

Doctoral Dissertation

**Organised Distrust and Indigenous Identity: Maintaining Self-
Determination in Cherán, Mexico
(Summary)**

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There is an extensive scholarship on indigenous self-determination within liberal democracies in two main directions. The first suspects or points out the weaknesses of the indigenous self-determination recognised in the liberal frameworks. The other spectrum explores concrete forms of resistance, negotiations, or strategies used by indigenous peoples to manifest or expand their self-determination within a liberal system. This study takes the second direction with a case study of Cherán, an indigenous community of Mexico. Cherán is a municipality, that until 2011 had a government based on an electoral democracy with processes of representation by political parties. On April 15, 2011, Cherán took arms to defend their life and territory. The uprising was against organised criminal groups whose business was the illegal logging and extortion in the region. What started as a mere act of self-defence became a broader social movement for the recognition of its self-determination. The goal was legally achieved on November 2, 2011, through a federal court ruling. At breakneck speed, Cherán moved from electoral democracy to a vague indigenous democracy whose nature and mechanisms were not precise for the community itself. Nine years after the court ruling, Cherán continues with a trial and error process of self-governance.

This research focuses on the mechanisms and practices under which Cherán maintains and operates self-determination. Through fieldwork along with a historical analysis to contextualise the observations, this study found out three pillars that maintain the self-determination of Cherán. The first it is organised distrust as a practice. Although distrust has a negative connotation, it can be a positive democratic practice as a check and balance mechanism. The second foundational element is indigenous identity conceived as a territorialisation process. The creation or expansion of political spaces (territorialisation) for self-determination needs to express ethnicity. This is where ethnic identity and territory come together. Cherán is in a continuous process of re-creation and expansion of

its indigenous identity. And the third pillar is the public assemblies known as *asambleas de barrio*. Cherán replaced an electoral democracy with a direct democracy practiced by its people through those public assemblies that legitimise and rationalise the first two pillars. Although Cherán keeps a discourse of indigenous rebellion against the status quo, the liberalism influenced its direct democracy.