

## Neozapatismo and Autonomy\*

I want to start with the present, go back to the past for a few moments, then return to the present and examine it again in the light of that past.

Today, neozapatismo must be a central focus of any attempt to evaluate the question of possible autonomy. Not only has the Zapatista movement survived despite two serious military efforts to wipe it out (January 1994, February 1995) and years of state counterinsurgency operations (including murderous paramilitary violence) but it has also successfully carried out a whole series of innovative restructurings in its own communities. Elsewhere in the world, and not just in Oaxaca or the rest of Mexico, many other autonomous movements and projects - some newly launched, some thriving, some faltering, some threatened with annihilation - have been inspired by what the Zapatistas have accomplished.

For all of these movements and projects - including those of the Zapatistas - one of their most common and serious weaknesses has been their isolation from each other and from other struggles. Breaking out of that isolation requires making connections with other efforts in other places and creating networks of solidarity and mutual aid. When the EZLN first came out of forests and invaded cities in January 1994 they were few and they were isolated. The heavy military counterattack (some 15,000 troops, armored vehicles and bombers) threatened to wipe them out. Only the mobilization of hundreds of thousands demanding a political rather than a military solution from the government made their survival possible. As time revealed that the government's pretense at political negotiation was only a public relations ploy masking a counterinsurgency strategy of repression, again and again it was the mobilization of people throughout Mexico and around the world that supported both their continued survival and their ability to discuss and implement reforms within their communities. That mobilization was not sufficient - it complemented but did not replace the Zapatistas' own efforts - but it does seem to have been necessary, to prevent even more brutal and bloodier repression. How the Zapatistas were able to break out of their isolation, build networks and retain them, therefore, has to be a key issue in any attempt to draw lessons from their experience.

Yesterday, Guiomar Rovira analyzed how the *rapid dissemination of information* by journalists and others, through a variety of media, including the Internet, played a central role in the mobilization of the solidarity and support for the Zapatistas that helped them survive and continue to elaborate autonomous approaches to self-organization. We also know that not only the dissemination of information but also the *spread of discussion about tactics and strategy* in those same networks circulated the efforts at solidarity and the mobilization of support: from demonstrations against the Mexican government around the world to the arrival of international observers and material aid to the rebellious communities. Moreover, we also know that those networks not only facilitated the organization of the Continental and Intercontinental Encounters against Neoliberalism and for Humanity in the spring and summer of 1996 and the Second Intercontinental Encounter in Spain in 1997 but led to the formation of Peoples' Global Action and the first Global Action Days against the World Trade Organization (WTO) in Geneva in

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1998. Those beginnings led, in turn, to the subsequent Battle of Seattle and the emergence of Indymedia in 1999 and the many demonstrations against the WTO, the IMF, the World Bank, and the G8 that followed in places such as Davos, Prague and Genoa, i.e., a global movement contesting the capitalist neoliberal reorganization of the world.

The importance of these developments cannot be overestimated. Never before in history have we seen anything like them. Never before has there been such intense and interconnected opposition to capitalism. Capitalism has always been resisted and opposed but never before have so many moments of resistance and opposition been linked in the ways achieved during the last ten years.

What has been the role of neozapatismo - born in the fires of indigenous struggle in one small area of Mexico - in these developments? It wasn't just the justice or valor of the Zapatistas' struggles, there have been many others as just and as valiant, including some far larger, e.g., across the border from Chiapas in Guatemala. It wasn't just the circulation of information, or even of discussion, those things happened in opposition to NAFTA and on a world scale in opposition to the First Gulf War. Clearly one thing that was new, one thing that had been missing from previous situations was the way the Zapatista message reverberated and resonated around the world, provoking action where previous knowledge of other cases of injustice and valiant rebellion had only provoked sympathy.

But why did *their* message resonate? It was not just their spokesperson Subcomandante Marcos' intellectual, literary and rhetorical gifts - though they certainly helped. The real reason for the resonance, it seems to me, was because the message spoke to common concrete concerns in ways previous messages had not. Whereas cries for help from many earlier struggles had often provoked little action, this time the story being told sounded all too familiar to be ignored. The Zapatistas may have been one more in a long history of indigenous struggles, but what they were struggling against was no longer just local repression but policies that had become general and all too familiar around the world. No longer did capitalist policy makers employ one kind of strategy here, and another there, so that those in struggle here had difficulty identifying with those in struggle there. As the 20<sup>th</sup> Century drew to a close similar strategies were being wielded against people everywhere and the Zapatistas recognized this emerging homogeneity and spoke of it in ways that others could understand.

### **From Imperialist & Colonial Hierarchy to the post-WWII Era**

Before, for a very long time, there was no such homogeneity. This was obvious in the days of imperial empires where the people in colonies were treated quite differently than the people in the colonizing countries. Most, in both places, were exploited, of course, but the modes of exploitation, levels of productivity, wage and income hierarchies were quite different. Imperial hierarchies tended to concentrate more highly productive manufacturing industry and higher wages at home and lower productivity agriculture and mining and lower wages in the colonies. Racism, patriarchy and ethnic discrimination often rationalized the brutality needed to impose the hierarchy and keep colonial majorities abroad on the bottom. The overall higher level of productivity achieved through colonization also made it possible to pay the higher wages in the "home" country and construct an imperial wage and income hierarchy as a whole. The theorists of "dependency" tended to dichotomize this structure in terms of a rich "center" that exploited a

poor "periphery" but in reality people were being exploited at every level, only some won higher wages and standards of living and others saw theirs reduced.

Even after end of most colonialism, however, when national liberation struggles bore fruit and formal colonial Powers were expelled in the years following World War II, both the existing international hierarchy and the radical difference between policies implemented by capital in the "First" or industrialized world, and those judged appropriate for the new "Third" or "underdeveloped" ex-colonial world continued.

On the one hand, the Keynesian solution to the Great Depression adapted to the new wave of industrial worker struggles that exploded in the 1920s and 1930s, reworked capitalist development in the First World around collective bargaining, rising wages, welfare and state support for technological change (to increase productivity to pay for the higher wages). In those areas, rising wages for some and welfare expenditures for others were seen through the optic of "macroeconomics" as central positive elements in "aggregate demand" that would induce capitalist investment and spur growth.

There were, of course, local hierarchies, with waged income generally exceeding unwaged welfare payments and wage growth limited by frequent capitalist recourse to new sources of labor, , e.g., recent rural-urban black immigrants or Mexican labor in the United States, West Indian or South Asian immigrants in Britain, North or West African immigrants in France.

On the other hand, in the "Third World" policy makers still reasoned, more often than not, in terms of zero-sum games, "development economics" and "growth models" - and sought to minimize wages and maximize exploitation, savings and profits to generate investment through repressive labor practices, the absence of welfare and such mechanisms as intentional inflation to redistribute value from fixed-wage workers to the business owners of the commodities whose prices were rising. Such economic policies were complemented by the "modernization" theories of political science and widespread institution, elite and nation building designed to replace the old colonial structures of command with new "modern", i.e., neocolonial, ones. Something similar was taking place within the "Second World" of Soviet-dominated countries where continuing industrialization in Russia was facilitated by more intense exploitation of workers in other "socialist" republics and in China where peasants were being squeezed to generate the surplus necessary to finance the build-up of manufacturing industry.

The reorganization of the international capitalist hierarchy from the colonial to the ex-colonial period was both a response to struggles against the old organization and an effort to cope with new ones. Britain may have pulled out of places like the South Asian subcontinent or Nigeria, just as France pulled out (well, was thrown out) of places like Vietnam and Algeria, but struggles in those places continued (sometimes quite obviously as in Korea where US government forces replaced the Japanese, or Vietnam where they replaced the French). As a plethora of "post-colonial" studies have amply demonstrated, the end of formal colonialism by no means meant the end of colonial-type social relations or the struggles that had grown up against them.

As a result, struggles against exploitation, alienation and repression multiplied and to some extent circulated, both within the First, Second and Third Worlds and among them - through

awareness and empathy but also through multinational investment and trade. Capitalists always tend to invest in areas of high profitability and to abandon those of lower profitability. That is to say: they flee from stronger workers to exploit weaker ones, or to exploit weaker ones in order to make it possible to make concessions to stronger ones. The resulting changes in patterns of investment produce changing patterns of production and trade and thus changing patterns of struggle as well, e.g., Western investment in South Africa led to an internationalization of the struggle against apartheid in that country. Foreign aid, on the other hand, whether deployed by Western Powers or Eastern ones, tended to rush to areas of intense conflict, either to counter or support local struggles but creating another link between struggles at home and those abroad, e.g., US aid - military and economic - to the government of South Vietnam led to an intensified anti-war movement all across North America and beyond. Conflict also circulated through the movement of those in struggle, whether from countryside to city or from one country to another (and often back again). So while American, British, French (or even Soviet) planners often imported cheaper foreign labor (to limit the growth of local wages), the multinational workers who came (often autonomously in violation of capital's rules) not only brought their experience of struggle with them - creating ethnic communities of mutual aid - but in interaction with local labor and new production relationships learned new forms of struggle (which they often took back home).

### **The Crisis of the post-WWII Global Capitalist Hierarchy**

For some years – almost a quarter of a century - these conflicts, for the most part, proved manageable, but in the end they tore the post-WWII order apart. In the First World struggles of the unwaged buttressed those of the waged and severed the connection between wage and productivity growth upon which the upper end of the international income hierarchy had been based. In the Third World, struggles by both unwaged peasants and waged industrial workers disrupted the ability of multinational corporations to pit them against better paid workers in the First World. In the Second World of the Sino-Soviet axis, the power of covert resistance against police-state repression undermined the state planning of exploitation. The withdrawal of imagination and creativity from the state sabotaged its ability to elaborate technological solutions to its political problems via Keynesian-style concessions in both countryside and cities. In the late 1960s and early 1970s struggle-induced crisis spread like wildfire across the capitalist world, West and East.

### **Counterattack and the Rise of Neoliberalism**

The capitalist response was a halting and often ad-hoc series of moves: abandoning Bretton Woods and fixed exchange rates, using food and energy inflation against real wages, fear of limited nuclear war (presaging current efforts to use fear of terrorism), a crackdown on immigrant workers, dramatic hikes in interest rates and debt service demands, and finally global depression with falling trade and rising unemployment in the early 1980s. In the First World, Keynesian macroeconomics was replaced first by monetarism (the tight money attack on inflation and behind inflation, wages) and then supply-side economics (the direct attack on labor unions, high wages, welfare payments of all kinds, and entitlements such as social security coupled with deregulation and privatization). These shifts were all designed to shift income flows from wages to profits, from consumption to investment - in other words, to shift the

balance of power back toward capital. At the same time, a conservative "social agenda" was pursued to restore patriarchal authority and discipline women and children by wiping out abortion rights, imposing standardize testing in schools and shifting student financial aid from grants to loans.

In the Third World, and then in the old Second World after the Fall of the Wall, the dismemberment of the Soviet Empire, and the crushing of the pro-democracy movement in China, capitalist initiatives took the form of massive debt crisis, the implementation of austerity and wide-spread privatization of state firms - sold off to private business to slash wages and benefits and increase profits - and the opening of both trade and capital flows to unregulated multinational corporate decisions, e.g., "free trade" rules, institutionalized in regional arrangements like the European Union or the North American Free Trade Agreement or globally in the WTO. All this was rationalized with a refurbished 19<sup>th</sup> Century ideology of market worship. In Latin America this combination of policies and ideology was soon given a proper title: Neoliberalism.

As these policies were increasingly implemented, North and South, East and West, the differences between the theories and policies applied in industrialized countries and those applied in so-called underdeveloped or developing countries disappeared. First brazenly implemented in Latin America during the debt crisis of the 1980s, then even more viciously applied in Eastern Europe, Russia and the various ex-socialist republics in the 1990s, and finally piece-meal and to varying degrees within the industrialized countries themselves in the same period, a new capitalist world order was crafted - still with a nasty hierarchy of waged and unwaged, rich and poor, less polluted and more polluted, etc., but being shaped with a much more homogenized set of theories, strategies and policies.

### **Zapatismo versus Neoliberalism**

Both the existence of those more homogenized theories and policies and the clear Zapatista grasp of them made their discourse against neoliberalism in Mexico resonate with others involved in struggle against similar policies elsewhere in the world. Discussion at the Continental Encounters against Neoliberalism and for Humanity in the spring of 1996 quickly made it clear that in England neoliberalism had the face of Thatcherism, in the United States the guise of Reaganomics and so on. The capitalists themselves, in the generalization of their theories and policies, created the possibility that the Zapatista "One No!" would echo around the world and galvanize people with many different "Yes's!!" Global capital launched the Fourth World War to crush or subordinate our struggles; it is up to us to win that war and free ourselves once and for all.

Some are confronting this new situation with familiar, but stale and unappealing - because of past failures - theoretical and political paradigms. Orthodox Marxists with their "working class party" to synthesize diverse oppositional currents make up one example. Anarchists who only repeat their mantra of "smashing the state" - presumably at both national and supranational levels constitute another.

One new theorization of this new capitalist homogeneity which has sought to ground a more innovative approach to organization has been Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's concept of post-imperialist "Empire" - a shift in sovereignty that corresponds to the multinational corporate subordination of the nation state to the maintenance of a world in which capital can move freely to reorganize itself to counter changing patterns and intensities of many different kinds of struggle. They, and others, have sought to grasp that diversity of opposition and affirmation, that combination of "One No!, Many Yes's!!" in terms of Spinoza's constitutive, world-reordering "multitude". Unfortunately, the leap to organizational proposals has been hesitant and vague at best.

But whatever theoretical approach you decide to use, the basic point is to recognize two things as the basis for organizing: first, the existence of, and therefore the ability to point to, a common enemy and second, the possibility of diverse autonomous projects being complementary in their struggles against that common enemy at the same time that they construct the future along diverse paths. In earlier times, the commonality of the enemy was not so apparent, given the diversity of its means and methods. Today the unique, neoliberal face of capitalism is recognizable to more and more people. Political organizing must, of course, continue to sketch its features so that it will, eventually, be recognizable to all. But, thanks to capital itself, and the vivid prose of the Zapatistas, that's the easy part.

### **The Sixth, the Other Campaign and the Search for a New Politics**

The hard part remains: imagining and constructing ways to achieve complementarity among diverse autonomous struggles, i.e., the politics of our own movement of movements. Our struggles for autonomous forms of life are always elaborated in particular places, among particular sets of relationships and at particular points in the international hierarchy of income and power that capital has imposed on our world. Our struggles are not automatically complementary, indeed they are often contradictory, or indifferent, and therefore isolated from one another.

One very partial solution has been joint action against the common enemy by representatives of many, many different struggles. This has the approach of international mobilizations that have brought tens of thousands of protestors into the streets against the WTO, the IMF and World Bank and the G8. Representatives of diverse struggles have stood shoulder to shoulder, quite literally, against these institutions of neoliberal capitalism. Success in such endeavors has been found partly in whatever degree of disruption has been achieved and partly in the inevitable, informal networking that has taken place prior to and during such protests. These gatherings have overcome isolation, at least momentarily, and not only given participants an acute sense of connectedness with others in struggle but laid the groundwork, through networking, for future common actions. For these reasons alone, such mobilizations have been fruitful.

On the other hand, participation in such mobilizations is both irregular and expensive (in both monetary and human terms) and despite communication ahead of time for organizing, and discussion afterwards for evaluation, actual gains in terms of disrupting capitalist planning or thwarting neoliberal strategies have been minimal. At the moment, such forms of joint struggle seem to have peaked in the summer of 2001 in Genoa, Italy when over 300,000 people protested

the G8 and their neoliberal policies. Despite widespread continued resistance, and multiplying autonomous initiatives, there have been no such massive gatherings in the last five years.

We have been going through a very necessary period of reassessment and exploration of alternative ways to proceed. Now what? Or in Chernechevsky and Lenin's classic formulation "What is to be Done?" next. This is the question that was posed by the Zapatistas' Sixth Declaration of the Lacandona in the summer of 2005 and this is the question to which we must all seek answers. As is typical of their ways, "asking as they walk", the Zapatistas did not offer a final answer to this question, only a proposal for one step in searching for an answer (or for a collection of complementary answers). They proposed changing the terrain of discussion (away from the formal electoral spectacle) and then set about organizing that change, first through a series of meetings with diverse people in struggle in Mexico and then through their "Other Campaign".

The Other Campaign, as it wound its way through Mexico from Chiapas to the northern border where it met with those from "the other side", effectively created, as it went, new terrains of discussion, of listening and of speaking, of the exchange of experience and of reflection on the past, present and possible futures. As has been typical of Zapatista encounters, no unified program was proposed by the organizers or adopted by the many, many discussants in those dozens and dozens of meetings. But the whole process constituted a dramatic political act, far more dramatic although less spectacular than the formal presidential elections with all their fraud and ex-post contestation by AMLO and the PRD. Not only do I know of no other example of such a nation-wide campaign of grassroots discussion and sharing of experience and ideas, but I do not know, unfortunately, any other group besides the Zapatistas with both the power of convocation to carry out such a campaign and the interest in doing so.

The Other Campaign's criticism of and refusal to be drawn into the electoral arena, either in supporting the PRD before the elections, or in protesting against PANista-PRIista fraud afterwards, was highly controversial and infuriated a great many who have dedicated themselves to struggle on that terrain. Yet, as events have unfolded since the elections, from the vicious state violence in Atenco, through the popular uprising in Oaxaca, to repression in that state, the bankruptcy of the professional political parties, including the PRD, continues to be demonstrated as they either lag far behind, or participate in the repression of those in struggle at the grassroots.

Phase One of the Other Campaign is now over, another phase is beginning. That phase will include a new Intercontinental Encounter in Chiapas in the summer of 2007 - one in which, I suspect, the Zapatistas will share with comrades from around the world their experience and the lessons they have drawn from their many discussions in Mexico. What the Zapatistas have organized needs to be replicated, in one form or another, around the world. We need to be engaging - locally and globally - in the same kinds of discussion, sharing experience, evaluating the successes and limitations of past efforts and ideas about what to do next.

And to the question of "what to do next?" there is no simple answer. For if we are really proposing to build new worlds we are not just talking about finding other ways of doing politics, we are talking about the reorganization of all of society. While the possibility of global discussion and the search for complementary strategies may be a function of capitalist

globalization, it also means the possibility of discussing, comparing and learning from alternative autonomous projects of reorganization of every aspect of life, e.g., ways of growing and consuming food, making textiles and clothing, how we house ourselves, manufacture items we want, the way we take care of our health, our bodies and their interrelationships, the way we build and use computers, the ways we play, the relationships in our families, the ways we learn, the ways we repair the damage done to the land, the oceans, the atmosphere and ourselves. There is already a multiplicity of interesting, alternative approaches to all these things. There are already coordinated efforts to change many of these things simultaneously, as in Zapatista and other indigenous communities. Innovations such as the Good Government Councils or APPO's are not models to mimic but small scale examples of the concrete reconstruction of social, economic and political relationships.

Local situations are already materially interlocked, both by the circuits of capital and by our efforts. Some interlockages can, and should be broken, e.g., Mexico does not need US government subsidized corn grown in Iowa for its tortillas. Some should be reconfigured, .e.g., shifts from "free" trade to fair trade that excludes exploitative middlemen and is geared to meeting the needs of communities rather than profit. To achieve the power to force such reconfigurations we need to find ways to reorganize our own regional and international linkages and for that we need exactly the kind of discussions organized by the Other Campaign, but at a global level. We need, in short, a Global Other Campaign. Instead of plowing our political energies into formal electoral politics - as many in Mexico did in 2006 and as many people in the United States did in the mid-term elections of 2006 and have been urged to do by professional politicians during the long run-up to the 2008 presidential elections - we need to be creating, as the Zapatistas have been doing, new terrains of very different kinds of discussion in order to find ways to fight outside, and against, the electoral straightjacket in which capital seeks to keep us bound.

For those of us in the United States, the parallels of the current situation with those of the recent Mexican past are disturbingly close. Existing repressive regimes - in Mexico first those of the PRI and then that of the PAN and in the US the administration of George W. Bush - provide oppositional politicians (the PRD in Mexico and the Democrats in the US) leverage to frighten us into backing them in the hopes that if elected they won't be as repressive and might even, if we're lucky and if circumstances permit, marginally reduce the repression and improve the services available to us. But even if they win, past experience demonstrates that the odds of improvement are themselves marginal and along the way they succeed in draining whatever energy and hope we have right back into the pseudo-democratic political structures which have distracted us for so long from imagining what real democracy could be like and from constructing new approaches to autonomous control over our own lives. Somehow, thousands of people in Zapatista communities have been able to free themselves of these distractions and illusions and employ their energy and hopes in more fruitful ways; we need to learn from what they have achieved and figure out how to accomplish something similar ourselves.

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