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The Zapatista contribution to the new opposition

Andrew Flood

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Chiapas is the poorest state in Mexico, bordering on the Guatemalan border, the area consisting of the Chiapas highlands and the Lacandon jungle has almost no infrastructure or services outside of those to facilitate tourists. Many of the communities here are extremely isolated, indeed it was only in the 1960's that the 'Lacandon Indians' made contact with the outside world. The population of the highlands and jungle are 99% indigenous living in traditional communities with collective land known as ejido.

There is extreme poverty in this area, its estimated that 19,000 people (mostly children) die every year from preventable diseases for instance. There is also considerable wealth, the most fertile areas, the canyon bases were seized from the indigenous people by large Spanish descent ranchers, displacing the indigenous to the less fertile hillsides and because of this less fertile land therefore forcing them to work for the ranchers in order to survive. This set up means a very extreme racism exists on the part of the ranchers and shop owners towards the indigenous people, a racism that in fact denies them their humanity and sees them as pack animals.

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The oil boom of the 1970's and the subsequent debt crisis of the 1980's also had the effect of taking some people off the land and into industry only to force them back onto the land when work vanished. Although the highland region has communities that have been there for considerable periods of time, some perhaps predating the conquest those of the jungle started from the 1950's on as land shortages forced people to try and work this infertile land in successive waves of colonisation. Significantly these colonisers included indigenous people from other parts of Mexico and returning oil workers who had often been involved in struggles in other parts of Mexico. The 1970's and 80's saw numerous struggles for justice through peasants unions but in Chiapas the limited democratic rights that exist in Mexico city are not found, such movements were met with fierce oppression up to and including the assassination of the main figures in them

In fact when you consider the factors outlined above, the grinding poverty, the racism, the land shortages and the repression of peaceful mass movements the emergence of the EZLN in 1994 comes as no surprise. Every other area of Latin America that has suitable terrain and the same situation has seen the emergence of at least one armed movement. I don't intend to go into detail of the military history of this rising, suffice to say that the strategy of the Zapatistas has been not to try to militarily defeat the Mexican army but rather to use armed struggle to highlight their plight and create a space in which land seizures and other forms of mass struggle can take place.

What I'm going to focus on is what can be learnt from the struggle of the EZLN and indeed from the international solidarity around it. In many ways this crosses over with the discussion we have had in recent meetings about the changing nature of capitalism and the way in which its latest phase, Neoliberalism has thrown up a wide range of problems in fighting for local reforms.

The first thing that has to be said about the Zapatistas is that they are not in any sense anarchist. It is true that they acknowl-

The challenges we have explored in recent weeks thrown up by neoliberalism and indeed the greater challenge of the failure of the left in the 20th Century require not only a new theoretical understanding of how struggle can be conducted but also real world examples of this actually happening. All of us are aware of how fruitless it can be to argue about the **theoretical possibility** of solidarity winning in a particular situation but how easy that argument is if we point to an actual example, like the December strikes in France or closer to home the Anti-Water charges campaign. What is happening around the Zapatistas is but one aspect but I believe an important one of creating a new tradition of working class struggle, one defined around anarchist practise.

But above all else the real contribution of the Zapatistas is the interaction that has taken place with the solidarity groups. This interaction has been on two levels, firstly the Zapatistas have opened up an alternative debate on the failings of 'Marxism' that provides answers quite different from the pro-market ones that most Marxists have preferred. To a large extent these answers are the one anarchists have argued all along and so solidarity with the EZLN has become a path by which Marxists are becoming anarchists. I use Marxists here in a very, very wide sense, including the 'left' in the various national liberation movements in that category.

Secondly the fact that the Zapatistas have emphasised the need for a global response has resulted in the creation of a global network against neoliberalism. The most extreme manifestation of this network was of course last years gathering 'for humanity and against neoliberalism' in Chiapas. This network is fragile, indeed the second meeting to be held in Spain this July will be the first real test of it, can it survive once it loses the allure of its exotic location. Early indications would suggest the Spanish gathering will attract at least as many as the Mexican gathering. But the central importance of the gathering is that it is creating a new tradition of international solidarity.

In the past this tradition has focused on organisational solidarity, the 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th internationals were all bodies which theoretically consisted of member political organisations, one in each country. Likewise the IWA-AIT works on the same model. Anyone who has followed the way the IWA has been tearing itself apart in recent years as national splits turn into international purges cannot but be aware of the potentially destructive and vanguardist nature of such a method of organisation even where it is based on an anarchist theory. Other forms of international organisation have existed, trade union federations or around specific issues like anti-apartheid. But these have existed on the basis of single issues and commonly either as uncritical support groups for a struggle in a particular location or as a top down body.

edge that the Mexican anarchism of Magnon is included in their theoretical analysis and they have adopted many of the points for which the original Zapatistas have been called anarchist but like them it is a label they have not chosen for themselves and also like them the libertarian aspects of their politics does come into conflict with other pronouncements in particular nationalism and an inconsistent approach to decision making.

Beyond this critique the Zapatistas are making a very significant contribution to the rebirth of the revolutionary movement and the form in which it is re-emerging. And its important to understand from the outset that this contribution is not merely on a romantic attachment to armed groups (although there are elements of this in it), the EPR in Mexico or the MRTA in Peru have recently failed to generate anything like the same sort of solidarity either nationally or internationally. The attention the Zapatistas are getting can only be explained in an attraction to their politics.

1994 in many ways marks the start of an international turn around for the left. The decade that preceded it was marked up actual defeats like the British Miners strike and ideological defeats in the form of the collapse of social democracy, national liberation and the Soviet block. It is easy for us to take a smug 'told you so' attitude to these ideological defeats but at the same time we do recognise the massive demoralisation this had on the left internationally. By the start of the 1990's not only was capitalism looking un-opposed to many people but it was apparent that it was in a new and more brutal phase typified by the mass destruction of Iraq during the Gulf War but also visible in the smashing of social services and the rise of racism all over Europe.

The Zapatista uprising and more importantly the ideas behind it became the first highly visible suggestion that in fact other ways existed. The Zapatistas did not try and ignore the failings of the Latin American national liberation movements nor did it try to deal with them by a move towards market socialism. Rather it claimed to have learned from them that a national liberation project based

on seizing state power could not succeed on the one hand, on the other a negotiated compromise between the gorilla leadership and the state also offered nothing. Alongside this however were the more conventional demands of a government that would represent the people, an example of the contradiction I referred to earlier.

To a large extent the importance of the Zapatistas is not so much what they really mean or what they really stand for but rather how what they say has been interpreted by the solidarity groups. They have not spoken with one voice, indeed the accounts they give of their own development since the 1980s as well as the knowledge we have of internal disagreements today suggest that the journey from Maoism has been difficult and is not yet complete. In terms of the leadership there clearly is a spectrum that runs from more or less unreconstructed Maoists to self defined anarchists. But speculation about the leadership misses the point of what the Zapatistas are about (although its good gossip to indulge in).

On the ground we now understand how the decision making process works in the Zapatista communities. And here I believe in terms of the civilian decision making structure we see a practise compatible with anarchism.

The Zapatista communities hold weekly assemblies at which each and every issue in that community is debated. These assemblies are conducted in one of the five local languages which makes understanding the exact nature of debate difficult but having seen several reports on them and talking to people who have sat in on them a few observations can be made. Firstly everyone has the right to speak and vote, including the children, this is extremely significant in what is traditionally a very patriarchal society where women are voiceless. Secondly there is a real effort to make decisions by consensus where possible. Thirdly these meetings send a delegate to the CCGI, the delegates have been observed sitting through these meetings making copious notes on everything that is being said, unfortunately I have not succeeded in finding out how delegates are selected and how recall functions.

The general impression people have is that the delegates fulfil an administrative role and not a decision making one, recall mechanisms have been referred to in interviews with Zapatista combatants.

Marcos refers to this process in the interview in the pamphlet we hope to publish soon when he says

“In any moment, if you hold a position in the community (first, the community has to have appointed you independent of your political affiliation), the community can remove you. There isn't a fixed term that you have to complete. The moment that the community begins to see that you are failing in your duties, that you are having problems, they sit you down in front of the community and they begin to tell you what you have done wrong. You defend yourself and finally the community, the collective, the majority decides what they are going to do with you. Eventually, you will have to leave your position and another will take up your responsibilities”

This process of decision making can be quite protracted the decision to pull out of the peace talks last August for instance was only finalised after two weeks of debate. This decision making process of the EZLN is another of their major contributions. Leninists frequently argue that such a process is unworkable in a crisis situation, that a trusted political leadership is necessary to handle the need to make fast decisions, in short whatever the theoretical rights and wrongs of delegate decision making it is not practical in the 'real world'. The existence of such a process in the modern world on a mass scale in what are the extremely difficult circumstances of war on the one hand and a complete lack of ease of communication in the form of phones or movement in the form of roads knocks that on the head.