participation in the workshops offered by the CFE was but one way to make one’s voice heard, and, more importantly, was later on scrutinized in the public sphere that the Movimiento had invoked through its meetings. Even the presidente municipal was forced to explain why he apparently had acted against the agenda of the Movimiento. Instead of simply falling back on the formal position given to him
through the population politics, and which made him the counterpart of the CFE, he also implicitly accepted the legitimacy of the Movimiento as a representative of the pueblo, by trying to explain that his actions were not directed against it. In this way, the formally established relationships between citizens and their representatives were put into question.

The issues that were discussed in relation to the development projects therefore not only failed to be accepted as a set of technical issues that were supposed to be handled by experts (as argued by Ferguson 1990, and by Mitchell 2002), but also did not become a single voice that could do away with all the colours in the municipality (as Green 2010 has argued was the case during her fieldwork in Tanzania). On the other hand, we have also seen how the population politics did not manage to substitute labour politics with discussions about development, as Picherit (2012) claimed was the case in India. Although the difference between development politics and labour politics became important during the negotiations, both of these political forms were understood to be immersed in a kind of “politics” that did not represent the pueblo of Chicoasén, nor took their interests into account.

This understanding of “politics” in fact reveals quite a different aspect than the ones pointed to by the authors referred to above: how certain differences became more explicit in the process of negotiation. The importance of this point is not only that the power of development and government policies is less important in Chicoasén as it reportedly has been elsewhere, but also that the faith in transparency and a properly working public sphere to bring about changes is somewhat naïve here. Indeed – much in line with Slavoj Žižek’s (2008:27-33) ideas about ideology, as well as Hetherington’s (2011), and Harvey and Knox’s (2015) ideas about transparency – the chapter shows how the dams and the political forms did not depend on whether people believed in them or not. In this sense, the participatory methods employed by the CFE did not first and foremost make the “developees” use particular political channels, or convince them of the advantages with the development projects. Rather, these methods could give rational reasons to sustain a belief already at hand (cf. Žižek 2008:35), at the same time as they could support a particular political form – the population politics – in its struggles with the pueblo politics.
What this chapter adds to the general argument of the thesis is then not only two new political forms that again highlight the complexity of the local experience of development; it also describes the materiality of the political forms, which is very difficult to get around for the new generations, and again brings out the predominance of men in the spaces and positions considered to be political. An important aspect of the materiality of these forms that I have also stressed is at the same time that it does not necessarily support the contemporary relations of domination. Rather, I have argued that grasping the materiality of the political forms discussed in this chapter is important for understanding the tensions and misunderstandings at hand in a particular situation, such as the case of the negotiations about the development projects that were supposed to come with the new dam in Chicoasén.
5.

Garbage in Paradise

Development, tourism, and the environment

Figure 26. The Cave of Colours, with a statue of the national saint of Mexico, the Virgin of Guadalupe. To the right of the ladder, a stone formation that was interpreted as a beheaded Christ on the cross. To the right of him, a commemorative plaque of Miguel Álvarez del Toro, the first director of the Zoo in the capital, which bears his name.
Figure 27. Map of the part of the Grijalva River where the tours between Chiapa de Corzo and the dam of Chicoasén take place.
Development, environment and garbage in the Grijalva River

If the previous chapter highlighted the conflict between two political forms, in this chapter, I will focus more on the changes that can take place within a particular political form. Here, we will turn to the changing character of the tension between society and nature, by following the garbage that moved through the Grijalva River, and the different generations of State policies that its existence highlighted. This tension furthermore enters the discussion about development from quite a different angle than the previous forms discussed. In fact, the struggles referred to in the previous two chapters are clearly inserted on one side of the divide that is disputed here, between humans and non-humans, or between society and nature – a fundamental division for the idea of modernity (Latour 1993 [1991]). There is a gendered aspect to this conflict that is worth stressing already at this point – although I will give it more space in Chapter Seven. For the time being, we could simply notice that it is hardly an accident that the ones promoting more consideration of the animals in the river are often women, while the companies working in the river are dominated by men in all positions – as is indeed the case with practically all activities understood locally to be productive or political.

As Nustad (2015:8) has stressed, the irony of the division between society and nature is that it has been important both for the appearance of current environmental problems, and has been crucial for the way in which these problems are addressed. As in the case of the ejidos, where contradictory positions were combined in a single concept, so has occurred in the discourse regarding the conflict between society and nature, which has been put together into the concept of “sustainable development” (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987). In this way, the tensions between the two theoretical poles were transformed into a concept which, rather than overcoming the dichotomy, confirmed it as a particular “terrain of struggle” (Li 1999).

Long after the idea of sustainable development was launched, economic development still appeared as diametrically opposed to environmental concerns (Nustad 2015:31; Agrawal & Redford 2006:2). Erica Bornstein and Aradhana Sharma (2016) have for example discussed this issue in relation to the way that the Indian Intelligence Bureau accused a number of NGOs for having “sabotaged mega-industrial
projects and threatened the country’s critical industries of mining, agricultural biotechnology, and energy” (Bornstein & Sharma 2016:76). Were it not for organizations like Greenpeace, the report of the Bureau argued, the Indian GDP would be two-three percent higher.

The environmentalist activists, however, did not only bother State authorities trying to improve the GDP. A remarkable aspect of environmental activism is indeed that it can simultaneously be understood as undermining left-wing and right-wing agendas (cf. Dowie 2009). As Lamia Karim (2001:98) has argued in the case of Bangladesh, large NGOs who worked with environmental issues – in close relationship with State officials – collided with traditional left-wing parties who built their politics on a class-analysis. From the perspective of party members of the Communist Party in Bangladesh, the environmentalist NGOs were indeed “depoliticizing” their work. Instead of fighting the State, they would therefore fight the NGOs (Ibid:98).

Bornstein and Sharma (2016) have referred to these conflicts to argue that politics in India is nowadays better understood “less [as] a struggle between ‘right’ and ‘left’ parties and groups, and more [as] a moral struggle between right and wrong” (Bornstein & Sharma 2016:78). What I will argue in this chapter is instead that – along the Grijalva River – politics can be better explained as a conflict within and between different political forms, but also between different generations of development and State policies.

What I will turn to in this chapter is thus, on the one hand, the political form tied to nature along the Grijalva River, particularly in the part between Chiapa de Corzo and Chicoasén, where tours took place. Here, the issue of the environment was used as a frame that was as important as the land politics and the pueblo/population divide have been in the previous chapters, forcing people to relate to it. A quite different kind of activism than we have seen in the previous chapter also appeared here, which used the intricate rules about development funding to mobilize resources for their cause. The garbage that I focus on was in fact used as an important argument for the importance of environmental issues here. On the other hand, I will stress the changing projects tied to the Mexican State, which relate to the society/nature divide. These changes were above all epitomized through the enormous statue of the engineer Manuel Moreno
Torres that awaited the visitors of the tour, and through the advertisement of the river as a lush paradise protected by the State. What the garbage did here was to uncover the way that the conflict between society and nature was simultaneously a conflict between contradictory forms of trusteeship (Cowen & Shenton 1996) that the State had taken on over time, and which implied different ways to think about development.

Driving through the garbage

Sand, stones, branches, fish and crocodiles have always travelled through the river, but since the 1940s, they started getting company from the things that came from the sewage of the capital of Tuxtla Gutiérrez, as well as agricultural runoff. Decades later, the discharge from the so-called “factory of flies”53 was also added, which caused serious damage to the beings living there (Robinson 2007:57-8; 205-6). While the liquid waste that moved through the river was important for the life in the Nature

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53 This factory – almost completely paid for by the United States – produced sterilized male flies of a particular kind, which were released into the area. Over time, this method eradicated the screw worm (Cochliomyia hominivorax) in Mexico, which moved the boundary of its existence further south, thereby protecting the cattle production from its mortal attacks, which was important for producing cheap food for the new industrial centres (Fernández & Tarrío:11 and 157-8).
Reserve of the Sumidero Canyon, the solid waste that had ended up here was a more palpable problem for the humans – as it was visible to the tourists visiting the area, but also to the boats taking them there.

This problem became particularly noteworthy as the rainy season started, when in the rains dragged more objects than usual down the mountains to the Grijalva River, and to the nature reserve. This was also the time of the year when I started my fieldwork in Chiapa de Corzo, in 2014. Big logs and branches passed by in the brown water at the dock of the boat company where I worked, accompanied by plastic bottles, footballs, toys and a range of unidentifiable objects. At this time of year, the boatmen driving the tours in the river had to relate to this garbage on a daily basis, both as an environmental and practical problem. While learning how to drive the boat, they also had to learn how to spot the garbage at a distance that would let them avoid it without the passengers noticing. If not paying enough attention, the plastic bottles could get stuck in the propellers, causing a sharp sound, and making it very difficult to maintain control of the boat. The plastic bottles, however, were relatively easy to see; the true challenge were the logs filled with water, which floated underneath the surface, just at the height of the propellers. Hitting them could cause serious damage, which implied an important expense for the company, and considerable problems for the driver, especially during the high season. At this time of year, the boatmen only had one boat each, which meant that problems with the motor could leave them at the dock while it was being repaired, thereby missing tips from the tours, which corresponded to the main part of their incomes – at least just above 50%, but rather about 80% or even more on a lucky day. Besides, damaging the motor would quickly give the impression that the boatman did not take care of his boat, which could cost him his job.
During the rainy season, a particularly difficult passage was found just at the beginning of the dam, where the counter currents it gave rise to packed the garbage into a massive blockage, which forced the boatmen to make a stop while looking for the safest way through it. Here, the garbage not only risked damaging the propellers, but also worried the boatmen because of the impression it gave the passengers. Besides the branches, bottles and other objects, there was the smell of the rotting logs, one that could get even worse if a dead animal or even a human corpse got caught there. In an attempt to make the forced stop at this blockage less repulsive, the boatmen carefully avoided the vultures walking around on the garbage, as they could indicate the presence of an unpleasant surprise. At the same time, they fell back on an oral script that presented a more positive narrative direction to what the passengers were seeing and smelling. The garbage, they explained, came from the settlements along the river, where it was often not disposed in the bins as it should, and as the rains started, it would be dragged to the river by the water. The CONANP, they continued, the institution in charge of the nature reserve, however worked on a daily basis to clean the river (as they said so, they often pointed to the boats that the institution usually had close to the blockage). To finish up the short intervention, they would finally claim, often in a rather dramatic tone, that more had to be done, and emphasize the possibility the visitors had to contribute to environmental improvements by throwing their garbage in bins.

For the passengers, on the other hand, the stop at the blockage represented the first problem they had to face during the tour – if nothing unexpected had occurred. Before that, they had only dealt with aesthetic remarks about stone formations, details about the behaviour of the animals living along the river, and a reference to the wars between the Spaniards and the Chiapanecas. Besides, the boatmen often made an effort to create a positive atmosphere on board: some would revert to humour, others to their vast knowledge of the animals on the river; others still chose to speak as little as possible, and instead focused on taking the tourists as quickly as they could to the main points of the tour. The garbage, independent of the tactic employed by the boatmen, would then put their work to the test. The worst case scenario was that some of the passengers would get upset by the experience and start questioning the pollution on the river caused by the motor boat they were travelling in, or that they would influence the
other passengers not to buy anything in the floating shop at the dam, the last stop before returning to Chiapa de Corzo, arguing that they participated in producing garbage on the river. This, the boatmen were sure, would negatively affect the amount given to them in tips at the end of the tour.\(^{54}\)

Considering the reasons the boatmen had to be annoyed with the garbage, it should not come as a surprise that they frequently complained about it among themselves. However, what appeared to disturb them most was not what they stressed during the tour – that people did not dispose of their garbage correctly – but instead that the workers who were supposed to clean the river were too lazy. Some of the boatmen even had photos and videos they had taken with their smartphones of the workers fishing instead of doing their job. Moreover, they had serious difficulties understanding how the money that the CONANP got from the tours was not enough to clean the river. All the visitors that took the tour had to pay a fee of 28 pesos to enter the reserve, and the park had more than half a million visitors per year. If all that money did not end up going back into the river, then somebody, they concluded, must be stealing it.

**Tours and modernist nationalism in Mexico**

While the boatmen were occupied with expressing their frustration about a situation that did not seem to ever be resolved, we could just as well ask what the boats were doing in that river in the first place. Of course, the issue of the garbage did not only

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\(^{54}\) This did not mean that at least some of the boatmen showed serious doubts about the correlation between effort and retribution through the tips. One of the boatmen told me that it did not matter how many crocodiles he showed, or if he had managed to spot spider monkeys or not: the tips would be the same anyway. Lynn and Sturman (2011) have also argued that rather than constituting an evaluation of the performance of the employee, tips are mainly related to physical appearance, reproducing social differentiations that would be considered as (racial) discrimination if managed directly by the employer.

The issue of the garbage in the river, on the other hand, showed that tips are not only a way to reduce the costs of the company, as for example Díez (2006) has argued in a similar situation. It could also be related to the perspective that the boatmen had of the garbage and of the CONANP workers that were supposed to clean the river. The tips gave an incentive to perceive the garbage with the same eyes as the company, and the inefficient labour performed by the CONANP workers would then be understood as affecting them economically.
need garbage to come about, but somebody that would frame it as a problem. To be able to trace the story of this problem, we once again have to go back to the dams, in this case to the one in Chicoasén.

The people working at the boat companies usually claimed it was a German who lived in Chiapa de Corzo who had started the boat tours, as he noticed that he was not the only one who enjoyed speeding through the canyon. According to Patricia Torres, an anthropologist who had been involved in the construction of the dam, it was instead the CFE that had come up with the idea, drawing on widespread ideas about the touristic potential of the canyon (cf. Lee 1996). According to Torres, the tours would be used to create a developmental narrative by taking the visitors from the poor and backwards Chiapa de Corzo to the symbol of the modern Mexico: the dam of Chicoasén (personal communication, September 2014). Iván Corzo, the administrator of what was left of the closed eco-touristic amusement park Amikúu that was found along the tour, also gave the CFE the credit for starting the tours.55 He however suggested that they had begun in Osumacinta – a village that was reconstructed at the margin of the river when the original settlement was flooded at the construction of the same dam. According to Corzo, the tours would in other words be one of the ways that the inhabitants were compensated for the dam. Its location, off the main tourist route between Tuxtla Gutiérrez, San Cristóbal de Las Casas and Palenque would however have left the boatmen in Osumacinta without work.56

While all three of these explanations are plausible, what makes Torres’ version particularly easy to digest is that it explicitly refers to a history of policies concerning tourism that the tours, at least over time, undoubtedly were part of. The idea of visiting sites of progress, like the dam of Manuel Moreno Torres/Chicoasén, readily fit within the kind of nationalist tourism projects that had dominated State policies in Mexico from the 1940s until the late 1970s – encompassing the period in which the first three major dams in the Grijalva River were built, finishing precisely with the dam of Moreno Torres/Chicoasén. In fact, tourism was just one part of the broad, nationalist project that was unfolding at this time. As Dina Berger has put it:

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55 I will come back to this park further ahead.
56 The restaurants at the dam had been more successful on the other hand, where the boatmen coming from Chiapa de Corzo would often stop when making private tours.
tourist development and promotion under Mexican control would prove to be a viable, state-directed industry: an industry made by and for Mexicans. Motorists would drive on government-financed highways where they would buy gas at government-regulated Petróleos Mexicanos (Pemex) stations, rent rooms in government-licensed hotels built by Mexican companies, and eat at locally owned restaurants. [...] Like the celebrated murals, folk art, films, and music, its tourist industry was inspired by and built on ideas of Mexican grandeur – vast beaches, curative waters, Mesoamerican pyramids, Indian villages and markets, colonial buildings, Porfirian monuments and boulevards, and modern constructs (Berger 2006:2).

Already by evoking the importance of the dam as a site for nationalist tourism, we can then see that the problem of the garbage was related to a connection between tourism, nationalism and the State. Indeed, references to Chiapas, and the grandeur of Mexico, would also appear explicitly in the discourses given during the tour, as well as in the advertisement of the canyon. A mandatory stop during the trip on the river, for example, was at a cliff that had been captured in the heraldic coat of arms of the state, where the Spaniards subdued the Chiapanecas. Here, the boatmen would show a printed and laminated image of the coat of arms, and often tell a wide spread legend about the Chiapanecas preferring to take their lives by throwing themselves into the canyon, rather than be enslaved by the Spaniards.57 In this way, the coat of arms was also reinterpreted as a celebration of the indigenous resistance to the Spaniards, which fitted with the post-independence and post-revolutionary nationalism well; as a way to distance it from Spain, this nationalism connected the Mexican State with an imagined pre-colonial one (Fernández 2004).58 Ironically enough, the coat of arms was supposed to celebrate the precise opposite of indigenous resistance. What it was meant to commemorate when it was designed at the

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57 For a historical review of this legend, see De Vos 1985.
58 Íñigo Fernández (2004) has contrasted this State-promoted nationalism with an “hispanist” (hispanista) nationalism, which drew the Mexican identity on the Colonial and Catholic heritage, and which suggested that the only thing that could hold together Mexicans was religion.
beginning of the 16th century was instead the glorious Spanish victory over the Chiapanecas (De Vos 1985).59

What was so interesting about the way in which the Mexican State was represented in this tour, however, was not the interpretation of the events that were described, but that it pointed to a shift from the “modernist nationalism” of impressive constructions made by “Mexicans”.60 Now the indigenous population was connected to a natural site, the Sumidero Canyon, instead of the pyramids that had been so important for modernist nationalism. By singling out this site as a place of nationalist pride, it also indicated that technological progress, which the dam was an example of, had lost its importance in Mexican nationalism. Rather than constituting the culmination of the tour, the arrival at the dam now would indicate to the visitors why there were so many problems in this part of the river. The garbage, in other words, would not be first and foremost a problem for the modernist Mexican State, but the modernist Mexican State – or indeed modernism as a broader project – would instead turn into an explanation of the existence of the garbage. Some of the boatmen had even started questioning why they should include the stop at the dam, and when they could, they alternatively finished the tour at the part that was most appreciated: a waterfall referred to as the “Christmas tree”. Instead of being the highpoint of the tour, where the over-sized statue of the engineer in charge of its construction met the visitors, the dam had thus turned into an anti-climax.

59 During these tours, no mention was ever made of the hostilities between Chiapanecas, Zinacantecos and Mexicas that I have discussed in Chapter Two.
60 Although the term would not have any meaning before the Mexican Independence.
From the dam to the environment

If “modernist nationalism”, as Torres claimed, had been important for the design of the tour, this model (as already noted in the introduction) had in fact already started declining even before the first tours took place. In the 1970s, the Mexican State tried to increase foreign exchange earnings in different ways – something that had proven to be difficult to achieve through the model of Import Substitution Industrialization. The beach resort of Cancún, a tourist destination planned by the State, was the first attempt in this sense, and was followed by a number of beach cities that were built throughout the 1970s and during the first years of the 1980s. By the beginning of the 1980s, the model of State planned tourist destinations was however abandoned by the federal government, as a response to the economic crisis from 1982-83. With the new, neoliberal agenda propelled by the World Bank – but, as mentioned in the introduction, which was also shared by Mexican economists and politicians who had seen the limits of the Import Substitution model – much of the State-owned enterprises were privatized. This was also the period when the dam of Albino Corzo/ Peñitas was constructed, which was the smallest dam among the ones that were built by the federation. At the same time, the Mexican State shifted its strategy away from the focus on sun and beaches to cultural tourism. This shift was not only due to the economic crisis, but also had to do with the competition from countries in the Caribbean, which had followed a similar model focusing on beaches.

The tours in the river did not have much to do with these policies, and in that sense, its focus on the dam appeared to be outdated even as it started up. This would change in the 1990s because of two important reasons. On the one hand, the concept of eco-tourism began to make its way into State policies, which also made “nature” a destination. (It is worth mentioning that the construction of new dams in the Grijalva River also stopped at this time). On the other hand, the uprising of the EZLN reaffirmed the idea of Chiapas as a place of indigeneity, which, over time, would be an important attraction of the state. While the first years after the uprising repelled tourists from Chiapas rather than made them go there, with the governmental changes in 2000, the situation appeared to be safer for tourists. The new state government also invested large sums in tourism as an economic alternative for Chiapas. During Roberto Albores...
Guillén’s term in office (1998-2000), plans already started taking form to import certain templates used in Cancún to the Grijalva River. In this way, traces from the State policies that dominated during the 1970s also made their way into the river, through the opening of the eco-touristic amusement park Amikúu in 2003. The idea, as Albores phrased it later on, was in fact to build a “new Cancún” in Chiapas (Wilson 2009:184). Although the focus for these plans was the northern part of the state, where the pyramids of Palenque were to be found, the concept then also appeared in the river.

While Albores probably wanted to use Cancún as a positive model that had generated unparalleled economic growth, this model was far from undisputed in the country. As already mentioned, it had indeed been abandoned by the federal government, although its symbol of success apparently lived on in certain circles. In Chiapas, the model would, on the other hand, readily appear as an example of neoliberal policies, and therefore constitute an antipode to the project of the EZLN – as expressed, for example, in Wilson’s account of Albores’ plans. However, Cancún did not make its way into the Grijalva River through large hotels and long beaches, but rather through a rough imitation of the controversial park Xcaret, close to Cancún, which in turn was clearly inspired by Disneyland theme parks. Xcaret had been built around the ruins of an ancient Mayan settlement, with authentic pyramids standing in the middle of the park, as part of the Mayan theme it had been given (Walker 2005:70-72). While Amikúu did not have these kinds of spectacular props, it did include an exhibition of indigenous clothing and costumes used in traditional celebrations, a number of signs mapping out the history of the indigenous populations that had lived in the area, as well as a part explaining the geological formation of the canyon. The main part of the park, nevertheless, was made up of two swimming pools, large restaurants with the possibility of organizing weddings, a small but impressive zoo, and a zip-line. Besides being a tourist attraction, it also offered environmental education to schools in the state through a government programme; the school trips, in fact, would turn out to be the main source of income for the park, not the least since it was considered too expensive for those visiting the area.

61 “Amikúu” is an imaginary Mayanization of the Spanish word *amigo*, friend.
However, the company never managed to attract the kind of visitor that would produce a resemblance to Cancún – that is, large numbers of foreign visitors – and the Sumidero Canyon continued to be a predominantly national destination. According to the manager of the boat company where I worked, 70% of their visitors were Mexican, a figure which also corresponds well with the official statistics on the national composition of the visitors to Chiapas (Subsecretaría de Planeación 2006:13).\(^6^2\) This difficulty not only related to the challenge of forming a new international destination, but also had to do with the financial crisis of 2008, which made the number of visits drop. On the other hand, the park also had constant problems with the companies running the tours in the river, over different issues.\(^6^3\) When the economic support from the government was cut back after the elections in 2012, the park closed.

At this time, Amikúu had changed several aspects of the tours, which remained that way even as the park closed. For example, they were behind the introduction of uniforms, new safety measures (including the Breathalyzer test that the boatmen had to take every morning), but also, and more importantly, the new discourse that was given during the tours. Together with the CONANP and the Ministry of Tourism, they had formulated a discourse that included many more details about the flora and fauna in the nature reserve, while taking away certain stops that were usually made to point to stone formations that looked like some recognisable object. During my fieldwork, some of the boatmen, for example, would point out places to me that no longer were part of the tour – like a spot in the mountainside which resembled a big bird, another one that looked like a monk, and so forth. These kinds of observations

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\(^6^2\) While much attention has been paid to these major tourist sites of international tourism (see Pi-Sunner & Thomas 2015; Walker 2005; Juárez 2002; Brenner 2005), national tourism has in fact been much more important in Mexico at large. According to the Ministry of Tourism in Mexico and the National Institute of Statistics, the domestic contribution to the total tourism consumption reached almost 84\% in 2001 (SECTUR & INEGI 2003:2); this tendency of internal tourism in fact also corresponds to a similar tendency in many other places with a growing middle class, like India and China (Venter & Lyon 2015:75; Gladstone 2013:132).

\(^6^3\) One of the problems was that Amikúu wanted to have its own boats – which had automatized the guiding part, among other things. The companies already running the tours in the river did not agree to this, and protested. However, they reached a settlement that implied that the cooperatives would take the tourists to Amikúu. The companies constantly and arbitrarily increased the prices for Amikúu to take the tourists there, making the prices unreasonable from the perspective of the park, until the boat companies decided to stop letting people off there; the companies claimed that the reason for doing so was that the price they had agreed on would make them lose money during the high season, when they did not have any problems filling their boats.
were rather common in places that had not received much institutional support for the
guides (as, for example, was the case in the caves at San Nicolás Ranch, close to San
Cristóbal de Las Casas). During my fieldwork, several socios instead expressed their
idea of offering a “scientific” tour, which would include information about everything
that appeared during the tour, such as the depth of the river, the height of the mountains,
the kind of rock that made up the mountains, among other things. The stone formations
would still be an important part of the tour, but the “scientific” eye would turn them
into something more than aesthetic remarks, or – which was also common – religious
references.

The majority of the stops, however, were referred to by the names of the
appearances of these formations. The first stop during the tour was at two bridges that
crossed the river, connecting Tuxtla Gutiérrez and Chiapa de Corzo, and which marked
the starting point of the Nature Reserve of the Sumidero Canyon. Entering the canyon,
the first stop was then a stone formation called “the seahorse” (some boatmen would
add that it could also be seen as part of a pirate skull, with a patch over one eye), which
was followed by a stop where you could see the cliff depicted in the coat of arms. The
next stop was where the Canyon reached its highest point (about a kilometre above the
surface of the river), and then at the “Cave of Colours”. Here, the passengers were
asked to look at a stone formation that – with some imagination – looked like Christ on
the cross. The companies had installed a small shrine beside the figure, and made visits
to it on the day of the Virgin of Guadalupe.64 During the rainy season, the next stop
was in front of a waterfall called “the bride’s veil”, before reaching the popular
“Christmas tree”. The tour, as already mentioned, then officially ended at the dam,
from where the boats returned to Chiapa de Corzo.

What the “scientific eye” added to the aesthetic comparisons and religious
references was a range of details about the names of the different kinds of stones and
their formation, the connection between particular types of stones and the colours in
the cave, as well as the height and depth of the canyon at different points. At the same
time, it indicated a shift from the modernist State, and implied a new notion of nature

64 For a discussion about the connection between this virgin and Mexican nationalism, see
Wolf 1958.
as a site of exploration, study, subjugation and admiration (cf Tsing 2005:134). In fact, the “scientific eye” had even turned the river into a site of political action through the CONANP and the boatmen, where the education of the visitors was crucial – as in the case of the “nature lovers” referred to by Tsing (2005). Of course, not all the boatmen thought of it in this way, and some would not perceive that a more detailed knowledge of the flora and fauna would increase their tips. Others, however, took the mission more seriously, and became the kinds of environmental activists that subverted the tourist space of relaxation and contemplation, turning it into a space of action. For this activism, the garbage was indeed a problem, but it was also an entrance point to this new discussion about the environment.

State activism

A particularly interesting aspect of the environmental activism that emerged in this context was that it occurred in a relation that has been neglected in the discussions about politics in Chiapas: that between workers in public institutions, private companies and tourists. When tourism appears at all in academic discussions in the state, it is with regard to the indigenous population and Zapatista autonomy (as in Babb 2011, or Libert 2012). In this part of the Grijalva River, tourism was instead part of a political struggle over the environment, closely related to ideas about the indigenous population, authenticity, nature, and Mexico as a nation, but also to a complicated history of development. Nature along the river was indeed deeply embedded in the infrastructure of the dams, which both had caused problems for different creatures – like the crocodiles – while also giving rise to tourism in certain areas, which in turn had brought with it several efforts to protect the crocodiles. After all, the crocodiles that had happened to end up on the “wrong” side of the dam – that is, on the side of Chicoasén, outside the nature reserve – had become extinct. The dam in this sense worked to protect the crocodiles, through more recent generations of development, and

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65 See also Ingold’s (2000:20) differentiation between nature, which followed the image of the detached scientist conveyed by the owners of the company, and the environment as something that cannot be detached from human beings.
it was also this kind of development that was employed as part of the contemporary activism that I found in the river.

If some of the boatmen then had turned their job into a form of activism, they did so in alliance with a group of people who had managed to use the bureaucratic setup and corporate interests to move their agenda forward. Some of these people had been involved since the new discourse for the tours in the river was formulated in collaboration with Amikúu and the Ministry of Tourism. As already explained, there were certain stops along the route that had been established in this way, and the boatmen were supposed to say certain things at each point. The script the boatmen followed, however, was rather flexible, and could include a range of topics. In fact, the word “script” is somewhat misleading. The boatmen that I worked with had learnt their discourse from other boatmen as part of their rather informal training, and depended very much on the capacity, interest and training of their “teachers”. The CONANP and other institutions, however, would constantly host workshops that could maintain a certain standard of the “script”, and add new information. Through these workshops, the boatmen who were interested could indeed become very skilled in a range of fields relating to the flora and fauna in the Canyon, but also when it came to other matters, such as life-saving techniques.

The involvement in environmental politics was evident in these workshops, as in one about spider monkeys that I attended while working with the boatmen. The problem that faced the spider monkeys, we – the boatmen and I – were told by the two women that organized the workshop, was that they had been caught on one side of the river since the construction of the dam, and therefore their numbers had quickly diminished. The area where they lived had decreased even more over time, as human settlements had started appearing in the nature reserve. One of the women holding the workshop proposed that it was as if all the people in the boat would first have to remain on just one side and then had to gather even tighter as some of the seats were taken away. To be able to communicate this situation to the passengers, we were told that it was not enough to simply know things; we must also be able to do things, express ideas, and recognise feelings. One way of creating this link, we were told, was to emphasize

66 During my fieldwork, the CONANP had knowledge of the existence of only 34 individuals.
the many resemblances between human beings and spider monkeys. The number of teeth was the same, as was the number of fingers; the monkeys also lived in relations that could be described as a family, and they have strong affective relationships, just like human beings. This kind of data, we were reminded, was then important to make the passengers connect instinctively and emotionally to the monkeys, which in turn was important to make them understand the problems that the spider monkeys faced in a deeper way. They also recommended that we involve the passengers actively, by posing questions to them, or – when possible, considering the safety regulations – make them participate in a corporeal way. In that way we would activate them in another way rather than just telling them the information and giving all the answers. The last challenge that was given at the workshop was how to connect these problems to people’s everyday lives, where they could take action. The difficulty here was that the issues facing the spider monkeys were restricted to a particular part of the river, but what those giving the workshop wanted to stress was how everything was connected in one way or another. Maybe the lives of the spider monkeys were not something that people could do anything about where they lived, but they could get involved with similar environmental problems.

The environmental politics that this workshop was involved with were, in turn, part of a longer struggle within the governmental bureaucracy to secure the space and funds to move this agenda forward. The people who gave the workshop had indeed managed to navigate in a very creative way through the rules and concepts that were tied to the State bureaucracy. When they presented themselves, they told us that their NGO had been hired by the CONANP and the state and federal agencies for development, SEDESOL and INDESOL (see note 6, p. 26). However, what was special about this arrangement, and which they did not mention, was that the NGO had been started by, and was staffed by former workers of the CONANP. To understand why a group of people would quit their job to get hired by the same institution through an NGO, it is necessary to consider the particular character of the CONANP and the people working there, as well as certain political policies. The CONANP was in fact something of a centre for environmental activists with a background in natural sciences. Many of them were women. Just like in the many NGOs in the state, particularly in San Cristóbal
de Las Casas, CONANP was a popular place to do the “social service” that was required of students by Mexican universities, and the institution always had a couple of students helping out. The social service was indeed often used as a way to support particular agendas which tended to have scarce resources, and was in those cases not first of all a strategic means to gain employment, as it could be at other institutions and companies – although the CONANP was definitely a place where many of them would have liked to work after having finished their studies. What the presence of these students pointed to was then how this institution was about much more than fulfilling certain tasks. An important reason why they had chosen to be there was evidently to follow certain ideals about environmental protection, and this was also a clear motivation of the employees. Although they were part of a federal institution, the employees often did not seem to consider themselves part of the government, but rather as an NGO that had the particular position of having governmental channels. During my fieldwork at the CONANP for example, I followed the sometimes difficult and time-consuming negotiations with the municipal governments in the basin, as the employees of the CONANP tried to convince those that polluted the river the most – above all Tuxtla Gutiérrez, but also Chiapa de Corzo – that they had to do something about the situation. The municipal governments often cancelled meetings without any notification, which made the young man in charge of the project at the CONANP shrug his shoulders and explain to me that “that’s how the government is”.

This brief context of the CONANP is then important to understand why a group of former employees of the institution had started an NGO that was hired by the CONANP and other governmental institutions. The most immediate reason was that the CONANP did not have the resources that the employees thought would be necessary to be able to carry out their work in a satisfying way. However, they had soon understood that there was money at other governmental institutions that could be used for their projects. The only problem was that these institutions could not sponsor each other’s activities because of administrative rules aiming at hindering corruption. As there was a policy at the State institutions to involve non-governmental organizations in their activities, a group from the CONANP decided to start their own NGO. Again because of legal restrictions, they were not allowed to work both at the CONANP and at an NGO
hired by that institution, and therefore quit their jobs at the CONANP, to become a sort of para-governmental organization that was constantly hired by people working in a number of institutions interested in the same objectives, but that had not had a representative of the “civil society” that could solve their problem of connecting resources with adequate projects.

The environmental State

The Grijalva River was indeed an excellent site for this kind of activism. Not only did it receive enough visitors to give it an impact few places could compare to, but it also had institutional support because of the existence of the nature reserve, and furthermore could pass relatively free from politics. If traditional forms of politics could often appear invasive – like the constant road blocks between Tuxtla Gutiérrez and San Cristóbal de Las Casas, or the political propaganda on the TV or radio – the tours in the river were a moment of pleasure and relaxation that visitors paid for. Even the commercials for the river would in fact set a scene that benefitted the activists, through the intermingling of Mexican nationalism and the river. In a promotional video made for the 200th anniversary of Mexican Independence, by the immense Mexican media corporation Televisa, the Grijalva River, for example, appeared in a context of waterfalls and pyramids, which all appeared to be inhabited by the indigenous population, or some kind of ancient female beings, together with wild animals.67 The Sumidero Canyon was thus presented in the image of a raft floating slowly by, with a woman lying on a crocodile, and two other women standing on its corners – all with dresses that evoked colonial representations of primitive re-incarnations of ancient Greece or Rome that were produced during the Enlightenment and by early Romantic thinkers (Outram 2005:67; on the link between Romanticism, nature and industrialism, see Nustad 2015:24-6). This kind of representation could indeed be understood as part

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67 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OEmRoQPJj2g; downloaded on the 4/9/16.
of a global industry which tries to give rise to a “parallel universe”, built on recognisable myths, fantasies and enclosed resorts – and where all sorts of problems should be hidden (Pi-Sunner & Thomas 2015:93). On the other hand, the kind of “original paradise” (Picard 2010:140) that the advertisement was referring to could also be read in the particular Mexican context. From this perspective, the Sumidero Canyon would rather become part of the “profound Mexico” (Bonfil 1990 [1987]) that has resisted the colonial order – and indeed different post-independent and post-revolutionary projects – much as the Chiapanecas who supposedly had thrown themselves into the river to avoid subjugation. Ideas relating to the “profound Mexico” have over time signalled authenticity, which has been connected to different political projects: from the post-independent and post-revolutionary States’ attempts to connect themselves to the precolonial past, to the project of Zapatista autonomy. Nature, a glorious past, and indigenous populations would, in other words, come together in the Grijalva River, as an image of purity and authenticity (cf. Nustad 2015:13). The context in which the advertisement appeared – the anniversary of the Mexican independence – however showed how the State was still present here, as part of that indigenous and natural authenticity. What did not appear in this promotional video was the dam, which again highlighted the new image of the Mexican State.
Garbage and political forms

To return to the problem of the garbage, and the presence of the boats, we can by now conclude that their appearance related to the modernist, Mexican State; independent of the narrative that we choose to believe regarding the origin of the first tours (as outlined on p. 148), they were undoubtedly connected to the construction of the dam of Chicoasén. Over time however, the tours came to change in character – as did the image of the Mexican State – which turned the garbage into a problem not only in relation to the propellers of the boats, but also for the environment. Nonetheless, this shift was not as clear-cut as it might appear in a discursive approach. The dam, for example, still remained in the river, and was important for its current form and for the provision of electricity needed for the industries, and thus for the production of the plastic bottles that turned up in the river. The struggles over the redistribution of resources – as we have seen in the previous chapters – were also present, notwithstanding this shift, and
were not that easy to overcome as the simple formulation of a concept as “sustainable development”.

We can by now also see more clearly how the boatmen were captured in this contradiction. While their desire for a clean river coincided with the visitors’ desire not to see garbage during their vacations, they also participated in the pollution of the river, which undermined what had become the main attraction of the tour: nature. This contradiction of course was not something that only the boatmen were involved with, although they had to hear the complaints, and see their tips reduced, when the visitors were bothered at finding themselves participating in it. The tour in the river was in this sense much like the avenues that were built in places like Paris and San Petersburg, which suddenly connected different human groups that previously had been kept apart, making their conflicts more apparent (Berman 1982). What was connected through the tours were the overarching policies that had guided the Mexican State, but also the paradox that the dam had made it possible to start the tours, at the same time as it connected to the industries that polluted the river through the garbage that they produced, and to the chemicals that they used.

The intricate conflicts that became visible with the tour were then between an ambiguous divide between society and nature, which in turn pointed to the contradictory history of the State, but also between different political forms. The conflict between the political forms, however, was not as evident as that relating to different generation of development and of the State. What was stressed through the discourse used during the tours was not the different sides of the apparent conflicts, but the possibilities of making them co-exist. The solution that was put forward indeed appeared simple: the main message that was transmitted was to throw garbage in the garbage bins. At the same time, much more complicated problems were also implied in the discourses that the boatmen gave – or at least in the discourse that the activists of the CONANP wanted them to say.

During the workshop described above, the NGO for example had explained the devastating effects that the new dam had on the spider monkeys, and also pointed to the problems posed by the new irregular settlements in the nature reserve – thus attacking both State actions, and those of people looking for land. The CONANP
activists, however, would not stop with the attempts to form the script of the boatmen through the workshops directed at them. They also took legal action against those affecting the nature reserve, such as the irregular settlements within its limits. They of course knew that getting people evicted was a politically complicated thing to do, not least because politicians could win many votes by promising to protect these settlements. The CONANP often opted for trying to involve the new inhabitants in the protection of the reserve, by offering development projects, as they had successfully done with the anglers to make them stop fishing in the reserve. These kinds of strategies, nevertheless, did not solve the basic problem of the settlements: that they diminished the surface of the reserve, and decreased its “quality”. With the new settlements, the most emblematic “companion species” (Haraway 2008) of humans had also made its way into the reserve: the dog. In the reserve, dogs were a threat to its quality, which was measured by the amount and diversity of bigger mammals, which by their very presence meant there had to be smaller ones, as well as rich fauna. Dogs then represented an unwelcome predator, which could affect the population of other mammals, but also made it possible to see how not all mammals made it into the definition of the “quality” of the reserve: the humans and their companion species were left well outside of it. While it was important for the CONANP to get rid of the dogs, it was not that easy to do so. The CONANP put non-lethal traps in the woods where they had spotted dogs before, through cameras they would put next to bait to survey the quality of the reserve. To attract the animals, they used canned tuna, which they wrapped into a small package that they in turn would hang in branches in front of the camera, normally close to places where the animals drink water. (The camera had sensors which would detect movement).

Another major difficulty for the CONANP to ensure the quality of the reserve was also the dam – another human creation – which was even more difficult to do something about than the people living there. Paradoxically enough, the nature reserve had been inaugurated at the same time as the dam, as a way of delimiting its effects. From the outset, it was in other words clearly foreseeable that the changes brought

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68 On standards for measuring the quality of nature reserves, see Nustad 2015:26.
69 The year before my fieldwork, in 2013, they had caught 19 dogs in this way; during the nine months that preceded my fieldwork with the CONANP, they had taken 11.
about by the construction of the dam would change the life along the river, including
the effects implied in opening up an area that had practically excluded the presence of
human beings because of the geography of the canyon: not only would the river itself
become navigable – which facilitated the access to the canyon – but new roads leading
to the dam also lead us back to the settlements, as they made it easier to reach the whole
area.

Also in this complicated situation, the CONANP activists came up with a way
to make the dam participate in preserving the nature reserve: they used the NGO tied to
the CONANP to be able to charge the CFE for a part of the costs of cleaning up the
garbage.

**Colliding histories**

In this chapter, I have shown how the garbage and the tours in this part of the Grijalva
River are part of struggles between political forms, and between historical incarnations
of the State – struggles which in turn relate to a division between society and nature. I
have described how people, to move their agendas forward, navigate through NGOs,
governmental institutions and companies, leaving them all with “blurred boundaries”
(Gupta 1995) – rather than reproducing the dichotomies between States on the one
hand, and social movements and/or NGOs on the other (as appears in Karim 2001, and
Bornstein & Sharma 2016), or by relating tourism to the division between macro-
political significance and local impacts (as proposed by Brenner 2005; Juárez 2002; Pi-
Sunyer & Thomas 2015; and Wilson 2009). I have also stressed how complex
environment politics is in a place as deeply embedded in infrastructural systems as the
Grijalva River. Here, the borders between the human and the non-human are far from
evident. Dams and dogs were, for example, clearly part of the human domain, if judging
from the attempts made by the activists at the CONANP to improve the “quality” of the
nature reserve that they were in charge of. However, the crocodiles were also drawn
into it, as they both were affected by the dam in Chicoasén, and then were protected by
the CONANP and the zoo in Tuxtla to recover from it. We should also remember that
the whole basin is a “cultural landscape” (Nustad 2015:52) that has taken its form over millennia, related directly to its political position between the centre of Mexico and Guatemala, and the cultivation of certain crops. Even if the dams were taken away, the landscape would, in other words, be a human as much as a non-human creation. Despite the difficulties in establishing nature and human culture as two distinct domains, I have also pointed to how there are clear contradictions between activities more intimately tied to humans, and the well-being of other beings along the river. These contradictions are not easily overcome, and cannot be forced into a single concept, such as “sustainable development”, nor made into concrete actions like not throwing garbage in the streets, or understanding the similarities between spider monkeys and human beings.

At the centre of this discussion, I have put the garbage in the river, which both is implied in the struggles between political forms, and between historical incarnations of the State. On the one hand, I have thus shown the contradictions between environmental politics and land politics, as well as between environmental politics and a kind of politics concerned with industrialization, capital accumulation and an improved material living standard. On the other hand, I have stressed how ideas about the relationship between nature and society have shifted over time, from a State mainly concerned with its “trusteeship” (Cowen & Shenton 1996) of industries and economy, to a trusteeship of nature. More concretely, I have focused on the shift from a State that conquered people living along the river, and which then conquered nature, to a State that started being promoted as a divine guardian of the environment of the river – relations that have been commemorated through the coat of arms of the state, the statue at the dam of Chicoasén, and the promotional video produced by Televisa. These shifts are in fact crucial to the contradictory nature of the tour, which I have also highlighted through the problematic presence of garbage. While the garbage provided concrete difficulties for the boatmen and other creatures trying to make their way through the river, and indicated an unwanted presence of human beings and other political forms, it also brought to light the contradictions between the different incarnations of the State. The most evident collision was between the States referred to by the statue and the promotional video, which also constitute the centre of the conflict between society and
nature. Even though the boatmen constantly assured the visitors that the CONANP was working hard to clean up the river, it was evident to all – at least during my fieldwork – that it had not done enough. If “chasing the dirt”, as Mary Douglas put it, would be a way to “positively re-order […] our environment making it conform to an idea” (Douglas, 1984 [1966]:2), failing to delimit the presence of certain objects also had implications for those kinds of ideas. As the garbage was often read by the boatmen, it definitely did not only talk about environmental problems – and thus about the tension between society and nature – but above all about a corrupt government that was unable to do things properly. Through the eyes of the boatmen, the CONANP was clearly part of the government – independent of how the employees of the CONANP perceived themselves – and was thus corrupt. What the boatmen saw was therefore that the entrance fees just disappeared in the hands of the CONANP (and not how it financed other nature parks); how the machines that were supposed to clean up the river never worked (and not the bureaucratic obstacles to finance accidents through the regular budget); and how the workers spent too much time doing other things rather than cleaning the river (and not how they participated in different parts of the process).\footnote{While it was true that the entrance fees generated a fair amount of money – as the boatmen indicated – the way that the person in charge of cleaning the river would explain it to me was that the CONANP did not in fact get a cent from those fees directly. What they did was to collect the money on behalf of Hacienda – the treasury department – from whom they also got their funds. The fees would indeed also go back to the CONANP, but not only to the nature reserves that had the practical possibility to charge for the entrance, or the sufficient amount of visitors to pay for their activities. The offices at the Sumidero Canyon would therefore only get about 15\% of what they collected, which meant that the amount available for cleaning up the river was never enough – particularly not when they had the bad luck of seeing their boats break down. During my fieldwork, this was precisely what had happened to the so-called “crocodile” – a boat that would automatically lift up the garbage on its deck, through something similar to an escalator. These mishaps made the work much harder, as everything therefore had to be taken up by hand, from smaller boats. In one year, they reportedly collected about 2,000 tons (about 6 tons a day, which corresponds to two trips with the boats), although it could be much more, as after the storm Stan in 2005, when they collected 5,000 tons; one of the boatmen told me that during that storm, the river was unnavigable because of a one kilometre long, and one meter thick block of garbage, so thick that you could walk on it.}

In fact, the boatmen’s annoyance with the garbage and the CONANP made the trip much more contradictory than it might have been if they had followed the advice given through the workshops. Rather than a great pedagogic example of teaching the visitors about environmental issues, the garbage could thus start to become part of quite a different story, one of a corrupt State. This story, for example, appeared in the stop
that some of the boatmen made at a place where a flock of vultures would usually gather, which they referred to publicly as “the Senate”. On the other hand, the boatmen never contrasted the dam, where the tour ended up, with the environmental problems that they often pointed to before getting there. Instead, they told the visitors about the depth of the river at that place, the height of the curtain of the dam, and pointed out the different parts of the dam (without explaining how it worked).

In this way, the garbage pointed to the complicated co-existence of a series of projects that had lost much of their coherent narrative frames as they lingered on in the river, contrasting with the appearance of new things and narratives. While these contradictions normally remained unnoticed, at times – as in the case of the garbage in the river – they became visible. The failure to “chase the dirt”, in other words, easily drew attention to the lack of a visible order, and instead pointed to the tense co-existence of different temporalities – that is, different projects, developments, or “teleologies” – which stemmed from different historical contexts, and which had configured the political form of the environment accordingly.

If we already in the previous chapter have seen the way that political forms survive through their materiality, in this chapter, we have then seen how this very materiality also can turn a particular form into a highly contradictory sphere of conflicts, where important actors – such as the State – occupy positions that need a considerable effort to be conceived as coherent. The complexity of the experience of development thus also relates to these changes within political forms, as the changes within the environmental form described here – where the State has gone from being a clear representative of the society against nature, to being presented as a guardian of nature, against society.
6.
Nowhere to go
Development and the politics of movement

Figure 34. The tunnel between Tuxtla and Chicoasén.
Sovereignty and the inversion of development

As we have seen in chapter three, four, and – to a certain degree – chapter five, much can be learnt about the experience of development by analysing the negotiations about particular development projects. What we will turn to in this chapter is however the more overarching ideas that offer a framework to the projects referred to. While this framework can be perceived also by continuing the analysis of particular projects, in this chapter, I argue that it can be observed effectively by focusing on the kind of actions and desires that fall outside of that framework, as in the case of certain movements that took place among people living along the river. I will thus show how the relocations that were planned as part of the Sustainable Rural Cities, and the constant movement between villages, regions and countries, let us perceive ideas about development from an angle where it becomes clear how entangled they are with national sovereignty, Order and Progress, but also with particular desires. By comparing these movements to the discussions about the Rural Cities, it also becomes evident how certain things were “illegible” (Scott 1998) from the perspective of politics tied to the State, and therefore were also effectively excluded from the discussions about this project. In this way, the chapter adds yet an aspect to the general argument of this thesis: that the coherence that is given to the State by employing “development” as its legitimate project excludes certain acts and desires from the politically legible, and thus from the political as such.

The links between movement, development, sovereignty and certain desires are, of course, not something that has gone unnoticed by the scholars working on these topics. Cowen and Shenton have, for example, put these concepts together by claiming that sovereignty implies that the State is the trustee of its citizens, and is in charge of balancing (economic) progress and (social) order. Development, as mentioned in chapter four, is thus understood precisely as this balancing act between Order and Progress, carried out by the sovereign State. Tania Li (2009) has in turn explored the

71 This balancing act was indeed particularly visible in the case referred to in that chapter, which combined a project that could be related to Progress, the construction of a dam, with a set of projects referring to the well-being of the population, which in other words addressed an issue that could be described as being in the interest of the Order.
historical formation of a “will to improve”, which has been formed through the interventions by different generations of the State, and, more recently, by NGOs.

Movement has also been a critical ingredient in the discussions about development, although it shows certain particularities in comparison to the topics referred to above. Cowen and Shenton (1996) have argued, for example, that “[d]evelopment rapidly emerged as state policy designed to deal with problems of productivity and unemployment associated with the growth of surplus population, emigration and/or the threat of economic decline” (Cowen & Shenton 1996:408). That is, movement was one of the problems that was supposed to be addressed through development initiatives. The same idea is to be found in Takeyuki Tsuda’s (2007:19-20) observation that international migration has often been understood as the result of a failure of development to equalize the harsh inequalities that exist between different parts of the world.\textsuperscript{72} If sovereignty then connected to development through the trusteeship over the processes of Order and Progress, the movement of people rather emerges as the inversion of development, which calls for its deployment, or for some political alternative to it. However, not every kind of movement necessarily becomes recognisable as the opposite of development: only certain kinds of movements turn into the “migration” that development projects are supposed to address.

A good example of this kind of reasoning appeared in the Master Plan of the Sustainable Rural Cities, but also in the critique of the programme. The authors of the Master Plan stressed the unequal development in the country, which they claimed was behind the contemporary divide between “rich and poor regions, cities with a high degree of development, but with poverty-stricken outskirts (cinturones de miseria) that grow each day” (UNACH, CEDES & UD, n.d:29). In the same breath, the authors also

\textsuperscript{72} This failure would then lead to certain countries that received migrants from poorer countries to risk increasing their expenses on that ground, at least in the short term, but this could also translate global inequalities into domestic conflicts. From this perspective, effective development projects are an option for States trying to lower the costs that they have for migration. At the same time, it is evident that there are certain companies that rely on migrant labour to keep their salaries at an internationally competitive level – something that is often against the interests of the workers in the countries of destination (Gardner & Osella 2003:xiii). If there are conflicts about migration in the receiving countries, the same is the case in the poorer countries migrants leave. The remittances they send back to their families can indeed improve their situation. On the other hand, they can increase prices locally, without a significant change in salaries. Those who do not count on connections with migrant workers can thus face new difficulties (Tsuda 2007; Gardner & Osella 2003).
highlighted how the economic difficulties of the country, and of the countryside, had caused “migratory flows” to the United States (Ibid). The Sustainable Rural Cities Programme, as presented in their plans, in other words was thought to hinder the formation of new shantytowns, and to keep people from migrating to the United States.

While an important goal of the project then was to avoid certain movements – much in line with the inverted relationship between development and migration – it also implied the relocation of people. It is worth stressing that the project was not thought to simply move people from the countryside to cities but to control a movement that was already unfolding, and re-direct it to new “cities” which could offer what was lacking in the outskirts of the major cities. What the project put forward was, in other words, an ordered form of rural/urban migration, which would keep possible migrants in the kind of urbanized countryside that it was supposed to give rise to.

As I have stressed in Chapter Three, it was however this movement that concerned the critics of the programme. On the one hand, the relocation was thought to be part of cultural politics that tried to uproot the indigenous and peasant population from their land, and turn them into modern citizens (Soto and Banister 2016; Wilson 2009), which indicated the possibility of an alternative to development (the Zapatista autonomy). On the other hand, there was a more practical concern with the conditions awaiting those who were supposed to be relocated, which drew on the experiences reported from similar projects elsewhere (see Gans 1959; Jing 1999; Mejia 1999; Li 1999; Rohe & Mouw 1991). For example, in a report about the Rural Cities, written by a group from Cornell University, the authors claimed that:

improper relocation efforts can result in a number of negative outcomes such as joblessness, loss of access to common property used for productive activities (such as communal land), food insecurity, and economic and social marginalization. Relocation is especially problematic when citizens are involuntarily moved, or when they are not given the opportunity to effectively participate in the process leading to their relocation […]. It can lead to increased poverty amongst relocated people, the disintegration of social and cultural networks, and psychological stresses, even when the purpose of relocation is to raise standards of living […].

Upon relocation, adapting to a new environment can be especially difficult for indigenous populations such as those found in Chiapas. These communities are frequently located in isolated
areas with strong and sacred ties to their language, territories, and culture. Relocation can be a traumatic experience, posing a threat to their way of life. Furthermore, indigenous populations are often impoverished and marginalized, with a limited number of coping strategies to adjust to changes in their environment (De Leon et al 2010:12-13).

What comes forth here is then an echo of the idea of movement as an inversion of development. In short, to avoid the negative aspects of movement, these authors argued that it is a bad idea to move people.

**Illegible movements along the Grijalva River**

When we leave the “doctrines of development” (Cowen & Shenton 1996) and the development projects aside for a while, and instead focus on the movement of people, it quickly becomes clear how these doctrines make certain things “illegible” (Scott 1998). The illegibility that James Scott referred to is closely related to the population politics brought up in Chapter Four, and the attempts to form particular desires of development. What Scott above all was interested in were the landholdings that did not correspond to the administrative requirements of State control – particularly the practice of polycropping and of shifting cultivation. These kinds of landholdings, he argued, were “an administrative nightmare”, because of “[t]he possibilities for evasion and resistance” and the high costs for the State administration to procure “accurate, annual data” (Scott 1998:338). What was “legible” for the State was then the kinds of practices that fitted more easily within its administrative schemes, which in turn corresponded to a process through which the State had managed to “arrange the population in ways that simplified the classic state functions of taxation, conscription, and prevention of rebellion” (Ibid:2).

As we have seen in the previous chapters, and as I will discuss further ahead, there were indeed certain movements along the river that connected to clearly “legible” categories from the perspective of development and State sovereignty. This was not least the case of the land occupations that I discussed in Chapter Three, which appeared again in the environmental politics described in the previous chapter. The arrival of
people to Chicoasén to work at the new dam, was also something that fitted within these schemes without major difficulties. There were, however, movements that did not appear within the framework of State sovereignty, nor as an inversion. This was quite ironically the case of the majority of the movements made by the people who were affected by the flood which would become the starting point for the Susainable Rural Cities’ Programme. In fact, for the people that I worked with in this area, the preoccupations formulated by the group from Cornell, as well as the concerns expressed by the authors Wilson, Soto and Banister, must indeed have seemed rather odd. The kinds of ideas about movement that these authors assumed is, on the other hand, quite common in development narratives, and the people in Mezcalapa would hardly be the first ones to see their long history of movements become bracketed (cf. Mosse, Gupta and Shah 2005:3026). As in the South Asian countries that interested Gardner & Osella (2003), people in rural Mezcalapa moved a lot, and not first of all between countries or to urban areas, which has dominated the discussions about migration (Gardner & Osella 2003:vii). While international migration was also present here, what prevailed were the movements within the rural area where people had grown up, and between villages and small towns that were found along the river.

**Leave-if-you-can: the strategy of avoiding problems**

The inhabitants of Los Guayabos, where I did fieldwork, had in fact moved so many times that they often did not even bother to give any details about exactly what their routes had looked like. The woman who had lived the longest in Los Guayabos, Angélica – whose intricate itinerary I will turn to in this section – for example, was born in the village of Miguel Alemán, just kilometres away, close to the road between Malpaso and Tecpatán. At the age of 11, she moved to the village of Lázaro Cárdenas, on the other side of the dam, where her parents had managed to get a piece of land. Here, she met her husband and they had their first child. She and her husband did however not have land in Lázaro Cárdenas, and therefore moved around a lot (as she put it, they were “paseando por donde quiera”), until they heard about the take-over
in Los Guayabos; at this time, her oldest son, Eserian, was 11, just as she had been when she left Miguel Alemán.

Angélica told me that living in Los Guayabos was not easy in the beginning, because of the thefts, threats of eviction, confrontations with police and others, but also because of constant conflicts between the new inhabitants. The wide use of alcohol was perceived as a great problem at the time, as it indeed was during my fieldwork, and the women did not dare to leave their houses after the sun had set. Angélica and her husband kept going back to Lázaro Cárdenas, and kept looking for other possibilities, but it was not easy to find somewhere to go. The situation changed in 2001 (one year after the electoral defeat of the PRI), when Gustavo Ronaldo Zurita, a nephew of Lastra (see p. 99), sold his land, which was right next to the occupied ranch of Lastra, to “the government” – which then passed it on to the occupants of the area around Los Guayabos. Another piece of land called Salsipuedes (literally “Leave/get out, if you can”), on the other side of the river, was also acquired by the government to satisfy the necessities of these families and this was where Angélica and her family ended up. As the government considered the issue resolved, they threatened to evict those who chose to remain on the ranch of Lastra anyway, and it was also abandoned. The inhabitants of the ranch sold by Zurita, which they called Rubén Jaramillo after a leader famous for fighting for land for poor peasants, would nevertheless continue using the land on the ranch of Lastra for agriculture, particularly since they could not be evicted from it; the only thing that they could lose was the harvest. Lastra, on the other hand, would abstain from making any attempt to take back his ranch. As the years passed, and it became more and more probable that he never would reclaim it, Los Guayabos became a permanent settlement again, as the families of seven brothers from the Highlands moved there. These brothers had all been part of the EZLN, but despite their participation in the uprising, only the oldest of them had gotten a piece of occupied

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73 As I understood it, this land was initially referred to as Rubén Jaramillo by the occupants. As the government bought the ranch from Zurita, they however brought that name with them. When Los Guayabos then was established, the first settlement of Rubén Jaramillo would be found within the land belonging to that village. This change of names was a clear obstacle during my fieldwork, as it made me misunderstand the order of certain events. In fact, it is possible that not everybody living in Los Guayabos knew about this change, as it occurred before they arrived there.
land through the organization. In 2002, almost ten years after the uprising, they heard that there was land that they could take over in Los Guayabos, and decided to go there. At the same time, other settlers would arrive and others returned; it was also at this time the family of Angélica came back from Salsipuedes, since they had encountered some problems there.

The complications for Angélica and her family, as well as their movements, did not stop there. Although the re-occupation of Los Guayabos was easier than the first time, it still offered some intricate difficulties. Initially, there was a linguistic issue, as the families from the Highlands spoke Tsotsil, one of the main indigenous languages in the state, which nobody else in Los Guayabos did, and the Spanish of the newcomers was also very poor. More problematic were the recurrent conflicts that would take place, often fuelled by the wide-spread use of alcohol. Despite these problems, Los Guayabos offered an advantage that Salsipuedes could not compete with: its proximity to the river, which facilitated the irrigation of the land, thereby increasing productivity. The land was also fertile since large part of the ranch previously had not been used for agriculture. Nonetheless, one of the disadvantages of living so close to the river was the risk of floods, and it was indeed the large flood in 2007 that would destroy the house Angélica and her husband had built. The flood lead them to move again, this time to the temporary camp in Malpaso, and then to the camp on the other side of the river, which presented new challenges. As Angélica put it:

The camp was a disaster. There, we truly had serious problems. We inhabited a ruin where we couldn’t live. The septic tanks were right outside our house… and there, all that sewage floated by. You know, there are compañeras who don’t think about others. They put old clothes there, which blocked it up… that’s why all that excrement came up, and floated on top of it all. We lived through that for four, five years, we endured the smell. We asked the authorities to intervene, but they couldn’t. Only two or three months before we left, they came by, and noticed that it was clothes that the compañeras who lived higher up had put in there; we lived below them, below the ones from [Rubén] Jaramillo, who lived higher up.

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74 As one of them explained it to me, being a miliciano was much like being a soldier, only that they did not get any payment for it; the compensation that they had their eyes on was the possibility of getting land.
[...] Our children got sick… even now, one of our daughters is still sick from that time.75

Despite the precarious situation that Angélica had to face in the camp, what becomes clear when putting it into a larger perspective is how this particular move did not represent the kind of dramatic and extraordinary “uprooting” that the critics of the Sustainable Rural Cities referred to. More importantly however, and as I will explain in the following section, is that the movements that did not relate to any particular development project, in fact, had more to say about development than the implications of resettlement that worried the critics of the Rural Cities. Indeed, these movements and the way people understood them could even say quite a deal about the critique of the Rural Cities as well.

Between Los Guayabos and Cancún

As was to be expected, the movement of people would not stop with the return to Los Guayabos and other villages, which followed the cancellation of the Sustainable Rural Villa. Now, it was the oldest children of the settlers, like Eserian, Angélica’s oldest son, who would face problems finding somewhere to work, whether it were in the fields or as workers in urban areas. Deciding to leave and where to go, however, was a difficult affair despite the harsh situation in Los Guayabos. This was also clear in the case of Eserian, who had just come back from Coita, on the other side of the dam, as I started my fieldwork in Los Guayabos. In Coita (or Ocozocoautla, as it is referred to officially), he had been working as a house painter, but had come back to Los Guayabos to take care of his sick father for a time. It never became quite clear to me how it came to be that Eserian did not have any land in Los Guayabos; maybe they had sold what

75 “El campamento fue un desastre. Ahí sí fue un problema grave. Nosotros vivíamos en una ruina donde no podíamos vivir. Había registros pegaditos a la casa. Ya ve usted que hay compañeras que no tienen cuidado. Metían ropa vieja, tapaban… de ahí, todo ese excremento salía encima flotando. Nosotros lo percibimos por cuatro años, cinco años, percibíamos el aroma. Les decíamos a las autoridades que intercedieran. No podían. Hasta que por último, cuando quedaban dos-tres meses para salir, ya fueron, y se dieron cuenta de que era ropa que metían las compañeras más arriba; nosotros vivíamos abajo, los de [Rubén] Jaramillo vivían arriba. [...] y se enfermaban nuestros hijos... hasta la fecha sigue enferma una de nuestras hijas.”
they had to pay for his father’s illness. I would however work with Eserian as a dayworker (*jornalero*) in the fields of Mariano – whom I have presented in the introduction.

This job was very tough, especially as the sun started to burn. We would start before the sun rose, but by ten or eleven o’clock it was difficult to find any shade, and the temperatures would get close to 40 degrees, even in the scant shade. The toughest part of the work was “cleaning” new land: that is, cutting down the dense vegetation on a piece of land that was to be used to sow corn and other crops (and later on, at least where I worked, to keep cattle). The only tool that was used for this work was a machete, even for the smaller trees; for the bigger trees, Mariano hired a man who owned a chain saw. For a beginner, the physically demanding work was not the only problem. Not knowing where to stand when cutting down a tree, for example, could unpleasantly surprise you by being in the middle of a torrent of ants that would start biting whoever had unknowingly attacked them. After a day’s work like this, I would not be able to move for days, and had difficulties grabbing things because of the blisters that quickly popped up. The vegetation that had been cut down would be left to dry for a couple of weeks, before burning it.76 This had to be done before the first rains started, which would make it more difficult to burn it, and which would postpone the next phase: the sowing. The burning was a particularly dangerous part of the work since the fire was difficult to control. The surroundings tended to be very dry, and a sudden whiff of air could then make the fire quickly spread to a large area.

For Eserian, this was not something that he could actually do for a living for very long. The pay, 100 pesos per day, was not that bad, considering that he did not have many expenses beside his father’s medicines, but those who had land did not need to hire him every day, making his monthly earnings very small for large parts of the year. On the other hand, Eserian was well aware that he could earn much more elsewhere. While people along the river had friends or relatives who were or had been in different parts of the state, country, and even in the US, Cancún was the place that everybody was talking about during my fieldwork in Los Guayabos. As Mariano

76 The vegetation had to be dry to be able to burn it properly. At the same time, it had to be done just before the first rain fell, which was the moment to sow.
explained to me during one of the breaks while cleaning his land, people were going to Cancún because of all the gringos that were constantly visiting, which meant that there was a lot of money there. In Cancún, he told me, you could earn 300-400 pesos in one day, and doing work that was not nearly as hard as in the fields. Cancún, of course, had much more than money to offer: another advantage was that there were many beautiful gringas there. Still, the predominant ideal in Los Guayabos was hardly to live in a place like Cancún for ever. Even the children that I spent a lot of time with had figured out that the goal was rather to have a house, a TV, a motor boat, and some cattle. (These were at least the things that one of them once mentioned to me when talking about what he would buy if he got rich). In other words, places like Los Guayabos and Cancún could offer different things.

**Nowhere to go**

The importance of this division in fact struck me for the first time as I met a young woman called Ana, who I met at the improvised dock next to the road, as I was waiting for a boat to take me over to Los Guayabos. Ana appeared on the path leading down from the road, where the public transport between Malpaso and Herradura would stop, as she walked towards the dock together with her daughter who apparently had just learnt how to walk. She was visibly annoyed with something as we met, but at the time I wasn’t sure if it was because she had been walking for too long in the heat; because her daughter kept taking off her pink boots; because she had to wait at the harbour together with a man that she didn’t know, or – as I soon would find out – because her partner had just left Los Guayabos to find a job in Cancún. Just like Angélica, Ana was also from a village in Tecpatán, but had come to Los Guayabos with her parents during the occupation. After the flood, they had decided to go back to Tecpatán because of all the conflicts at the camp, but since her father had difficulties finding a job there, they had come back to Los Guayabos since the project of the Villa was over. Here, Ana had met her partner, but – just as in the case of her parents – they had a hard time getting land of their own, and this was the reason why he had left for Cancún. In the meantime, Ana was living in the house of her parents-in-law, which also was an obvious source
of frustration. It is worth adding that this kind of arrangement is common in (rural) Chiapas; as Cameras (2015) has shown, married women in the municipality of Oxchuc are considered to belong to the family of her husband. If the husband leaves to work elsewhere, she is supposed to be protected by his family, while at the same time helping out in the household of his parents. That the relationship between the wife and the husband’s family can be extremely complicated also was evident in a complex case that Cameras analysed, where the wife of a man who left Oxchuc was raped by one of his brothers. This situation became a major conflict in the family as the wife of the rapist started accusing her of having seduced him.

At the same time, this comparison shows how women could easily get the blame for any inappropriate relationship with men, as well as their very weak position for negotiating. In fact, in the case that Cameras analysed, the conflict was presented to the local authorities as a problem between the brothers, and it was also the husband of the woman that had been raped that ended up apologizing to his brother – without letting the woman have a say. The absence of a husband\textsuperscript{77} could in other words expose the wives that were left behind to very difficult situations. While I do not know if my encounter with Ana resulted in any repercussions for her, Eserian, however, would assume that I was married to Ana just because he had seen us share a boat.

Despite all the difficulties that Ana faced, she was not very keen on moving to Cancún, which otherwise could have been a possibility. In fact, Ana told me that she had an uncle who was also living in Cancún, and who had just come back to visit Los Guayabos. Ana told me about all the money that he spent during his stay, and about all the gifts that he had brought – apparently trying to present an image of himself as a successful migrant who had been in a place considered modern and cosmopolitan (cf. Gardern & Osella 2003:xvi). Despite telling me about the details of the visit, she did not appear to be too impressed by all the money you could make in Cancún. However, it was clear that she did not want to stay in Los Guayabos, at least not in the house of her parents-in-law. If life was difficult in Los Guayabos, where she had to work hard

\textsuperscript{77} It is worth mentioning that it was rather common, all along the river, that people would present themselves as married although they had not married formally.
for her husband’s family – under the detestable supervision of her mother-in-law – there was something about living off the gringos that she deeply disliked.

**Salir adelante and gringo development**

The gringos were indeed considered to be suspect in Los Guayabos. The OPEZ surely had a part in this, with its rhetoric about North American imperialism that the organization made sure all its members had heard. People in Los Guayabos were on the other hand convinced the gringos had a very twisted sexuality, and that they would do things without considering the necessities of others – much indeed like politicians were thought of. At the same time, the gringos were thought to know how to salir adelante (“move ahead”), which associated the gringo with development.

*Salir adelante*, as Hilary Dick (2010:278) has discussed, is a notion intimately tied to markers of social mobility, such as higher education and formal employment. *Salir adelante* is thus a “project of transformation” (Gardner & Osella 2003:xii), or a “will to improve” (Li 2007), which focuses on personal achievements. However, the phrase also refers to spatial mobility in a quite literal way; while it is social mobility that is referred to in the idiom, it uses a metaphor of spatial movement to do so. Furthermore, it connects to the idea of progress – which was to be found all along the Grijalva River. As Jairo had pointed out to me in Chicoasén, this idea, for example, was explicitly formulated in a slogan that found at the entrance of the tunnel in the photo that represents this chapter, and which led to Chicoasén. On a worn down painting, the CFE had formulated its overarching means and goal as: “Electricity for the Progress of Mexico”. To become a “first world nation” is also something that has marked Mexican policies for decades (Dick 2010), and the use of the first-world/third-world dichotomy is very much present in everyday conversations, together with the ideas of developed/underdeveloped countries. These kinds of dichotomies both correlate with the relationship between the United States and Mexico, but also with that

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78 Dick claims that the expression that was used where she did fieldwork was to seguir adelante, “continue forwards”, which is slightly different to the metaphor of salir adelante, which more properly could be translated as “getting ahead”.

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between the countryside and the cities, and between rich and poor people. While the distinction between Mexico and the US is not as evident here as Dick (2010) claims is the case in the small city of Uriangato (in central Mexico), along the river, there is also something to the idea of Mexico as a place of underdevelopment and corrupt politics – but of a good life – and the US as a place of development but of moral corruption.

If this kind of difference is visible in the examples that I have put forward from Los Guayabos, it was maybe even clearer in Chicoasén. Here, the migration to the United States was much more common than in Los Guayabos. An acquaintance in Chicoasén, for example, claimed that there must be some 200 people from the municipality in the US, which would correspond to almost 5% of the population. I would also meet many people who had been to the US, but that had returned. One of them was Jairo, whom we have already met in Chapter Four, although his time there was quite different than most of those who went. While the overwhelming majority would go as workers, without any permit to enter the country, Jairo was accepted to an exchange program and thus left as a high-school student. However, Jairo’s narrative about the US and Chicoasén, respectively, was clearly tainted by the wide-spread idea about the contrast between Mexico and its northern neighbour. For example, during my fieldwork, Jairo thought about moving to Canada, because, as he put it in an interview to a local newspaper, El norte de Chiapas, he felt a need “to be in a country where dreams and the aspirations are valued, and the margin of failure is less than in ours”. At the same time, in the same interview, he felt compelled to stress all the good things that he had seen when he was in the United States, as a contrast to the idea that they are “the worst” (los más malos). On several occasion, he told me about his return to Chicoasén as a moment when he understood the value of doing things together, as a family. The first day he got back, he went to his grandfather’s fields together with his parents and siblings, to pick some corn. They then ground that corn, and turned it into a dough they filled with the meat of animals that also lived on his grandfather’s ranch. Together, they had thus made tamales (see note 46, p. 113). However, this process, he claimed, was in a sense a by-product of them passing time together, talking about his trip and about what had happened in Chicoasén and so forth. Something similar would be impossible to find in the US, he argued. Not only was the production of things
different there: nobody would even come up with the idea to spend so much time on making a dish like that. Family life in more general terms, he told me, was also very different there, and did not offer the same proximity.

There was a distinction in Jairo’s narrative that is worth underlining: the differentiation between political and moral corruption. As we saw in Chapter Four, politics was basically understood as the corruption of the values of the pueblo, which in turn related to certain ideals regarding kinship and gender relations. What shows in the ideas about the gringo and kinship relations in the US, which I have discussed above, is that in this case we are dealing with an inversed relation. Here, as Jairo claimed, there would be place for dreams and aspirations, while – as I understand him – the risk of becoming poor is not as big as in Mexico. What appeared to be working in the “first world”, but not in a place like Mexico, was therefore “the country”. What had been lost there was instead the values of the family, and it thus follows that the gringos were morally corrupt. The way that they were understood to be acting indeed showed clear similarities with the way that politicians were represented along the river, as only thinking about themselves. The tension in this scheme is, in other words, very much as Dick claimed, between corrupt politics and a “healthy” family, versus a corrupt morality and a healthy country.

There are, however, important details that have to be added to this scheme. On the one hand, personal experiences would not always fit within it, as when Jairo claimed that the gringos that he had met were not “the worst”. In the same newspaper article he was interviewed for, Jairo in fact also argued against another widespread idea when he sustained that the gringos were not as racist as was commonly thought, or, to be more precise, that the racism that existed in the US could not be related to the character of the gringos. Rather, what appeared as racism could be better defined as misunderstandings, which related to “language problems” and “bad interpretations of different cultures”. On the other hand, and as we have seen in Los Guayabos, far from every movement was carried out in direct relation to this scheme. Going from Los Guayabos to Coita, for example, hardly mobilized the same radical division between home and away as the comparison between Chicoasén and the US, or between Los Guayabos and the gringo colony of Cancún. As in the case of Angélica, but also of
Ana, the question was not about choosing the best alternative, but rather picking the least worse one, or simply finding somewhere to live. Not everybody was on track to salir adelante.

The (il)legibility of movement and development desires

What shows when approaching the discussion about the relationship between migration and development from the perspective of the movement along the river in relation to the Rural Cities is how the absence of a common “terrain of struggle” (Li 1999) made certain movements politically recognisable – or “legible” (Scott 1998) – while others became illegible. To become legible in this context, and to be taken into account in the politics relating to the State, it was necessary to appear within or relate to the schemes of the contemporary form of national sovereignty, including its intimate relation with ideas about, and desires of, Order and Progress. What became illegible were, on the other hand, the actions that did not aim at, did not relate to, or did not show any desire of Order and Progress.

The movements that counted for the authors of the Master Plan of the Sustainable Rural Cities were, for example, those that crossed international borders – which related directly to the State sovereignty and its modern border politics (cf. Torpey 2000), or those that risked contributing to the growth of the shantytowns that surrounded the major Mexican cities, which in turn related to the desire of an ordered progress. Even the formulation of an effective critique of a particular development project implied choosing between recognising the need for more Progress or more Order, or else criticize the whole idea of Progress and Order, including local desires of salir adelante. This is exactly what we saw in the case of the Rural Cities. Different argumentative strategies not only left out the movements within rural areas, but also the migration to Cancún, and the United States. In this way, it was possible to formulate a more drastic image of the relocation of people who had never left their birthplaces, which, in turn, made it easier to put forward a critique of Progress as something endangering indigenous cultures that appeared as disconnected from the contemporary world. In addition, the local strategy of escaping problems, which was common in the
small movements that I have discussed, also disappeared in the critique put forward. The movements within rural areas were instead inserted into the politically recognisable claims for Order that were present in the land politics defended by the OPEZ and the EZLN respectively. However, the discussion about the Rural Cities also implied a critique of the members of the OPEZ, for having accepted the project of the Rural Cities. This project, as stressed by Wilson (2009), did not correspond to the kind of desire that a critical mind should have, and could supposedly not be inserted into any alternative project.

The movements within rural areas that I have focused on in this chapter were, on the other hand, were not very interesting from the perspective of State sovereignty, Order, Progress and their corresponding desires, and therefore remained excluded both from the plans for the Rural Cities and from the critique of them. As we have seen, the movements that many people in Los Guayabos were involved with did not have to do with the wish to salir adelante, which evidently was more common in the kind of migration referred to in the Master Plan of the Rural Cities. As already mentioned, the main objective that we have seen in the rural movements referred to in this chapter was instead to escape problems. This strategy resembles the one used by the women living in the slum of Jaipur, discussed by Unnithan-Kumar (2003), which aimed at escaping debts and the restrictive demands of their families, but also to avoid the attempts made by the State to control their bodies through medical interventions. A similar situation has also been described by Rogaly et al (2003: 307), where certain people were pushed to migrate because of their severely restricted access to local resources.

While people like Angélica and Ana did not express any desire to salir adelante, it did not on the other hand mean that they were unaware of this ideal, nor that they would try to follow it if they had the chance, as might have been the case with the Rural Villa.79 When not moving within any legible form of politics, and by not relating to the desire of salir adelante – by subscribing to it or criticizing it – their actions would, however, become illegible, and outside of the discussions about the

79 In Chapter Three, for example, I referred to a man that I interviewed, and who claimed that with the Rural Cities he would “maybe [have been] a bit better, because we would have better services, health and all.” Here, the focus was not on this city as a way to escape from problems, but as a way to be better off.
Rural Cities – and, indeed, outside of the kind of actions and desires that were also locally understood as part of the political. The kind of coherence of different development policies that could be established with reference to the ideas about the modern, sovereign State, then excluded certain things from the kind of struggles understood as political. In practice, judging from the experiences of Ana and Angélica, it was women above all who would occupy this space outside of politics. After all, and as we will see in the next chapter, development, as well as politics, is something that not only relates to the State and to sovereignty, but also to complicated ideals of gender that imply that men are those who are supposed to \textit{salir adelante}. 
7.
Threshold Masculinity
Between male autonomy and male responsibilities

Figure 35. A group of men dress up as women, or chuntáe, during the enormous Fiesta de Enero, in Chiapa de Corzo. The appearance of openly homosexual men among the chuntáe upset some of the boatmen that I worked with. Their presence evidently blurred the rather clear division that existed between men and women, and which hardly would be questioned by the carnavelesque play with gendered attributes.
Introduction

As we have seen throughout this thesis, the engagement in the different fields of conflicts about how to define specific actions morally – which is to be found at the centre of the political forms that I have described – is basically a male affair. Men headed the OPEZ, the Movimiento 16 de septiembre, and the Comité Ejidal, and the State representatives that they negotiated with were also men – at least in the most important positions. Men were furthermore the ones driving the tours and those managing the company where I worked in Chiapa de Corzo. As we will see in this chapter, this male bias of politics was not necessarily understood as a privilege, but rather as a consequence of men’s position in kinship relations. From the local reasoning about the rights and obligations of men and women of different ages, and in different relations, it is possible to conclude that the way that politics was thought of was intimately tied to the image of an unbalanced man. While the literature on masculinity has put much energy into understanding certain men’s violence against women, and against other men, what I want to draw attention to here is how this kind of dominant male is connected to the idea of politics. The ideal man, however, was not thought to be a politician, or – which turns out to be the same – a man who only thinks about his own, immediate needs. To act as a balanced man however implied switching between the two poles of masculinity, found in the ideals of the autonomous man and the responsible father.

What this chapter thus adds to the general argument of the thesis is that the experience of development along the Grijalva River was strongly mediated by the local understandings of gender, and, above all, the conflictive ideals of masculinity.

The *hogareño* and the macho

When doing fieldwork, there are certain issues that are more related to the “person” or “self” (Mauss 1985) of the researcher than others. For example, when Gutmann (1996) did his research in Mexico City, he was accompanied by his wife and their first, new-born child, which put him in many situations where the education of children, the
relationship between father and child, but also between husband and wife would constantly appear. The research that Don Kulick (1998) did with transvestite sex workers in Brazil would also have taken a very different turn had Kulick not told them that he was a homosexual (although his definition of homosexuality differed somewhat from the local understandings of the term). The immediate effect was that Kulick was located outside the circle of possible clients of those he was working with. What in turn became important during my fieldwork was that I did not have any children, although I was married. If I had not understood that before, it now became clear just how important it was to be living in a heterosexual relationship, preferably in a house owned by the couple, and to have children. Every time I paid the rent to our landlady in Chiapa de Corzo, I was reminded about the importance of having a child. I was being very selfish, she told me, as I did not consider the natural cravings for a child, which my wife supposedly would have. To my wife, she would also explain the dangers of being in a relationship with somebody without having children, as there would then not exist any natural bond connecting us, making it possible for me to leave at any time.

Just as much energy as I put into understanding what it meant to be a boatman on the Grijalva River, the people at the dock would also put into figuring out my sexual habits and preferences, but also teaching me how I should relate to my wife. On repeated occasions, both boatmen and socios, the owners or members of the cooperative, were surprised at the amount of time I spent at home, and how much I, from their perspective, was adjusting to my wife’s wishes. After having observed me for a couple of months, their conclusion, as the manager informed me, was that I was an hogareño – a low status man who spends a lot of time at home. The manager, however, took his time to kindly explain to me how I could relate to my wife in a more reasonable way, by giving his own take on the issue. “From the threshold and inwards”, he told me, “I am all theirs [suyo – of his wife and/or children]. But from the threshold and outwards, I’m all mine”.

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80 *Hogar* translates as “home”, which probably makes “homebody” the best translation of the term. *Hogareño* is similar to *mandilón*, which Gutmann (1996) used in his typology; *mandilón*, however, is understood to be a more offensive term than *hogareño*, since it referred to the apron (*mandil*), thereby connecting the person with certain tasks considered to be feminine.
This threshold morality echoed a basic tension that Peter Wade (1994) has highlighted in his work in Colombia, drawing on Whitehead’s work in the West Indies. Wade here centred his attention on the conflict between the autonomous party-goer (parrandero) and womanizer on the one hand, and the responsible man who provides the material base for his wife and children on the other – a conflict that would give rise to sometimes violent conflicts between partners. From this perspective, the manager would then warn me of the disturbing delimitations that women would try to impose on men when at home; in short, I would have to defend my autonomy.

However, I was not the only hogareño among the boatmen, the manager assured me, and called for Carlos, one of the socios, to ask if it wasn’t true that he was also an hogareño. “Of course I am”, Carlos replied. “I have four houses” – meaning that he had relationships with four women, and in other words by no means was an hogareño. In fact, a man like Carlos would instead have difficulties appearing to be trustworthy even to men, for not showing any control over his sexual urges, and particularly for failing to build a house of his own for his family. One of the boatmen even advised me to look out for Carlos, whom he said could not be trusted since he was the only socio of the company who had not managed to save enough money to build a house. The lack of a house as a moral ground for his suggestion then showed how the ideal of an independent male would not be effective without owning a house – including a wife and children. Halfway through my fieldwork, Carlos was even excluded from the circle of socios, despite being among the founders of the company, because of his economic inability to provide the means needed for the new investments in the boats. Through the lens of the boatman who had warned me about him, this was just another example of his exaggerated character: it was indeed as if Carlos did not have any threshold to cross to change perspectives and become a more balanced man.

81 Wade argued that domestic violence can emerge in these situations, in the meeting between the “irresponsible” man (from the woman’s point of view) and the “mercenary” woman (only trying to exploit men economically, from the men’s perspective). Wade also showed how this conflict occurred in a context where the most positive value for men was attached to the image of the party-going womanizers. Taking the ideal of the provider more seriously was, on the other hand, seen as a sign of weakness, although the pressure to perform the ideal of the womanizer would ease as men grow older, and it became more acceptable to spend more time at home.
Threshold masculinity: gender, kinship and politics

While the exclusion of Carlos from the group of socios had a clear economic background, the commentaries about him also implied an understanding of important moral shortcomings, which related to his one-dimensional form of masculinity – a masculinity that had gotten stuck in irresponsible hedonism. What was striking about this situation was not only how it pointed to the importance of balance, but also how the exaggerated form of masculinity would blend into the local understanding of politics, as outlined in Chapter Four. Those in politics would be criticized – just like Carlos – for being too occupied with their own interests, especially when compared to those in the collective they were thought to belong to. In this way, what the exclusion of Carlos revealed was how the local understanding of politics did not start with the State, nor with abstract ideals, but rather with behaviour connected to an unbalanced masculinity. This, in turn, indicates the importance of looking deeper into the ideas of masculinity to understand how politics was thought of, and how the different political forms were enacted along the river – and thus also to be able to perceive how development appeared. What, then, did threshold masculinity actually build on?

At its most fundamental level, the manager’s tips about an adequate conduct implied that masculinity had to be understood in relation to two distinct spheres: that of the family and that outside it. Yet, when trying to understand where the family started and ended, things already started to get complicated. The idea of the family along the river drew heavily on ideas about kinship through blood ties. However, these ties would lose much of their meaning if constant relations were not upheld (cf. Edwards & Strathern 2000:151 and 158). On the other hand, constant and close relations would often be referred to in terms of kinship, even when there were no blood ties to be traced – which had the effect that threshold politics would be introduced in these kinds of situations as well.

Soon after arriving at the company, for example, one of the socios used the idea of family to describe the kind of relationship that I was about to become part of, stressing the importance of trust between socios and workers, and the shared commitment to the company. His use of the term “family” was indeed quite ambiguous, as the boatmen and the owners, more often than not, were connected to each other
through different kinds of kinship ties. It was, however, not in this sense that he used the word; in fact, surprisingly enough he told me that he had not thought about all the kinship relations that were to be found at the company when I asked him about it. Instead, his use aimed at communicating a certain kind of relation, although his stress on trust glossed over the complications found in this “family”.

Throughout my fieldwork, an ever decreasing group of the boatmen tried to raise their salaries, be compensated for working overtime, and get written contracts where the actual sum that they earned would be stated (which would be important for them if sacked, as the compensation they were then legally entitled to depended on their formal salary). The salary that they had, the boatmen claimed, would not be enough if they wanted to save something for the future to be able to build a house and get married. The idiom of the family that the socios used would, in turn, imply that the boatmen should think more of the survival of the company, and less of their own interests: quite a contradictory discourse, since one family, that of husband, wife and children, was put against the other, that of the company. According to the socios, at the moment, it was not possible to raise the salaries because of the fierce competition, and besides, the boatmen earned much more than the legal minimum wage of 64 pesos per day; it was even slightly higher than the minimum wage that the PRD had proposed of 100 pesos. When considering the tips, the salary was not be that bad, they claimed. However, to convince the boatmen, they did not rely only on this argument. A more important argument was instead to give out “bonuses” to those who chose to put their claims aside, but they also stressed their blood ties to make the boatmen see their issue from a different perspective. The boatmen who did not accept the bonus, on the other hand, would argue that the socios were constantly trying to “apply politics” to get away from their obligations. Although these boatmen were the most skilled as guides or mechanics, and counted on kinship ties with some of the socios – which they must have thought offered them certain protection – it did not take too long before they were all fired, and so, excluded from the family of the company.

It is possible to follow Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall (1987:20-21) here, and argue that these relations, much as the English companies that they were interested in, could be “described in the language of paternalism as the dependants and
children of their father, their master, their guardian”, even though here we also see that these kinds of ties can break. The socios were indeed thought to have the obligation of looking after their boatmen, and the boatmen were also expected to show solidarity with and respect for the socios because of the kinship ties. However, the way that these hierarchical relations were described by those involved in them, more often stressed another aspect of family relations: between older and younger brothers, or between “litters” (camadas), as it was often referred to (and not only along the river). What made this term so interesting was first of all that it split up “the family” into subgroups, creating new “insides” and “outsides” within “the family”. At the same time, the term litters made the different interests of the boatmen and socios come forth as something relating to natural but complementary hierarchies, and not to the ways that labour politics is normally recognised, such as the differences between employers and employees.

These “litters” had some relation to age, but were first and foremost an important distinction that referred to different roles in the company. On one of my first days at the dock, for instance, the manager there asked one of the boatmen where he could “za-za-za”, that is, where he could see a sex worker. While the boatman understood both the question and knew the answer, he found the whole situation awkward. Rather than getting an answer to the question, what the manager got was instead a new nickname: Za-za-za. While the manager did not appear to dislike his new name, and let the boatmen use it publicly, the socios decided to sack him when they heard about it. To the socios, the public use of an offensive nickname was yet more proof of the inability of the manager to become respected by the boatmen, which they considered crucial to be able to run the everyday activities at the dock. One of the socios explained to me that offensive nicknames such as Za-za-za could only be used among people from the same litter, and those from another litter should not even know about the existence of such names. Occasionally, the socios and the manager could use offensive nicknames when talking to the boatmen (as when they referred to one of them as “Swiney” – a name that he had gotten because he supposedly would look for young male sex workers), but a boatman should never use an offensive nickname of one of the socios or the manager.
While relations of brotherhood were important for the “performance” (Butler 1990)\(^\text{82}\) of masculinity at the boat company, as implied by the term litter, they were difficult to grasp without comparing them to the way that relations between women played out. The boatmen would constantly refer to each other and to the friends of their litter as “brothers”, which then revealed a close relationship and a distinction from other litters. On the other hand, it was very rare that women used the term “sister” between themselves; personally, I never heard it being used. Instead, they called each other “friend” (amiga or amiguita). When reading this detail in the light of the division between hogareños and autonomous men, what this slight difference indicated was how the dividing line between acceptable and unacceptable forms of intimacy was much stricter for men than for women. Besides indicating a close relationship, the use of the term “brother” also introduced the incest taboo of the family into the friendship relation, signalling that the relation supposedly would not have any erotic undertones despite the physical and emotional proximity of those involved – something that was not necessary in the relations between women. The step from “friend” to “lover” would then apparently not be as far as that from “brother” to “lover” – at least ideally; during my fieldwork, I heard about a couple of boatmen who allegedly had different forms of sexual intercourse, although it was always presented as something out of bounds that had happened while they were drunk.

What this detail exemplifies is thus how men and women were moving along different moral scales – a crucial aspect to understand the threshold masculinity. While men were compared to women or homosexuals, women, on the other hand, were considered either good or bad (cf. Kosofsky 1985).\(^\text{83}\) Men’s physical intimacy could

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\(^{82}\) Judith Butler argued that a person’s gender is constantly “performed” by everybody. With this, she did not mean that there was any genuine conduct that could be contrasted by it; quite the opposite. Butler instead understood gender as “a set of free-floating attributes” that is conditioned (not determined) by discursive limits (such as the ones of homosexuality and of incest) that refer to the “hegemonic cultural discourses” – particularly to the fundamental discourse on the sexes as biologically existing in a pre-discursive realm (Butler, 1990:9 and 24-5).

\(^{83}\) In her influential study on English literature from the 18th century, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick set off from the assumption that the erotic potentialities of “homosocial” bonds – that is, relations between persons sharing the same sex – had historically been denied, particularly among men. This would have given rise to an ideal divide between the homosocial and the homosexual, and to the development of a homophobic language used to underline that divide, as well as a misogynist one to stress the distance to women.
then make them slide into female categories, while the same would not happen to women.  

This distinction is also something that is possible to conclude from different ethnographies and other academic writings about gender in Mexico. For instance, when Marcela Lagarde (2005) discussed the classification of women in Mexico, she focused on “mother-wives” (madresposas), nuns, “hookers” (putas), imprisoned and lunatics (locas). Gutmann (1994:221-22), who analysed Mexican manhood in a working class neighbourhood in Mexico City, instead centred his attention on a typology that can be related to the division between the macho and the mandilón, which corresponds to a comparison between more “manly” and more “female” men. An important detail here, for the discussion about the link between the term “brother” and homophobia, was that Gutmann implied that male homosexuals were not even considered to make it onto the scale of more or less manly conducts. While Gutmann chose to follow the classifications made by his informants, we could just as well have considered the homosexuals as being understood to have adopted a female gender. The majority of the men in Gutmann’s study, however, would claim to be “neither-machos-nor-mandilones”, thereby locating themselves on the threshold, so to speak. The ideal woman in Lagarde’s work – the mother-wife – on the other hand, was not in need of any balancing act, and was also not contrasted with the figure of the lesbian.

These scales, in turn, have to be understood in light of the difference between “male authority and female kinship” (Bear et al 2015), where womanhood, through its connection to childbirth, would unquestionably be connected to kinship through blood ties, at least to her children, while the position of the men would be more ambiguous in this sense, and require his authority to be accepted. This is again implicit in the description of threshold masculinity made by the manager. When he was at home, he

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84 A similar detail pointing in the same direction is how, in Chiapa de Corzo, men – as in the photo introducing this chapter – dress up as women (calling themselves chuntá) during the major Fiesta de enero, a three-week long carnival, while women do not dress up as men; women can in fact also dress as chuntas.

85 The interest in the intricate classifications of male homosexuality in Latin America – and not in the female form – is informative here (see for example Prieur 1996 and Kulick 1998). While Kulick concludes otherwise, his ethnography for example points to the division that is made between penetrating and being penetrated, where the first one is not considered to be a homosexual, while the second is. This division in turn goes back to ideals about sexual conduct performed by men and women respectively.
considered himself to be “all theirs” – referring to his wife and children – which indicated that he did not belong to them naturally; he did not spontaneously consider himself to be part of a “we”, but instead connected to them as an autonomous man. From this perspective, masculinity in fact appears to be in perpetual crisis: an artificial sex that has to be worked hard on to form and maintain, compared to the “natural” sex of women (cf. Chodorow, 1989; Gallirgos 1996:38-39). Popular sayings in Mexico express this idea in a straightforward way, like the one claiming that: “children of my daughter: my grandchildren. Children of my son: who knows…” The difference between male authority and female kinship can also be found in an influential book in Chiapas: The New Testament. Here, the Virgin Mary’s conception put Joseph in a difficult position, but Jesus’ whole faith in his “father” also stresses his independent role.

What is implied here is then that men and women come to occupy their places in kinship relations in very different ways, but also that the local understanding of politics in fact draws on relations within the family, through the very presence of men as fathers. When the manager expressed that, strictly speaking, he did not consider himself as part of the household, what he stressed was his autonomy, which in turn was what constituted the basic characteristic of the local understanding of politics – that is, the selfish (father) person who does not think of the collectives that he is connected to (not part of).

In fact, this is highlighted in Spanish through the use of the term pariente político (“political relative”), which is used for in-laws. The local understanding of politics thus appears where blood ties, or the performance of their equivalence, end. The very archetype of politics is indeed found in the relationship between spouses, which does not fit within the “natural” kinship hierarchies. This relation, as Penny

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86 “Hijos de mi hija, mis nietos. Hijos de mi hijo, quién sabe...”.
87 This representation of fatherhood has been overlooked in anthropological discussions in Mexico, despite the fact that its importance could easily be compared to the role of Mary’s virginity for ideas about womanhood or about the Mexican nation; see Wolf, 1958; Lagarde, 2005: 203-207.
88 Even these ideal divisions would become more complicated when taking into account the use of the (social) father’s name as the first surname (of two) of the children, which is the established practice throughout the Hispanic world (with the exception of Brazil, where the order is reversed). While the family (here: the children) is considered the natural domain of women, this practice then introduced an “artificial” link between the fathers and their children.
Harvey (1994) has also argued is the case in the Peruvian Andes, is instead characterized by disorder and desire, which takes place in a relation marked by the struggles involved in a hierarchical complementarity between male strength and authority on the one hand, and female motherhood on the other (Harvey 1994:76, 83-85). While this tension often plays out between spouses, frequently in violent ways (Harvey 1994; Wade 1994), threshold masculinity also shows that it is part of the internal struggles of men, and most likely of women. The autonomy of men always has to relate to a wife to make sense, and not become an exaggeration, as in the case of Carlos.

Having a wife and a house, as already stressed, is indeed crucial to be able to avoid scornful commentaries, and to be related to in a more respectful way. Once married (or meeting the basic expectations of marriage – that is, living and having a child together – without formalizing it through a civil or religious procedure), and once the house was constructed, these topics, however, occupied a marginal space in daily conversations between men. When women appeared in conversations as something of interest, they did so as part of other relations. Particularly the young gringas – i.e. women perceived to have lighter skin and hair, and who were assumed to come from Europe or the United States – caught the attention of men that I worked with along the river, and not only among the boatmen. During a break from the work in the field in Los Guayabos, for example, one of the men asked me about the sex life in the United States, as he perceived me to be a gringo. Noticing that my knowledge on the topic was next to non-existent, he told me that he had heard that the sex life there was very scarce. The peasants in Mezcalapa, by contrast, would have sex three times a night, he claimed, echoing widespread ideas about sexuality as part of Mexican nationalism, particularly in contrast to the United States (Gutmann 1996:217-220; Cameras 2016, also reports that men in Oxchuc, in the Highlands of Chiapas, mention the same amount of sexual intercourse expected from them). The older men would supposedly mix a drink consisting of a part of the badger and tequila to be able to keep up with the pace of this demanding sexual life. His own sexual drive supposedly made him spend 1,000 pesos

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89 Even if gringo and gringa supposedly refer to a person from the USA, the terms are used as a broad ethnic or racial category; on ideas about race, nationalism and gender in Mexico, see Wentzell 2013.
on one night out – which in that case would constitute a considerable part of his monthly income, reportedly around 4,000 pesos – because, as he said, he was very fond of the “little dolls” (muñequitas, a way to refer to young sex workers). The gringas, however, belonged to his unfulfilled sexual dreams. “What would it be like to have sex with a gringa”, he exclaimed as we talked about this issue – more as a publicly expressed fantasy than a question.

The boatmen, who met gringas on a daily basis, rather delimited their discursive interventions on the topic by referring to the physical appearance of gringas that they had found particularly attractive on their boat, or at the harbour. They often offered these women to get up on the steering deck of the boat, where the view was much better, and tried to exchange some words with them, despite often encountering serious language barriers. Returning the tour, these women had to climb down the ladder with their backs towards the harbour, which was often followed attentively by the other boatmen.

More elaborate among the boatmen were the accounts of their encounters with sex workers. Their visits to sex workers were without a doubt the favourite topic among the boatmen, and they often shared details that they found especially remarkable or humorous. For example, I listened to how they managed to get free sex, did things that the sex worker claimed not even their husbands were allowed to do (such as ejaculating in her mouth), or about how one of them had forgot to bring his money to a brothel, and had to leave the room half naked to ask for money from a “brother” of his. Another rather elaborate story concerned how a sex worker tried to fool one of them into ejaculating in her anus without mentioning the extra cost it would have, but how he saw through it and negotiated the price before doing so. Instead of 150 pesos, he paid 180; she had asked for 200 pesos when he asked her in the middle of the intercourse.

Nevertheless, the visits to sex workers appeared to be rather scarce, and definitely marked a special occasion, as showed when one of them appeared at the dock, still smelling of the sex worker’s perfume. As we walked back from the harbour after finishing work, the rest of the boatmen sniffed his chest and asked for more details, but also laughingly asked what he had told his wife when he got home with such a strong smell of perfume.
While the visits to sex workers were then something that their female partners ideally should not know about, the constant references to visits to sex workers, but also – although with much less detail – to lovers, made it difficult to believe that their partners would not at least suspect that their husbands maintained a sexual life in which they were not included. Women’s extramarital relations were, on the other hand, a topic that I never heard being discussed among the men that I worked with, but the fear of these relations seemed obvious. The unemployed partner of one of the few women working at the boat company, in reception, for example, spent his mornings outside her office. His excuse for this odd behaviour was to bring her breakfast (everybody else brought their own breakfast in plastic boxes), and to take her children, which she had from a previous marriage, to school. That did not, however, prevent her from leaving him for one of the khaki-uniformed guards from the Navy, who was around the harbour every day.

Following a well-established idea in gender studies in Mexico and Latin America at large (Wentzell 2013; Fonseca 2003; Marín 2014; Harvey 1994), men along the Grijalva River could then underline both values of sexual virility and economic power through extramarital relations, without threatening the femininity or position of their partners. On the other hand, women were not considered to be able to enhance their femininity in the same way. Rather, female infidelity would undermine the masculinity of their partners. The house – as again indicated by the manager’s comment about the moments when he was all his and all theirs respectively – was considered to be a space of the family, held together by the wife. The man would still hold the authority over domestic life by (at least ideally) being responsible for providing a house. Women’s infidelities, therefore, would question male authority, since it cast doubt upon the place of the man in the house and family; this, again, was not the case when it came to male infidelity (cf. Harvey 1994:76).

While threshold masculinity then ideally followed a set of divisions between men and women and their roles in the “family”, we can also see how the local understanding of politics fitted well into the way the relationship between husbands and wives played out. Given the intricate ideas about gendered responsibilities, it was the men, however, who were most likely to emerge as the kind of selfish actors that
were epitomized by the politician, and who did not care about their moral obligations to friends and family. In this way, men ran a great risk of entering the sphere of “politics”, but also, paradoxically enough, of losing their status as men if trying to balance their masculinity. Besides the risk of going too far in one direction or the other, one also had to take into account a series of aspects that in some way related to the position of a particular man – such as the dynamics within a certain kind of “family”, age, but also, as we will see further ahead, skin colour. When considering all of these aspects, trying to find an equilibrium between being “all mine” and “all theirs” was a much more complicated affair than the simple advice the manager had given.

**Stretching the limits**

While many of the norms referred to above are very old and widespread throughout the world, there have been important changes taking place over the last decades, which add to the ambiguous space between the inside and outside of the family described above. During my fieldwork, this was certainly apparent in Chicoasén, where even the most basic norms had been revalued to a certain degree. This was the case of the taboo regarding homosexuality, which had started to change slowly – despite many people being convinced that it had not existed before, but rather was an invention of the government to keep the birth rate down. The relatively new phenomenon of having boyfriends and girlfriends was another important change, which had become the new norm, despite certain suspicion and surprise from the older generations. This change had also implied shifts regarding the adequate conduct of young men and women, where the public exposure of their relations would not be read in the same way as when those kinds of relations were practically unthinkable. Yet another important taboo that had loosened up was the issue of separations and divorces, which also reflected general tendencies in the state. Cameras (2015) has for example shown that one of the most common reasons for women to resort to the judicial institutions in the municipality of Oxchuc was to get economic support for their children from their former partners.
At the same time, new reasons had emerged for postponing the compliance with the basic norms of marriage and children. Studying at university was one of these reasons, which had been unthinkable just one generation back. Don Gil, whom I referred to in Chapter Four, for example, told me that he was among a distinguished group of people who had managed to finish primary school, when he was about 20 years old. His two oldest children, a son and a daughter, on the other hand, had both studied at university, and his son, Jairo, would even start studying his master’s during my fieldwork; his goal, as already mentioned, was to do a PhD in Canada. While Jairo had both gotten married and had children while studying, others, like Fermín, the local president of the PRI, would mention their long studies as a reason why they had not yet gotten married (nor had children, nor a house). In the case of Fermín, his plan had first been to become a priest, which indeed would have turned the mandatory obligation of marriage into a prohibition. As he left his studies in Theology, and started Philosophy (letras), Fermín however lost his formal reasons not to marry, and some people also began thinking that he was stretching the limits too far. During my fieldwork, he had started to be associated with the embarrassing category of niñote, or niño viejo – terms that refer to an unmarried man who still lives with his mother.

Fermín, however, took the norms of marriage more seriously than many others. During my fieldwork, he had a girlfriend, Dulce, and he was thinking of asking her to marry him, but there were many doubts in the way to do so. Wasn’t she in fact too young? Would the families get along well? What would happen to his political engagements, as well as to all the time that he spent reading and writing? Dulce had repeatedly asked Fermín to leave politics altogether, since she considered it too dangerous. Besides, Jairo had also told him about the difficulties of combining family life with other interests, like his scientific ambitions; Jairo wanted to formulate a project that could re-introduce extinct species of fish into the river, but found it difficult to pursue this idea as he had a family to consider.

On the other hand, it was easy to imagine the doubts Dulce must also have had, when for example listening to the ones that Francisca, Fermín’s sister, had been concerned with before marrying – but also when talking to Dulce’s mother. What Francisca had been looking for was a passionate man, but her boyfriend never showed
that he was jealous, so then how could he really be in love with her? How passionate could Fermín then appear, considering all his doubts, and his difficulties moving the relationship forward? As time passed, and Fermín never asked her to marry him, would Dulce not just be wasting her time? Her mother thought so; she had made it clear to both of them from the very beginning that they could see each other for a month without getting married; after that, they would have to make up their minds. As almost a year had passed, and nothing had happened, she was convinced that Fermín was not serious.

What apparently never occurred to Dulce’s mother was that Fermín in a sense took the whole issue too seriously. Drawing on the existentialism of Søren Kierkegaard, who spent much time thinking about marriage without ever getting married (see above all Kierkegaard 1997 [1843] and 1988 [1845]), Fermín told me that he wanted to pass from an “aesthetic” to an “ethical” love before marrying. For Kierkegaard, marriage was an important “ethical” life choice, where the fascination with sensory pleasures was to be changed for moral duties, giving a higher form of satisfaction. At the same time, and as Fermín was well aware, Kierkegaard argued that the ethical life conflicted with the religious life – the highest stage of human existence, which was so central both for Kierkegaard and for Fermín. The emphasis on social norms that the ethical life brought with it would make self-exploration more difficult, which was necessary for the religious life. In this way, marriage would stand in the way of a faith in God so strong that it would be more important than social norms, and which could ease the existential angst that Kierkegaard had struggled with.

In other words, marriage was a complex affair for Fermín, with conflicting ideals involved, but also with economic restraints. Getting married implied considerable cost, especially for somebody with Fermín’s social position; this cost would not be easily met, taking into account the “Socratic life” that he thought himself to lead, where income had not been a priority. This could of course change if he would get a job at the new dam.
Threshold masculinity, the State, and other political forms

Given the complexities involved in the performance of masculinity, it should not come as a surprise that it was not just Carlos, Fermín and I who had problems knowing how to act adequately as men. As Alice Elliot (forthcoming) has argued in an ethnography on manhood among migrants returning to Morocco, the different ideals of masculinity would be practically impossible to fulfil for any man. Despite the apparent coherence that the manager of the boat company presented to me, he would also in fact be criticized for his odd behaviour in relation to women. The rumours among the boatmen had it that he would constantly watch porn on his computer at the office, which was thought to be offensive to the young women working there. The boatmen watched porn too, but the difference was apparently that they were part of a different litter.

The mandatory challenge, however, as the manager had explained to me, was to find a balance between the extremes that would turn him into an irresponsible and selfish man (a “politician”) or a hogareño respectively. Along the river, the much cherished masculine ideal of autonomy (or, as the manager at the boat company put it, the ideal of being “all mine”) that the writers on “hegemonic masculinity” have stressed, necessarily had to be related to a space of its negation not to be perceived as an exaggeration. At the same time, generational differences and hierarchies between men also have to be taken into account in order to know what kind of manhood was appropriate to express at particular times and in specific relations. If, for example, the conversations about sex workers could indicate the celebration of an ideal of autonomy, a house, a wife and children were just as important to lend it a positive framework. As the case of “Za-za-za” showed, this kind of balance would however not be enough to

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90 The studies of “hegemonic masculinity” tend to project an image of the ideal man, as Almeida (1996) for example has proposed, as somebody that is physically and psychologically strong, including a considerable degree of endurance (including the consumption of alcoholic beverages) and a rather violent sexuality, circling around his own pleasure. These characteristics are furthermore accompanied by misogyny and homophobia. More recently, this approach is also visible in the argument put forward by Simpson (2009), where the ideals of masculinity are explained as the fundamental reason to why men do not chose to use condom, despite the high risk of getting AIDS, and also transmitting it to their wives. It is also against this model that more practically directed proposals have been formulated – as when Hammarén & Johansson (2014) promoted a more “equalitarian” masculinity, to contrast what they perceived to be a “hierarchical” form. In Chiapas, the interest in hegemonic masculinity is particularly visible in a study of manhood among the Tojolabales, made by Martín De la Cruz (2010), although the influence of Bourdieu gives it a somewhat different turn.
be respected as a man, if one did not know how to also balance between different litters. What the ideas of threshold masculinity then show us is how masculinity along the river was less a set of ideals that were strived for, and more of an intricate balancing act.

Even when understood in this way, the adequate performance of masculinity seems impossible because of the invisibility of a single positive model. The ideal man of threshold masculinity indeed emerges as an invisible eye, watching and defining the “other” positions, much as Campbell (2000) has argued. While there were names for the hogareño and for the “politician”, there was no real name for the person balancing between the inside and the outside of the house. What became most readily visible was therefore these “other” positions of the hogareño, the macho, the niñote, and so forth. Rather than thinking that these positions fail to meet the ideal, invisible model of “hegemonic masculinity”, what I will suggest is that masculinity is performed precisely through the balance between these different labels. This is also true when looking at the way that politics was perceived through the scheme of threshold masculinity. As authors such as Matthew Gutmann (1996) have argued, the idea of Mexico could, for example, easily be read as an equivalent to the idea of the macho (see also Knutsson 2009:9 and Domínguez & Wendt 2015a:4). As Gutmann (1996:224) put it, since the 1940s “Mexico came to mean machismo and machismo to mean Mexico”. This machismo, he argued, was connected to urban workers, but also to ideals linked to “caciques, feudal lords, hacienda owners, politicians, generals, captains of industry” (Paz in Gutmann, Op. Cit:231) – and, we might add, finqueros and engineers. At the same time, he sustained, Mexican machismo should be understood as nostalgia for an order presented through the so-called “Golden Age” of Mexican cinema of the 1940s, and, furthermore, as a figure daring to challenge the historically problematic neighbour of the United States.91 What the connection between threshold masculinity and pueblo politics shows us is however that the State just as easily can come forth in a more contradictory form, like an hogareño, or indeed a homosexual. That is, although

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91 The topic of masculinity and nationalism has recently been analysed by a series of authors in Domínguez & Wendt 2015b; for a historical account of this connection in Mexico, see also Allen 2013, who analyses the role of boxing.
“politics” relates to the figure of the irresponsible and selfish father, actual politicians caught up in threshold masculinity do not necessarily have to represent a macho State.

In the chapters that I have presented this far, what has dominated is indeed the kinds of settings that more easily could be connected to the established idea of a macho State. During my fieldwork, I could also see clear examples of how the government officials in Chiapas made attempts to approach the pueblo from a position of the macho politics. As in the photo on this page, the government would claim that it was “the government of the people” (gobierno de la gente), and, as was required by the pueblo politics, stressed the importance of union by using the slogan “Chiapas unites us”. More problematic than the connection to “politics” was, however, the image of its governor that started to spread, which represented him as very feminine. When the governor appeared in public, there were just too many details that did not fit within the image of the macho “politician”. His voice was not deep enough, his handshake not firm enough, and his movements were not sufficiently manly. The colourful propaganda that covered walls throughout the state, I soon realized, was often read as a veiled version of the rainbow flag, the famous gay symbol. In the wall painting below, it was also not a macho man that came forth. The naïve – not to say childish – aesthetics, where he appeared with a (childish) cap, and surrounded by women, could easily be read through the scheme of threshold masculinity as a representation of a niño viejo. There was even a question about whether his skin colour started playing against him within this scheme.

As the rumours about him spread, the otherwise positive connotations of his fair skin that had given him his nickname, El Güero, “the fair-skinned”, now started to run as a parallel to the suspect sexuality of the gringos. Would El Güero also have this kind of weird sexuality in his blood? From the very

Figure 36. “Government of the people [gente]”. Governmental propaganda painted on a wall, depicting the governor, Manuel Velasco, together with four women.
beginning of his term, widespread rumours furthermore claimed that the person who in fact was governing the state was his mother, which indicated that – if not gay – he was definitely a niño viejo.

The rumours about El Güero were indeed so strong that they would not even go away when he got married to the soap opera actor and singer Anahí and had a child with her. Instead, videos were widely spread on social media, making fun of his feminine appearance – as when he passed over a flag during a military ceremony without showing an adequate level of strength.⁹² These kinds of details were thus taken as proof of his sexual preferences and feminine manners, and turned his marriage and his child into poor attempts to cover up his embarrassing sexual inclination – which in turn showed his unbalanced moral character and inaptitude as a governor.⁹³

What the importance of this kind of proof shows is the capacity of threshold masculinity to create apparently coherent narratives despite ambiguities and contradictions. In fact, this coherence did not necessarily have to relate to specific acts in the first place, but rather to the (political) intentions of the one making the interpretation (cf. Nencel 1996:62 and 66).⁹⁴ Fermín, for example, also had the possibility of creating a coherent narrative once married, through schemes offered by threshold masculinity. By doing a “Mexican classic” (Wentzell 2013:54), he could turn

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⁹² See for example “¡¡¡SALE A LA LUZ LA VERDAD!!! Manuel Velasco tiene otras preferencias” (“The Truth Comes Out: Manuel Velasco has other preferences”): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z3_05qhtAu0, downloaded on the 20/5/17. This video had more than five million viewings in May 2017, which is more than the whole population of Chiapas.

⁹³ A significant detail in this context is that the president of the Congress of Chiapas was detained (or kidnapped) in the municipality of Chenalhó, as he tried to solve a dispute that had emerged, due to the first female presidente municipal being elected there. As a form of humiliation, he was dressed up as a woman. See for example Aristegui Noticias, 26th of May 2016.

⁹⁴ Nencel for example proposed that women in Lima were labelled by the men in her study as pacharacas, rucas, putas and chicas de su casa – labels that she argued were springing from the dichotomy between the mother and the whore. While the chicas de su casa were understood as possible partners or spouses, and therefore considered to be able to fulfill physical desires, both the rucas and pacharacas would rather be viewed as women who provided pleasure – without therefore asking for payment, like the putas. The difference between a pacharaca and a ruca was in turn that the pacharaca was unknown to the men, while the ruca was not (Nencel 1996:67-71). It is worth adding that, in the case of the boatmen, Nencel’s basic categories could easily be translated as conceivable partners or wives, lovers and sex workers – ambiguous categories which all could be tied to the intentionality of the men. Also further elaborations within each category appeared, similar to when Nencel distinguished between the ruca and the pacharaca. One of the socios of the boat company, for example, boasted that he did not go to the “cheap prostitutes” that the boatmen went to, thereby introducing a categorization of sex workers which could follow a practically infinite scale that related to economic cost. At the same time, and maybe more importantly, he then marked a difference between the litters of the company.
his unmarried phase into a time of male autonomy and pleasure which would be succeeded by his mature, married life. Through this kind of narrative, it would then be possible to bracket ambiguities and to erase interpretations of his situation as a niño viejo.

The astonishing aspect of threshold masculinity was then something that had not appeared in the work of Elliot, Campbell, or Gutmann, nor in that of the authors of the “hegemonic masculinity”. The balancing act that the manager referred to did not, in fact, take place in conceptually invisible acts, nor on the threshold in between extremes, nor in a tense relation to a “hegemonic” set of ideals, nor indeed as an attempt to come to terms with contradictory and impossible ideals. What the balancing act of threshold masculinity instead was all about was putting together acts inside and outside of the house, so to speak. The equilibrium between these spaces emerged as the acts as an irresponsible and selfish man and as an hogareño (etc) were put together; this implied having a notion of when to be macho and when to be a hogareño, as the manager tried to explain to me. Even if the task indeed seemed impossible, it was then by combining the “possible”, albeit ambiguous, forms of masculinity that the representation of a man could come forth as coherent and successfully balancing between the house and the street – even if there would always be room for doubts and critics of these kinds of representations. Threshold masculinity, therefore, necessarily harboured a certain degree of deviance from important norms, although it would try to forget that – much indeed as the Catholic Church similarly would “forget” about the contradiction of simultaneously defending heterosexual marriages as a mandatory norm, and cherishing its inversion through rules about celibacy for the priests, monks and nuns.

Although pueblo politics and threshold masculinity then are useful concepts to understand the politics along the river, it is just as important to keep in mind that they are much more ambiguous than they are represented through their use. The many changes that these norms have undergone over the last few decades also show that the discursive point of equilibrium of threshold masculinity is never given, but is always possible to stretch, negotiate, and change.
In this way, the contradictory ideals of masculinity fitted well into the attempts to give a coherence also to development and the State: gender, in the same way as narratives about the State and about development, in other words worked as a particularly flexible political form that could be adjusted to label just about any interaction. Much as the case of development and the State, also the efforts to create a coherent masculinity – and, most likely, femininity – tried to get away from the messy reality, where things never really seemed to add up to a single narrative.
8.

A world with space for many worlds
Development and political forms along the Grijalva River

Figure 37. Electricity cables and a lamp post in Chiapa de Corzo.
Connections

Throughout the thesis, we have seen how the dams were involved in a complicated network of boats, garbage, crocodiles, spider monkeys, tourists, NGOs, floods, engineers, anglers, suicidal Chiapanecas, development workers, squatters, people trying to negotiate the terms of development projects, and those adjusting their wedding plans to the dams. Despite the range of the things on this list, they are only part of the connections that the dams are involved in. The links made through the energy that they produced, for example, is something that has not been explored, although it is a crucial aspect of the dams. In this regard, it is, on the other hand, not even enough to point to fifty potential effects, as Elizabeth Cecelski and Sandra Glatt (1982:14-16) did in a report about the benefits of electrifying the countryside in developing countries. This list included the possibility of starting to use radio and TV for education and entertainment; improving education in general (as the teachers would be able to prepare their classes even after sunset); reducing the work burden for women (since they could use new electronic devices, such as irons and washing machines); and reducing foreign exchange expenditures for other energy sources used for lighting and cooking, such as kerosene and oil. Left outside, for example, were the crucial changes brought about by the electrification of the industries, which after all was an important objective of the construction of the new dams: while the first dam was part of a multi-purpose development plan, it clearly related to the production of oil in Tabasco (Robinson 2007:107). Indeed, a by-product of the oil was in turn important for the reconfiguration of the landscape in Chicoasén, since the plastic bags competed with the local production of bags made from the cactus plant ixtle. Plastics, on the other hand, had been important for the construction of the boats that were used for the tours – boats that of course run on petrol, with motors that would have been unimaginable to build without electricity. The electricity generated by the dams were, in this way, part of a new energy paradigm that reconfigured relations all over the world (Mitchell 2011). In the Grijalva River, as in many other places around the world, this paradigm was also supported by the World Bank (Robinson 2007:22-3). At the same time, the dams constituted an attempt to centralize the control over strategic resources, thereby centralising the power of the State as well. Furthermore, they were part of a strategy
aimed at changing the shift in the relations of foreign exchange – especially with the United States – through the Import Substitution Industrialization. (This was in fact quite ironic, as the whole model of the management of the dams was a copy of a similar arrangement in the Tennessee Valley).

All of these connections then take us back to where I started this thesis, and the questions that I formulated there about how to understand the ubiquitous use of the term “development” along the Grijalva River, and whether it was possible to hold together the different things that it relates to analytically.

Development and complexity

In this thesis, I have made an effort to avoid resorting to the kinds of explanations of multiplicity that have been rather common in the studies of development, where development above all has been tied to the dynamics of capitalism, sometimes explicitly (Hart 2001; Cowen & Shenton 1996; Wilson 2009), and sometimes more implicitly (Ferguson 1990; Li 2007). I have not made this effort to be able to claim that capitalism is irrelevant along the Grijalva River. Rather, the aim of my effort has been to avoid “substitut[ing] false objects with real ones” (Mosse 2005:6). At the same time, however, I have tried to approach the question about how to understand development – and not just, as Mosse proposed, the way that development is done. In fact, Mosse’s model only permits a diversity in terms of the different perspectives that people have on the same thing – a diversity that can be aligned discursively, through translations. As Latour (1993 [1991]) has pointed out, when we, like Mosse, focus on different perspectives on things that can never be reached directly, we are working within a deep divide between representation and that which is represented. The multiplicity that Mosse referred to, in other words, only can appear on one side of the divide. In this sense, this approach “overmines” (Harman 2013) things, as it does not allow for a diverse presence outside of human perception and construction.

By stressing the question of material complexity, the effort that I have made in this thesis is thus to point to the ways in which, for example, pueblo politics is not simply a basis for a particular perspective on the development projects in Chicoasén.
Instead, I have wanted to draw attention to its ambiguous and emergent, but yet material, reality. In other words, the thesis suggests that the struggle over the development projects along the river was not only between different perspectives, but – as Nustad (2015:41) has proposed in his study of protected areas in South Africa – between conflicting realities.

It is, of course, important to recognise the kind of international connections that tend to occupy much of the literature that stresses the importance of capitalism for development, in the same way that it is informative to follow the historical formation of discourses or doctrines of development. In a similar way, it is worth stressing the differences between development projects: the intentions behind such a costly project like building a dam are, for example, not the same as those behind the community development that is supposed to compensate for it (from the perspective of the development agents involved), which in turn is different from the kind of project that aims to educate the boatmen through workshops carried out by an NGO. For comparative purposes, it is also important to highlight that development in Mexico – with its close but complicated ties to the United States – is hardly the same thing as development projects through international agencies that, for example, take place in India, not the least because of the alliances and ideals that are made. The Sustainable Rural Cities are a good example here when compared to the similar kinds of settlements constructed after an earthquake in north-western India, as discussed by Simpson (2014). While the Rural Cities evoked images of rational, urban citizens of Mexico, the corresponding settlements in India referred to competing religious congregations and NGOs, which all put forward their own ideal villages.

What I want to stress, however, is that by relying too much on specifications such as these, it is easy to reproduce the kind of map referred to by Mol & Law (2002:1), where the different development projects on the Grijalva River can be pinned down as part of a macro-structure of development and capitalism – or, as in the case of the State representatives, as a project which gives the State a coherent objective. An important effect here is that the locale loses its importance – not just in analytical terms, but also politically (cf. Latour 1988:158; Harman 2013; Harvey 2005). In other words, a map of this kind does not offer any real tools for dealing with the complex multiplicity
referred to above, and thus risks overriding certain realities that do not fit within the established macro/micro divide. It thereby shows evident difficulties when taking into account things that don’t add up, don’t unfold on a linear time-line, and are not possible to pin down on a map by referring to a single set of pre-established coordinates (Law & Mol (2002:1).

From this perspective, I have thus argued that the complexity along the Grijalva River has to involve a category that neither undermines nor overmines things (Harman 2013). To bring forth the complexity of things along the Grijalva River, I have then chosen to treat development as an “ethnographic category” (Candea et al 2015:17-9), which implies tracing it practically with the aim of drawing out an open-ended typology.

**Political forms: materiality and ambiguity**

It is the for this purpose that I have drawn out a series of “political forms”, which are helpful to analyse why things don’t add up. The concept of political forms refers to emergent material realities that both involve political narratives and recognise their material embeddedness. At the same time (and despite long lasting structures such as

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95 It is worth mentioning that the importance I have given to symbols when analysing these forms is not self-evident for the kind of “material turn” (Nustad 2015) that this study is inspired by, and less so in the post-humanist literature (see for example Descola 2014:269). The difficulty that has been addressed regarding symbols is that they turn human beings into the only acting subjects there are, and thus re-create the society/nature divide referred to in Chapter Five. While these problems are real, I have not tried to create an analytical model that builds on symbols, but rather have approached them as a “distinctly human form of representation” (Kohn 2007:5), which therefore are important to take into account to analyse human (inter)actions. This not only follows the suggestion made by Mitchell (2006 [1999]:170), that the study of phenomena as the State will fail if only focusing on material or symbolic aspects. It also follows the suggestion made by Latour (1993 [1991]), that the problem of the linguistic interest of constructivism was also the exclusive focus on human symbols. In *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence* (Latour 2013), an important part of the study is indeed to analyse human understandings of particular, material domains that the human delimitations have participated in forming. While Latour, for example, argued that the symbolic relation between map and terrain is only a way to connect two extremes of a long chain of things – as discussed in the introduction – these kinds of simplifications are common for humans. As I have already highlighted, simplifications like these are in fact an important part of the political forms, which create concrete problems for people using them, precisely because they have difficulties taking into account the kind of complex multiplicity that are part of their lives. In other words, what the concept of political forms does in this sense is to avoid the problem of the divide between reference and referent that is implicit in constructivist accounts (Latour 1993 [1991]), but also in the studies of development that address the difference between policy and practice.
the dams), the concept implies an ongoing recreation of these forms, and a considerable degree of ambiguity.

Throughout the thesis, I have, for example, drawn out the historical configuration of land politics – which has been important for the way that development appears as lived reality – and its relation to the Mexican Revolution and the Agrarian Reform. The conflict that was embedded in this political form was between substantial landowners, finqueros, and the workers that were supposed to take over the finquero’s land and turn it into a collectively held unity. In several chapters of the thesis, I have shown how this political form has effectively formed and reformed the landscape and the political strategies along the river. In the same way, I have drawn out the historical formation of the pueblo as a political category that was linked to kinship ties and a particular morality that opposed a focus on individual and personal gains. I have also shown how nature has been created as an opposition to modernity, at the same time as it has been constructed as a delimited area where conservation is supposed to take place. I have furthermore – very briefly, and without dwelling on the issue – mentioned how the houses were supposed to be designed, with a particular configuration of a family in mind – a family circling around the parents and their children, or the extended family where several families of the first kind live in houses that are interconnected. These houses were then both the result of particular relations that draw on the embodied knowledge about gender, kinship and age, and gave these relations a physical space for the struggles relating to these categories. To add a last example, I have also highlighted the importance of institutions like the trade unions for the configuration of labour conflicts, which are not as immediately visible along the river as the previous forms – although they are at least as tangible.

To understand the complexities of development in relation to these political forms, it is important to take into account their contradictions and ambiguities. While all the forms I have discussed in the thesis built on dichotomies that were expressed more or less explicitly – whether between the macho and the hogareño, pueblo and population, or Mexico and the United States – they were then never as stable in practice. The claim of nature as distinct from society, for example, was very complicated to sustain in practice, as the whole area encompassed by the nature reserve
had taken its form through human activities. The same was true for the *ejidatarios* who could suddenly, and on good grounds, find themselves being accused of trying to imitate the *finqueros*. In the same way, the representatives of the pueblo all of a sudden were politicians running for office and accepting money from the State institutions to ease up the protest that they were heading.

**Political forms and development**

When related to development, these forms could then help sort out how development appeared as lived realities to different actors, in different situations. It is worth stressing that the different chapters have not focused exclusively on explaining a particular political form. Rather, I have followed particular problems in different, interconnected sites, which, however, reveal the importance of certain political forms. We have thus seen how the land politics in Mezcalapa made development appear to be a possibility for occupying the bourgeois State, much in the same way that the large landowners’ properties had been occupied. The land politics therefore offered a framework through which the government emerged as a big landowner, or *finquero*, and there were indeed intimate relations between government and *finqueros* in practice, which made this connection more evident. The development project of the Sustainable Rural Cities could thus appear to be a job that had to be carried out by the workers of the *finca*, which were supposed to benefit them, although everybody knew that the *finquero* would never do anything that was not in his own interest. Taking control of development projects, as the Proletarian Organization Emiliano Zapata aimed to do, was then part of an attempt to take over the whole *finca*-State and turn it into the opposite: a collectively held *ejido*. The *finca*-State was, of course, expected to resist this attempt, and do its best to divide the ones involved. In other words, development at this place was experienced as part of the practices of the *finca*-State, including the way it tried to redistribute resources among its allies, but also among its enemies, in an attempt to co-opt them.

On the other hand, we have seen how development appeared in the midst of an intricate conflict between the different understandings of the pueblo, which related
to the rights to the development projects that were to come with the construction of the new dam in Chicoasén. The ways that development was understood in this conflict differed significantly between the ones involved in the negotiations for particular projects. While those moving within the relations of the pueblo tended to perceive it as a way to get a fair share of the gains that were going to be generated by the new dam, the development workers at the Federal Commission of Electricity implied that the projects they were in charge of constituted a space where the inhabitants of the municipality could achieve the correct desires. From the standpoint of the pueblo, development was, on the other hand, just part of the resources that were to be included in a fair redistribution of gains made on their land. Another crucial part was made up by the jobs at the construction site. Both when it came to the development projects, and jobs, the local experience, however, related directly to the unequal relations between formal, governmental institutions, and the informal institutions of the pueblo. This experience was clearly material, as showed, for example, in the fences put up outside of the offices of the CFE, where a large group of men constantly were waiting for the possibility to get a job, but also were echoed, for instance, in the configuration of the public meetings that took place in the municipality.

When turning to the problem of garbage in the river, what stands out here is rather the attempt to make the disparate projects fit together through a narrative about the State’s involvement in environmental protection. Development in this part of the river thus pointed to the category of development as a way to create the appearance of a coherent political project, which could also give the effect of presenting the State as a coherent entity. At the same time, the environmental politics also showed how political activism did not only take place against governmental institutions, but also within them, and even within private corporations.

The category of development, on the other hand, occupied a much more marginal place when looking at the movements of people living in Los Guayabos and Chicoasén, which became particularly evident when comparing it to the Sustainable Rural Cities Programme. While the governmental institutions presented the Sustainable Rural Cities as a classical measure to decrease poverty rates, they also made it clear it was a particular kind of poverty that was concerned: the one that threatened to make
people move to the urban centres in Mexico, or to the United States. The constant movement of people between rural settlements was, on the other hand, not part of the equation, and would only become politically recognisable when it led to the occupation of big \textit{fincas}. If a project like the Sustainable Rural City could be said to be aiming at any particular order, it clearly related to that of Mexican cities, and of other countries – and hardly at the negative effects of capitalism in any general sense, such as Comte’s Progress/Order divide would easily make us believe. These restrictions on movement, and the attempts to keep people where they were born, apparently related to the kind of idea about a connection between people, governments and companies that was found in Chicoasén, where blood ties and fair exchanges were more important than merit and productivity. In other words, certain development projects had at least an indirect relation to some version of pueblo politics.

The most contradictory and ambiguous appearance of any project that had been presented through the idiom of development was finally related to the dam – not least under the guise of the statue of the engineer and his workers, depicted in Chapter Five, celebrating its existence. While clearly communicating the grandeur of the accomplishments that could be made by autonomous men, it also showed how it lived up to the obligation of providing the support for the dependents of the State. This statue, in other words, clearly related to the intricate ideals about masculinity that were found along the river, and thus forced the construction of the dam to participate in the complicated balancing act of the threshold masculinity.

Drawing on the political forms discussed throughout the thesis, and their relations to development, we can thus elaborate a list of different ways that notions of “development” were brought into being as lived reality. Development, I have argued, can be seen:

- as a way of occupying the bourgeois State similar to how the land of large landowners had been occupied.
- as part of the \textit{finca}-State, and its attempts to co-opt and divide people who were against its order.
- as embedded in “supernatural” struggles.
- as a way to form political alliances.
- as a way to decrease poverty rates.
- as the material through which and over which conflicts and negotiations take place.
- as distinct from labour and large infrastructural projects like the dams.
- as distinct from nature.
- as a way to conserve nature.
- as consisting in large infrastructural projects like the dams.
- as embedded in labour relations.
- as a way to redistribute the gains of a particular project.
- as a way to concentrate resources among the friends and family members of a particular elite.
- as a compensation for the flooding of land.
- as a way to create a population who desire the right things.
- as an expression of the unequal relations between formal, governmental institutions, and the informal institutions of the pueblo.
- as the construction of the modern State.
- as opposed to the destructive practices of the modern State.
- as a possibility for moving forward environmental agendas from different kinds of activists.
- as corruption.
- as related to pueblo politics putting limits to the movement of people, not to upset the *citizens* of the cities, and the citizens of the countries where they were born.
- as the expression of the sovereign State.
- as an example of the accomplishments that could be made by autonomous men.
- as an example of the obligation to provide the support for the dependents of the State.

These different experiences of development, however, are not neatly separated through the different political forms referred to, but are just as connected as the different policies that linger on in the part of the river where the tours were conducted. The dams, for example, made way for land occupations by redrawing the geography of the river, which made it easier to defend certain areas from attempts to take them back, while at the same time the new river hardly offered any guarantee against floodings of these lands, which in turn became one of the reasons why the Sustainable Rural Cities Programme started. At the same time, the construction of the dams related back to political attempts to show the superiority of liberal capitalism, as well as linking to oil findings in the neighboring state of Tabasco, and their need both for electricity and a safer environment, which in turn connected to the plastic bags that changed the plantations in Chicoasén that emerged simultaneously with the first dam in the
municipality. This dam also directed particular practices among the anglers, who would fish at certain times depending on the opening and closure of the gates of the dam. On the other hand, the construction of the dam also made certain workers skilled enough to continue working for the CFE in other parts of the republic. Then we of course have the case of the spider monkeys and the crocodiles who also had a direct experience of the dams. These dams had reshaped their environment, their possibilities of finding food, and so forth, which in turn were linked both to tourists hoping to see natural wonders, and to university students using their obligation to offer their services to a company, NGO or government institution to work with issues they thought were important.

All of these situations imply particular experiences tied to the category of development, through projects explicitly proclaimed as development by State representatives, or through the far reaching connections to things which had been made in the name of development. By considering these historical chains of things, projects, animals and people, development, however, appeared and disappeared as a category – without therefore breaking the links of the chains which gave the category a material form. Consequently, it becomes quite difficult to draw any conceptual limits of development. What has been proposed in this thesis is thus that development can only be perceived by following the chains, seeing when development is used as a category to refer to parts of it, and drawing out the political forms that makes it “legible” (Scott 1998) locally. Pinning down exactly where the source of a particular act or thing referred to as development is found is, on the other hand, practically impossible, as indeed it is knowing exactly what is acting within a certain network. While human beings can be found behind the construction of the dams, they are not, for example, behind the existence of the river, nor do the people act directly through the dam. The dams themselves have part of the agency that moves things along the river, although they do not have the conscience of human beings.

What we can therefore see is how the “philosophical concept” (Candea et al 2015) of development – as used in the development plans of the different levels of government – gives an air of coherence to a range of complex, emergent realities, by putting forward the State as their “trustee” (Cowen & Shenton 1996). This kind of
documents are in other words crucial to produce the “development effect” (cf. Mitchell 2006 [1999] and 1991) – the appearance of development as existing beyond its material forms. The story, however, does not end with the attempts to reduce complexity, or the struggles against those attempts, as it so often has in the studies of development. What we have seen throughout this thesis by treating development as an “ethnographic category” (Candea et al 2015) is instead how the State participates in giving material forms to this complexity, together with the people involved in the different projects. While the initiatives for the kinds of projects I have discussed in this thesis are presented as coming from the State, by paying attention to the problems that are addressed through these projects, it is furthermore evident that even these projects were part of the political forms I have discussed. In other words, the development projects we have dealt with came about within the ambiguous and always local networks of things, ideas, people and other beings that made up the different political forms I have presented.

A world with space for many worlds

The contribution of this thesis is thus its conveyance of the complex multiplicity where development appears, which has been achieved by focusing on the materiality of a range of political forms found along it. Approaching development from this perspective gives a somewhat different understanding of development than is the case when following it as a discourse, through the institutions made in its name, or through the differences between policies and practices.

By using this approach, we can conclude that the development narratives that try to order the kind of complex multiplicity found along the Grijalva River are not as powerful as they often have been represented in the literature on development. The same kinds of difficulties, however, face the political forms that in one way or another connect to the things framed by development narratives, which also try to align complex networks of things, people, beings and ideals. What becomes apparent when involving the materiality of the river in the discussion about development, is thus not only that it becomes evident how the category relates to different forms of material
politics (cf. Knox & Huse 2015:12), but also how the references to different forms imply their own particular difficulties constructing coherent worlds.

With this, the thesis also implies a modest, political contribution that I would like to stress. On the one hand, it makes the complex multiplicity of worlds legible, and thus easier to insert into political discussions. On the other hand, it reminds us about how the truths that are formulated through the different political forms are “partial perspectives” (Haraway 1991), which co-exist in a given space. In this sense, the thesis addresses an ideal formulated by the EZLN of constructing “a world with space for many worlds” (EZLN 1996). What I have sought to do throughout the thesis, is, in this respect, to extend this ideal to objects and non-human beings, while simultaneously pointing to the complexities of the worlds that are visible in the different political forms referred to.
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