

Zapatismo in the Movement of Movements

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ABSTRACT *Peter Rosset, María Elena Martínez-Torres and Luis Hernández-Navarro argue that the Zapatista uprising in Chiapas proved to be a key turning point and re-awakening for the global Left, or perhaps more accurately, the figurative birth of the movement that replaced the 'old Left.' The Zapatistas gave the new movements new forms and more inclusive methods and ideologies of struggle. These were the forms, methods and ideologies with roots in the history of subaltern indigenous communities deep in the Lacandón jungle of Southeastern Mexico.*

KEYWORDS *global justice movement; Internet; Zapatistas; Chiapas; globalization; neo-liberalism*

Foreshadowing

The New Year's Zapatista uprising in Chiapas, Mexico was a shot heard around the world, with at least two far reaching impacts. First, the rebellion has been widely read as the first organized cry of Basta! by the dispossessed of the New World Order. And many think that it will not be the last... Second, the Zapatista revolutionary strategy, emphasizing civil society and rejecting vanguardism, together with their initial success, is bound to influence progressive thinking everywhere.

Today we find both a figurative North and a South within each nation. Whether of the old First or Third Worlds, in each country we face increasing polarization between rich and poor... We now have two Americas [in the USA]. We also have two Mexico's – the nouveau riche Mexico and the Mexico of the working class and the peasant poor [the Zapatistas speak of the Mexico of 'above,' and the Mexico of 'below']. This same pattern is being repeated worldwide – witness homelessness and unemployment in Germany and Denmark... or the fancy cars and high tech electronics of Guatemala City, Lagos or Manila, while the poor in these countries are as bad or worse off than before.

Given this new reality someone from the Global South was bound, sooner or later, to interrupt the 1990s reverie of triumphant western capitalism. Though the Los Angeles riots may have been such an interruption, they were not widely seen as such. The Zapatista rebellion on the other hand, which coincided with the implementation of NAFTA, a powerful symbol of the New World Order, is seen as the first uprising against global restructuring...

What will the future bring? Will the rebellion in Chiapas... mark a watershed in recent history, the figurative end of the neo-liberal decade?... Does the novel ideology and strategy of the EZLN mark a shift away from the recent trend towards ethnic nationalism among armed movements? Does the Zapatista rebellion mean that recent announcements of the death of the... Left in Latin America have been premature, and that indeed, we may see more uprisings against the wasteland that free market ideology has created in the Global South? What we can be sure of however, is that the Zapatistas have managed to awaken the world's progressive forces from the lethargy and depression brought on by the

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collapse of the socialist bloc and the apparent triumph of neo-liberalism and free trade ideology. And for that we can be thankful (Rosset, 1994).

The new century: the globalized and the globalizers

The new century was born under the sign of confrontation between the globalized and the globalizers. Neo-liberalism had profoundly changed the global organization of production, the nature of national states and the social fabric of communities, and had modified social identities, spurred a new wave of South–North migration, and altered the mechanisms of political representation. In response to these changes, a new subject of transformation arose, variously called the ‘people of Seattle,’ the alter-mundistas or alter-globalists, the anti-globalization movement, and finally, the ‘movement of movements.’ They have also been called the ‘neo-Zapatistas,’ because of the profound boost – and ideological framework – given by the rebellion in Chiapas.

Four dates mark the start of this century. The first was 9 November 1989, with the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the symbolic end of ‘actually-existing socialism.’¹ The second was the Zapatista uprising on 1 January 1994, which marked the beginning of a new cycle of struggles of resistance. The third was 30 November 1999, the explosion of the revolt of the globalized in Seattle. And finally, 11 September 2001, the beginning of a cycle of ‘justified’ planetary reorganization through fear and war.

These events are profoundly inter-related. The fall of the socialist bloc, and the apparently unstoppable rise of neo-liberalism, represented a powerful blow to the Left around the world, including those who had criticized those regimes as authoritarian and bureaucratic, far from socialist ideals. We were left, at least temporarily, without a compass, without a reference point, condemned to move on the margins of the ‘end of history,’ far from the Left’s historic emancipatory vocation.

The Zapatistas gave us new hope. The Zapatistas helped us (re)discover our collective history, both past and future, precisely at the ‘end of history.’ The rebels who rose up in arms in January of 1994 announced a new resistance to the world, and

two years later convened the first global gathering of the new resistance, the Inter-Continental Encounter Against Neo-Liberalism and for Humanity. Members of old, new, and other Lefts, anarchists, indigenous peoples, peasant organizers, radical environmentalists, intellectuals, first-world farmers, unionists, gays, NGOs, feminists, punks, human rights activists, and young and not-so-young people, came together from Latin America, the United States, Canada, Europe, Asia and Africa, in non-violent protest against the new Babylon. A year later, with less impact, a second meeting was held in Spain.

The meetings became benchmarks in the formation of the global justice movement. Many trace at least one genealogical line from this great encounter in the jungle to the great ‘coming out party’ of global resistance in Seattle – announced by the Mexican rebels – but carried out by transnational coalitions and alliances against transnational corporate domination, that had been gestating for decades.

Over the next few years, the growing discontent, protest and resistance against dominant globalization contributed to the crisis of legitimacy of the model, which together with multiple other dimensions of its crisis ably outlined by Walden Bello, led to what Pablo González Casanova has called the latest phase of capitalism, ‘war neo-liberalism,’ with its symbolic beginning on 11 September 2001. This, in turn, is giving rise to the global anti-war movement as part of the movement of movements.

The contribution of Zapatismo

For Zapatismo, ‘modern globalization, or neo-liberalism as a world system, should be understood as a new war of conquest.’ The end of the Cold War – what the Zapatistas call the Third World War – does not imply that we have achieved stability under the hegemony of the victor. Yes, there was a loser, but it is not clear who the victor is. Out of the defeat of the socialist camp came new markets without owners, and a global race to conquer them. The Zapatistas see the Fourth World War as the battle for the conquest of markets, a race between the world’s great financial centres.

Among the first casualties of this war have been national markets, liquidating one of the bases of state power under modern capitalism. The logic of this war is to destroy the material basis of the sovereignty of nation states (and their histories and cultures), provoking the qualitative depopulation of their territories, which is understood as getting rid of everyone who is surplus to the new market economy. Yet nation states are being simultaneously reconstructed as administrators of global capital, and in this process, neo-liberalism has concentrated wealth and distributed poverty, say the Zapatistas.

But in the entire planet, pockets of resistance have arisen. The surplus peoples have rebelled. Seeing themselves as both equal and as different, the excluded of 'modernity' weave together resistances against neo-liberalism, which eventually requires a global coordination of the excluded. Resistance in networks, what the Rand Corporation calls 'netwar,' has become the strategy of choice to face the Fourth World War. 'This inter-continental network of resistance is not an organizational structure,' say the Zapatistas, 'it has no command or decision-making center, and no hierarchies. The network is all of us who resist.'

Beyond declarations, the excluded in many places, together with many others, have indeed transnationalized the politics of those who are below, and have organized international mobilizations, pressuring governments and political parties, while building links of solidarity and learning how to struggle together. In the Zapatista view, this struggle against neo-liberalism necessarily implies developing a new humanism. While 'humanity' arises from the recognition of oneself in the Other, the subjugation, humiliation and annihilation of the Other, which are the negation of humanity, are substantial elements of neo-liberalism. This reconstruction of humanity – the task the Zapatistas set before us – requires rescuing and giving new meaning to values like dignity, liberty and justice.

Zapatismo has made profound contributions to the movement of movements. Without its injection of hope, who knows if the movement would have truly taken shape. The horizontal and inclusive nature of the World Social Forums (WSFs) was clearly foreshadowed by the Inter-Continental En-

counter in the jungle. The anti-vanguardist nature of the movement is Zapatista and anti-authoritarian in origin, as is the Gramscian emphasis on building civil society rather than seizing state power. The Zapatistas have always insisted that we must impose our own agenda, rather than be bound by the agenda of the WTO, G-7 and other summits imposed by dominant power, and the WSF is a clear attempt to set our own agenda. The Zapatistas place genuine grassroots social movements, indigenous peoples, and the marginalized of all kinds, at the centre of struggle, and have a healthy suspicion of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), a tension played out throughout the movement of movements. And it has been widely argued, by Harry Cleaver and others, that Zapatismo virtually invented struggle via the Internet, a key form of struggle in the movement of movements. The Zapatistas – using a quasiperformance strategy – have transformed the battlefield into a stage, where they use symbols, characters and narrative to capture the imagination and creativity of an audience around the world. Their innovative use of language has helped convert the struggle into a war of images, words, legitimation, and moral authority, which has provoked a strong echo among Mexican and global movements. But to understand where these influences come from, it is instructive to look back at Zapatista history.

Origins of the Zapatistas

In January 1994, the day the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) went into effect, the Zapatistas emerged from the Lacandón jungle area to seize towns in the populous Chiapas highlands. Yet their origins date back well before NAFTA. The Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) was forged in communities of colonists in remote jungle areas on poor rainforest soils. They were mostly colonists displaced by the harsh economic realities of the Chiapas highlands, but other migrants who also came were mestizo veterans of agrarian struggles in other parts of Mexico, and elements of the intellectual left that went underground after the repression of 1968 and the early 1970s. They were also the subject of intense evangelization by adherents of liberation theology.

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A new sort of community had been taking shape in eastern Chiapas, in the isolated settlements of the Lacandón jungle. Diverse peoples of different Mayan and mestizo ethnicities all faced the same enemies: cattle ranchers, forest rangers, corrupt bureaucrats, poor soils, and declining prices. These displaced peoples, driven from their places of origin by diverse manifestations of capitalism and Mexican government policies, joined in a struggle for survival against injustices. In this process, they gave indigenism new importance, even while re-inventing its meaning and merging it with elements brought by their new neighbours and comrades in struggle.

The Zapatistas arose from the encounter and fusion, then, of different ideologies and world views: indigenous utopias, agrarian struggles, the Guevarism of 'Che,' and liberation theology. As sub-commandante Marcos has said:

Ok, let me explain. We didn't propose all this. In reality, the thing we proposed was just to change the world; the rest we have been improvising as we go along. Our original 'inside the box' view of the world, and of revolution, was demolished in the confrontation with the reality of indigenous Chiapas. Out of the ashes rose something new (which isn't the same as 'good'), what is known today as neo-zapatismo.

Running contrary to a global trend toward ethnic conflict, the Zapatistas proved to be inclusive rather than exclusive. An inclusive form of social movement had not been widely expected as a reaction to the globalized economy by analysts of globalization. As the most negatively affected zones shifted from exploitation to irrelevance in the economic panorama, most expected widespread violence and disorder, with conflict arising along ethnic lines. Clearly the EZLN did not fit this expectation, though many movements elsewhere, do. This difference stems precisely from the jungle's hybrid communities. This exceptional and perhaps unlikely kind of movement has since echoed powerfully in the broader civil society – locally, nationally and internationally. Precisely because of their inclusive rather than exclusive message, they have been able to reach out not only to the socially marginalized across borders and through new media, but have also found a powerful echo among the middle classes in Mexico and beyond.

The EZLN is a political-military organization that identifies with the Zapatismo of Zapata as a historical revolutionary current. It was conceived as an 'insurgent' movement, in the sense of putting forth new values. The protagonists of such a movement may not always be victorious, but regardless, they are remembered in history as the actors of foundational processes. Whether the insurrection lasts or is crushed, nothing is ever the same. Mentalities have been changed, new horizons have been glimpsed, and eyes have suddenly seen realities they never wanted to see.

The war of information and Internet struggle

In 1994, by the ninth day of battle, then-President Carlos Salinas de Gortari accepted a cease fire despite his troop's military superiority. Information flow out of the guerrilla zone was fueling a level of international protest and a consequent loss of investor confidence in Mexico that went well beyond the threshold the Mexican government could tolerate. Of course, the war was also stopped because of the huge mobilization of Mexican civil society, and because it generated rifts within the ruling power structure of the country.

The primary means of information flow, despite a military cordon, came via the Internet, allowing the international media to report what their reporters could not see, as local civil society organizations connected to the Internet sent out hundreds of eyewitness reports. That information also flowed to the members of a rapidly congealing transnational solidarity network.

The Zapatista support movement successfully stopped the shooting war in 1994 in part because the Mexican government had become susceptible to adverse publicity in the US, a by-product of economic restructuring. In the larger Third World, structural adjustment programmes imposed by the World Bank and other supra-national bodies have stripped the nation state of its power to regulate the domestic economy, and free trade policies have reduced it to the level of a beggar pleading for foreign investment. Nowhere was this truer than in the Mexico of Salinas. Ex-President Salinas created a temporary 'bubble economy,'

based on a massive influx of speculative investments in high interest government bonds, which via a spiraling trade deficit and debt, allowed the middle and working classes to enjoy a multitude of imported consumer goods for a while. Yet as easy as it was to lure investors in, any loss of investor confidence could spiral into a panic and a run on Mexican bonds, potentially causing a collapse of the system. In effect the Mexican economy was an enormous confidence game.

Since confidence is basically created by the manipulation of information, it can be destroyed in exactly the same way. The Mexican government was more sensitive to what CNN broadcast in the US than it was to domestic dissent, because the US is where the investors are. By the same token, copycat protests in 1994 (spread via the Internet rather than CNN) in front of Mexican consulates in the US, Europe and Japan were perhaps more effective at scaring the government than much larger protests in the Zócalo plaza outside government buildings in Mexico City.

The Zapatistas were able to turn information – essentially the scaring of investors and the mobilizing of international support – into a key tool to force a ceasefire and bring the government to the negotiating table. The Zapatistas had learned important lessons from the previous Latin American guerrilla experiences – crushed either militarily or by elections – and remain convinced of civil society's key role in struggle.

Global Zapatismo in the movement of movements

Since 1994, Zapatista supporters have been the PR headache of successive Mexican presidents, especially in Europe. On tour in Germany, President Fox recently cringed as a group of Zapatista university students repeatedly yelled 'assassin.' In Spain, Germany, and other places, Mexican diplomats have had to keep a stiff upper lip while confronting European Zapatismo.

Although the international solidarity movements were largely spontaneous, the EZLN rapidly and consciously conceived of its message as international, which makes sense in terms of their conception of neo-liberalism. Convinced that

globalization drastically modifies the logic and the dynamic of liberation struggles, and that the nation state is being deeply eroded, they banked on a project that went beyond national borders.

Since the EZLN emergence in January 1994, thousands of young people of all nationalities have been travelling to Zapatista communities to live for months at a time in the civil peace camps. At first, they sought to serve as protective shields between the army and the population. Later, they began to work in community service. Solidarity soon gave way to reciprocal learning experiences. The Mexican government was unable to halt the steady stream of support even when it expelled dozens of international workers of several nationalities and imposed all kinds of migration impediments. Not only did these actions cause serious diplomatic tussles, they failed to stop internationalists from coming into the zone of conflict.

Some analysts have written that young people travel to Mexico from across the globe to join a romanticized revolution that will never exist in Europe. Extensive interviews indicate they're wrong. In most cases, Zapatista supporters travel to southeast Mexico to do what they are already doing at home. The Europe of Maastricht is also the Europe of unemployment, of job insecurity, of precarious standards of living, of genetically modified foods, and of deepening racism. The new model of development consistently fails to generate enough employment for everyone, and much less for youth.

Many European young people view the language of Zapatismo and the movement's proposals on diversity, autonomy, power, and resistance to neo-liberalism as new and valuable elements in the elaboration of proposals to confront the challenges of their own societies. The same individuals who spend a month in a Chiapas peace camp are forging the global justice movement in their own communities and countries.

Luca Casarini, spokesperson for the Italian Disobedient movement, could easily pass for a medieval character. His appearance and his sense of the dramatic make him seem from another epoch. As leader of the Rivolta (Revolt) Social Center in Mestre, Italy he is one of the most prominent figures of the global justice movement.

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Shortly before the historic protest against the G-8 in Genoa in 2000, Luca described the origins of the Disobedient movement, formerly known as the White Overalls:

We have a dream. In this dream we are born on 1 January 1994 alongside the Zapatistas. The dream is a good one, and it isn't completely a fantasy, but reality is different. The truth is that the White Overalls movement was started in 1997 by a group of young people in Rome who called their collective 'the invisibles.' They were the first to wear white overalls and go out into the streets dressed like that to demand rights.

The Disobedients are not the only ones with the dream of having been collectively born with the Zapatista uprising. All over the planet, groups have sprung up that believe 'another world is possible' and identify with the Zapatistas. Many of them play key roles in the movement of movements that confronts neo-liberal globalization. For them, the rebels from southeast Mexico have been a source of inspiration and a political point of reference. Many view Zapatismo as a cornerstone of the movement that became visible in Seattle in 1999.

Sergio Zulian is an Italian in his 30s, a specialist in Spanish literature and an immigrant organizer in the city of Treviso. Following the uprising, he went to Chiapas many times until the Mexican government expelled him from the country in 1998 for traveling 'without permission,' along with dozens of young Italians.

According to Sergio,

Zapatismo was the first stage of worldwide movements of the twenty-first century, and the second was Seattle. The indigenous people who rose up brought a new language and an open attitude, and the Seattle demonstrations renovated forms of protest. The ironic and poetic language of the Zapatistas broke many customs of the left, which was very serious and boring. It showed how you could change the world with joy and arms too.

Zulian explains the impact of the Chiapan uprising on the Italian left:

First, we realized that it wasn't a traditional guerrilla movement. We discovered that the language of this insurgency was totally different. Here in Italy, in Europe, despite the fall of the Berlin Wall, in 1994 the linguistic legacy and the influence of the big ideologies of the twentieth century were still very strong. To speak of dignity, of humanity, of democracy, of justice, was something that many movements considered bourgeois words, or at least strange.

Many young people, he adds, embraced the Zapatistas and Marcos as a symbol. Being a Zapatista did not imply adhering to an already constituted line. 'It was something subversive, but not a new ideology. We always said they weren't the last of the twentieth century guerrillas but the first of the twenty-first.'

Two factors are key to understanding the success of the Zapatistas' call to action: the renovation of politics, and language. In the words of Tony Soldevilla, a small businessman in the information industry in France:

Zapatismo has meant hope. For us it's a movement. It came out when Internet came out. To be Zapatista was to be modern – if you were a Zapatista with Internet you were doubly modern. But also it was a new way to do politics. People stopped being leftists because it seemed like the same old thing. They went out to vote for the left to confront the right, but once in government they discovered that it was the same politics. Zapatismo was a new form of expression, of giving people the floor.

García believes that the rebels

have created a new language that knows how to say this world is shit, but it knows how to say it with humor, joy, candor, without authoritarianism. It's a universal language that has changed the words we use. It's alive. It isn't discourse. It's a language that obeys a reality, a desire not to remain only in words. A language that most thoroughly underlies the movement of movements.

Note

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