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Class, Colonialism and the Zapatistas

Bromma

July 22 2003

I started off wanting to like “A Commune In Chiapas?” (This article about the Zapatistas, written for the English journal *Aufheben*, was circulated as a pamphlet by Arm the Spirit/Solidarity.) I appreciated its willingness to criticize radicals who “project their hopes onto this ‘exotic’ struggle.” I was ready to agree with its skepticism about the rhetoric of Subcommandante Marcos, about romantic views of indigenous life, about social democracy masquerading as “civil society.” I was glad to see that the pamphlet included some background history about Mexico and a chronology of the Zapatista uprising. Most of all, I looked forward to its attempt to analyze the events in Chiapas from a class perspective.

I shouldn’t have got my hopes up. “Commune” is actually a pretty conservative piece of writing. Conservative in its view of class. Conservative in its distaste for national liberation struggles and radical anti-colonialism. Above all, conservative—even predictable—in its Eurocentric assumptions about Indians. A narrow form of academic Marxism acts like parental web-screening

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software, preventing the authors from seeing even the basic outlines of the Zapatista struggle.

The January 1, 1994 uprising in Chiapas resulted from a fusion of indigenous peoples' struggles for survival with a band of revolutionary Marxist guerrillas. This fusion produced an innovative movement which slammed a body blow into global capital. "Commune," on the other hand, was written by theoreticians who lack respect for indigenous struggle and apparently have little use for real-life revolutionary Marxist guerrillas. Not surprisingly, their main message is that the Zapatistas have limited historical significance.

The pamphlet's aim is not so much to learn lessons from the Zapatista struggle as to grind ideological axes. The authors claim to represent the voice of moderation, avoiding what they see as twin errors: wishful thinking about Chiapas (which they ascribe to autonomist Marxists, among others) as well as a dismissive attitude among self-styled "ultra-left" groups in Europe. But actually "Commune" is squarely in the dismissers' camp. Like them, it disdains what it calls "anti-imperialist and Third Worldist ideology." Like them, it applies a series of formulaic litmus tests to the events in Chiapas, and judges the Zapatista struggle as essentially backward.

The authors' theoretical basis for this judgment is a crude class analysis, pivoting on the assertion that the Indians of Chiapas are "semi-proletarian peasants." "Commune" argues that weaknesses in the Zapatista movement result from an unequal struggle between two ideological tendencies: the Indians' "traditional" and "conservative" peasant world view, and a slight countervailing proletarian tendency. The authors consider the Maya "essentially peasant"; their proletarian impulses are said to be based in material circumstances "extremely marginal" and "peripheral" to modern capital. It's no contest. "Indeed," the article says, "one could argue that the uprising itself has... reinforced the peasant aspect over the proletarian." We will see that this excursion into class theory has little to do with reality. For the most part, it's simply a

that happens to Indians. Under imperialism's fluid new world "order," disaster and hardship can strike any population at a moment's notice. When and if we face the kind of adversity the Maya face, I wonder how many of us will react with the courage and creativity of the Zapatistas. What will our community and our values be then? I wonder if the women will have arms, and know how to use them. And in those dire circumstances, I wonder who will seem more "backward" and who will seem more "advanced"—us metropolitan Leftists, or those "traditional" Indians—who, after all, continue to survive and maintain their unity in Chiapas nine long years after rising up in arms against the entire capitalist system.

miles away. This is the broader global context out of which the Zapatistas arise.

Indigenous peoples, and indigenous women in particular, represent a material force in the world, one that has proven its potential for powerful anti-colonial insurgency. Given their histories and their unusual situation—both “marginal” and central to imperialism—indigenous peoples who take the path of struggle sometimes have an opportunity to reforge their communities in a blend of the traditional and the cutting-edge. Like the Zapatistas have done. Despite suffering the most difficult conditions, such peoples nevertheless have as good a chance as anybody to live as the actual “alternative” communities that the Left talks about so much. In other words, to choose their own future.

Indigenous struggles are loose cannons on neocolonialism’s deck. What seem at first (Western) glance to be limited local struggles can explode unexpectedly, destabilizing old political arrangements and sending tremors through the whole system. We sense instinctively that within indigenous rebellion are forces that can be very dangerous to imperialism practically and that flatly contradict it ideologically. But sometimes, as with “Commune,” our limited metropolitan paradigms aren’t up to the task of explaining their significance.

Will indigenous politics around the world continue to jell? Will the earth’s consummate survivor peoples figure out how to resist more effectively on the new terrain of neocolonial politics? Will woman-centered traditions assert themselves within indigenous resistance movements, as they have in the past? I don’t know. But what the Zapatista uprising represents is a real post-modern challenge to imperialism, rooted in a deep tradition of anti-colonial and anticapitalist struggle—not just a peripheral peasant movement with slick spin control.

The way things are going, a lot of us will someday find ourselves bobbing and weaving through the chaotic, mortally dangerous skirmish zones of the neocolonial landscape. This isn’t just something

way to attack on the Zapatistas’ revolutionary authenticity while sounding scientific.

“Commune” makes the obligatory disclaimer about how “the self-activity of the Indigenous, above all else...defines this struggle.” But it actually says precious little about self-actuating indigenous resistance in Chiapas—or its broader context. It completely avoids the key fact that the struggle between European colonialism and Mesoamerican civilization is the central contradiction of Mexican history. It doesn’t dwell on the long record of Indian struggles against ranchers, caciques and the government that led up to the events of the 1990s: Indian demands in the Mexican Revolution, the struggle for ejidos in the 40s and 50s, the pioneering communities of the 60s and 70s in Chiapas (which historian John Womack calls “improvised soviets”), the battle against the government’s creation of the “Lacandon Zone,” etc. It doesn’t take into account the long genocidal war in neighboring Guatemala, which sent thousands of politicized Maya pouring across the border into Chiapas. (The Maya have moved back and forth across this artificial border for its entire history.) It doesn’t mention the growth of an international indigenous-rights trend starting in the 1970s, centered around the Encounters of the Indigenous Peoples. It doesn’t recognize the rising significance of militant indigenous struggles today in Mexico, the Americas, or the world. And it certainly doesn’t treat the indigenous leadership of the Zapatistas as an authentic leadership, capable of making important political decisions independently.

Instead, the article focusses relentlessly on the “mediations” by outside forces which supposedly delimit the Zapatista phenomenon. The authors find it sad and ironic that “the Chiapas uprising would not have reached the heights it did without the vanguardist form” that these outsiders brought. Coming in for particularly critical scrutiny are the “Che Geuvara Leninists” of the Fuerzas de Liberación Nacional (FLN), personified by Subcommandante Marcos, as well as Catholic liberation theology advocates such as Bishop Samuel Ruiz. With all this mediation

going on, the authors are convinced that real proletarian politics is out of the question for the EZLN. The backwardness of the Maya makes that impossible: “A more generalized and proletarian movement, to achieve its goals, could not accept the relations of mediation and representation that the Indians [sic] peasants do.”

Having unceremoniously ushered the Indians off to the sidelines of world revolution, “Commune” makes a backhanded attempt to be generous: “The Zapatistas may be marginal, but we cannot deny them their revolutionary subjectivity.” After all, the authors admit, the rebels are courageously fighting the state, refusing to lay down their arms. It’s “inspiring.” And at least “the racism which has done so much to bond this organized expression of class struggle has not been transformed into Indian nationalism, unlike the Black Power movements of 1970s America.”

It has to be said: “Commune” is appallingly chauvinist. It’s chauvinist in an offhanded, unintentional way—a way that’s so typical among European and Euro-American leftists that it usually passes unnoticed—by them.

It seems that the authors of “Commune” know little about indigenous cultures in Mexico, or their long anti-colonial struggles. (A good starting point for study is Guillermo Bonfil Batalla’s *México Profundo*, available in English translation from the University of Texas Press.) But they nevertheless feel comfortable describing Indian communities as “hotbeds of patriarchy and alcohol-fuelled domestic violence.” At one point the Indians are characterized as “docile” in the face of oppression—a patent falsehood contradicted in practice by centuries of militant resistance. “Commune” would have us believe that an “obsession with Mayan tradition” prevents the Indians from developing proletarian consciousness. The authors even pose a rhetorical choice between “guerrilla fighters or Mayan Indians,” as if the two were logically incompatible. To top it off, the authors pat the Indians on the head for supposedly not falling into “Indian nationalism” like those foolish Black Panthers!

social formations that have come into existence on this shifting terrain are best looked at not as elements of a single unified “mestizo” class structure, but rather as attacked and/or dispossessed indigenous communities defending their whole civilization while undergoing rapid transition. (That transition can go in more than one direction, of course. Some Indian communities in Chiapas have thrown in their lot with the Mexican government and the ranchers’ death squads.)

Like so many other indigenous societies around the world, the Indian communities of Chiapas are neither being left alone, nor are they experiencing a gradual internal evolution/devolution towards capitalism. Instead, on top of all the existing layers of colonialism, the Maya are being slammed abruptly into the path of a new-style capitalist juggernaut. Like other Native peoples, they live where the bourgeoisie has found surprising quantities of valuable old-line industrial raw materials—oil and gas, timber, minerals, etc. Moreover, by location, culture and, yes, tradition, Native peoples are arrayed diametrically against what Vandana Shiva calls “the new enclosure of the commons”—the intensified privatization and commodification of the biosphere—which capitalism badly needs to survive. (The creation of “ecological reserves” on Native territory is heavily implicated in this theft of biological wealth.) The new bourgeois world order is putting regions that were once seen as “marginal”—suitable, that is, only for neglect or use as “reservations”—on the front lines of capitalist development.

Native communities are therefore under tremendous pressure. But, unlike many other world populations under assault today, indigenous peoples often have high levels of social coherence and long histories of armed resistance against colonialism and genocide. They emerge onto the terrain of advanced global capitalism with viable anticapitalist traditions and communal values. These are communities who spontaneously share core values with indigenous peoples they may never have met, some living thousands of

land as a bitter enemy. In fact, the bourgeoisie's determination to repeal of Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution, which protected the ejidos from privatization, helped fuel the uprising. This reflects a completely different kind of consciousness from "Commune"'s stereotype of Native peasant backwardness.

I think it's impossible to analyze the Zapatistas from a class point of view without situating their struggle theoretically within colonial class structure. The Chiapas uprising isn't just about class versus class in Mexico. It's (also) about an oppressed indigenous people resisting imperialism. Overall, what's most critical to understand is that the Maya of Chiapas—Totzil, Tzeltal, Tojolobal, Chol, Mam, Zoque and others—are colonized peoples under genocidal attack. Multinational capital, using the Mexican ruling class as its main representative, wants to control the Indians' natural resources (which apparently include huge oil reserves). It plans to liquidate the Maya's relationship to their land, cutting the roots of their communal traditions and rebellious culture in the process. This is merely the latest in a long series of colonial assaults on indigenous Mexico. It's being met as it has been for five hundred years—with determined, creative struggle for self-determination.

The Indians are being forced into confrontation with modern global capitalism in a series of rough shocks and disruptions. These apparently have done nothing to provoke Indian demands for private land tenure. Instead the Maya have repeatedly carried out militant struggle for communal land. At the same time they've exploited their other options for survival, such as wage labor (which has actually been one of their survival modes for a hundred years), craft work, migration and small manufacturing. This has almost certainly complicated the class situation in Indian communities. Native peoples have experimented widely with different types of social organization—legal, clandestine and in between. They've taken advantage of tactical and strategic openings provided by liberation theologians, leftists and others, adapting the outsiders' agendas to their own interests. The various Indian

In its chauvinist blindness, "Commune" makes the classic Eurocentric error about Native peoples: that "traditional" equals "backward." This thoroughly ignorant proposition, commonly used as a pretext for marginalizing Native struggles, is one of the main reasons that Indians tend to be skeptical of the Left.

Guillermo Bonfil put it well: "One of the most common ideas about Indian cultures is that they are conservative and reject change, even when that change might constitute a significant improvement. This is a prejudiced image within colonial ideology, which sees those colonized as causing their own colonization. Cultural resistance is a real fact, but it has a meaning very different from that attributed to it."

As Native American activist Jimmie Durham explains, "We define a 'traditional' Indian as one who maintains the whole body of his people's vision (political system) and that includes total resistance to colonization, speaking his own language, etc. So our progressives are what look like to you our 'conservatives'." Bulls-eye.

The Zapatistas are first and foremost an embodiment of the Mayan struggle for self-determination and autonomy. The Maya may or may not be a nation in a conventional European sense, but they are certainly a civilization, a people. They are a people who have lived in their ancestral territory for millennia, who have common linguistic roots and much common culture and heritage, including hundreds of years of anti-colonial struggle. At the same time, they are a people made up of peoples. There are several separate cultural groups within the Maya, most of whom also have a determined ancestral territory, separate lifeways and cultural attributes. The various Mayan languages have evolved independently to the point that they are sometimes mutually unintelligible.

Under colonialism, the Maya have faced wave after wave of painful forced migration, a fact that has put formerly isolated communities into contact and often mixed them. Maya have

also been forced to deal with ladino culture, which they have confronted through multiple strategies—resistance, diversion and appropriation for their own use. Today, as in the past, the Maya are defending and reinventing themselves in order to survive genocidal attacks and throw off the latest form of colonialism. This is the stage on which the EZLN is an actor.

So any reality-based analysis of the Zapatistas has to start by acknowledging that they are actually “guerrilla fighters” largely because they are “Mayan Indians.” Their “Indian-ness” is central to their resistance; a critical part of what makes it so radical and strong.

Moreover, contrary to “Commune,” the Zapatistas’ identification as Indians has been a major impetus for internationalism. It has helped the EZLN reach out beyond their remote region, starting first of all with the connections they are forging with other indigenous struggles in Mexico and around the world. Their demand for self-determination connects them naturally with indigenous and anti-colonial peoples everywhere.

This isn’t the place to rehash old theoretical arguments on the Left about how important self-determination and the struggle against genocide are to proletarian revolution. In any event, Indian struggles have their own particularity, apart from any general formulas. I would simply observe that it’s impossible to analyze class forces—in Chiapas or anywhere—without some understanding of race, colonialism and genocide as deep expressions of class. Unfortunately, in the case of “Commune,” the longing for “pure” class struggle (without the “taint” of nationalism) has distorted the authors’ view of the situation in Chiapas. The Maya AS A PEOPLE are almost completely off their radar screen.

If the struggle for Indian self-determination is the authors’ biggest taboo, disciplined guerrilla organization comes in a close second. “Commune” strains to discredit the revolutionary process in Chiapas.

Organized, anticapitalist, oppressed women with guns—this is absolutely the last thing imperialism wants to see in Mexico, or anywhere else. And the class-fluid position the Zapatistas find themselves in apparently means that women have unusual leeway in choosing their own future. In fact, the Zapatistas are living evidence that the “traditional Mayan culture” that “Commune” bemoans provides at least as much of an opening for rebel women as Western culture does.

The Zapatistas’ security barriers and the smoke from Marcos’ preppy pipe obscure much of what’s happening behind the scenes, among the women. (Maybe that smoke screen’s an advantage, though.) What indigenous women decide, probably outside our view, is going to have a lot more impact on the trajectory of the Zapatista struggle than the so-called “essentially peasant nature” of Indians. From that perspective, “Commune”’s orthodox labeling scheme looks sadly academic. It’s the authors who are being conservative here, not the Indians.

In any event, trying to analyze rural Indian life using European peasant models is a losing proposition. Even “mestizo” rural society in Mexico has many unique features. Some Mexican theorists have likened it to what Marx called the “Asiatic mode of production,” rather than a European peasant model. Bonfil, for his part, argues that it can only be understood as the underlying Mesoamerican social structure, distorted by colonialism. In any event, traditional Indian communalism in Mexico is yet another step removed from the European past.

Significantly, Indian demands for land have little in common with European peasant attachment to land. Indians do demand a stable land base for their collective survival, but most of them don’t have a privately-owned plot that’s been in the family for generations. Nor is that their goal. Most of the Indians of Chiapas are fiercely loyal to communal land tenure, which is both rooted in ancient indigenous traditions and integral to the Mexican Revolution. The Zapatistas, embodying that loyalty, see privatization of

the authors of “Commune” cartoonishly sketch. (Has anybody every heard of the Chinese Revolution?) More to the point, “the peasantry” as a category is viewed by virtually the whole Left in an oddly gender-blind way.

Let’s suppose that a (male) peasant personally owns land, owns “his” wife and daughters like property, and compels them to do backbreaking labor under threat of violence or death. Are those women “peasants” just like their owner/master/husband/father? Isn’t there a theoretical problem here that we need to look at?

Of course we can’t blame “Commune” for this gender myopia—it’s probably no worse than most Left theory in this regard. But the custom of automatically defining women’s class according to who “their” men are strikes me as one of the things radicals need to detox from. Especially those of us who want to use class analysis as a tool of struggle.

Interestingly, while “Commune” calls Indian women “virtual slaves in their own villages” before the rise of the Zapatistas (a controversial statement that it doesn’t document), the article doesn’t treat this as a serious CLASS contradiction with the men. Nor, on the other hand, does it try to explain how the women managed to transcend both “slavery” and the FLN’s anti-proletarian “mediations” to become guerrillas. Indigenous women’s story ends up getting lost in fuzzy concepts like the “the tradition of the village” and the “the ‘different world’ of the peasant.”

We really do need to think about class and gender in trying to understand the Zapatistas, because the class position and class politics of Mayan women seems to be at the heart of the class situation in Chiapas. As Marcos says, “the first uprising of the EZLN was in March of 1993,” when indigenous women, singing and chanting, forced the CCRI to adopt their version of the “Law of Women.” Indigenous women have continued to develop their leadership and autonomy within and through the Zapatista struggle. It seems likely to me that the women are the key determinant of the EZLN’s future, as they were to its early dynamism.

Ever since the Zapatista uprising first exploded into world consciousness, the nature of the relationship between the urban ladino guerrillas like Marcos and the longstanding indigenous struggles in Chiapas has been a pressing issue for activists. This is a particularly important question for those who consider themselves revolutionaries, since armed struggle movements with the impact of the EZLN’s aren’t exactly a dime a dozen these days.

Marcos and his original FLN comrades arrived in Chiapas from central Mexico in the early 80s. They were Maoists, advocates of the “mass line.” That is, they did not see their role to be dictating the direction of the struggle from above. Rather, they hoped to join, support or ally with struggles of the oppressed, promoting a proletarian line through a process of give and take: “from the masses, to the masses,” in Mao’s terminology. The guerrillas brought with them a set of somewhat rigid political assumptions, some authoritarian baggage, and some specialized political knowledge. As Marcos puts it: “The EZLN was born having as points of reference the political military organizations of the guerrilla movements in Latin America during the sixties and seventies.” With all the formidable strengths and weaknesses that implies. Still, the guerrillas’ commitment to working with indigenous peoples as a basis for revolutionary organizing put them on a serious, dangerous path.

For years, a small unit of the FLN concentrated on learning how to survive in the mountains of Chiapas and made initial contacts with the people there. This process started to change the militants, grinding down their “romantic vision” of guerrilla war as it strengthened them physically and politically. “The environment,” Marcos says, “brings you back to reality.”

From all accounts I’ve seen, the Marxist militants’ early approaches to the Indians were principled, if orthodox. FLN cadres advocated a classic guerrilla war with a final aim of overthrowing the Mexican state. However, as their relationship with the Indian

population became closer, the nature of the guerrilla project started to change significantly.

The Indians were already quite interested in developing more of an armed capacity—but mainly to defend their communities from the ranchers. Marcos again: “In this initial political work, a connection began to take place between the proposals of the guerilla group, the initial group of the EZLN, and the communities. This means that there were different expectations of the movement. On the one hand, there were those who hoped that armed action would bring about a revolution and a change of power, in this case the fall of the governing party and the ascension of another party, but that in the end it would be the people who took power. On the other hand, there were the more immediate expectations of the indigenous people here. For them, the necessity of armed struggle was more as a form of defense against groups of very violent, aggressive and powerful ranchers.”

The actual mass-based EZLN was originally set up in response to the Indians’ needs, as a defense force against the ranchers’ gangs. As the “relationship of convenience” between the FLN activists and the indigenous population started to deepen, and as more Indians began to join, the political equation shifted:

“The moment arrived in which the EZLN had to consult the communities in order to make a decision. At first, we only asked if what we were doing was going to cause problems for the companeros...A moment arrives in which you can’t do anything without the approval of the people with whom you work. It was something understood by both parties: they understood that we wouldn’t do anything without consulting them, and we understood that if we did anything without consulting them, we would lose them.”

From that time on, Marcos says, the whole mechanism of leadership and decision-making was gradually transformed. The Clandestine Revolutionary Indigenous Committee (CCRI) became the key leadership body, and the EZLN ultimately adopted a broad-based, communal form of organization compatible with

modernity are often used as a smoke screen for colonial thinking: “What here we call advanced, modern, and urban is not the leading edge of an internal self-development, but, rather, the result of the implantation of Western civilization from above. What we call backward, traditional and rural is not the beginning point of that development, but, instead, the underlying stratum of Mesoamerican civilization...In terms of the dominant ideology, Indian civilization does not exist. The civilizational conflict is masked by the phraseology of development, in its various modalities, which converts the imposition of a foreign civilization into a natural and inevitable process of historical development.”

Because “Commune”’s authors refuse to look at the Zapatistas as the political expression of a people—part of the struggle for Mayan self-determination—they are unable to think about class structure (or its absence) among the Maya themselves. Instead, they try to cram the Indians into a class slot in “mestizo” Mexico. This leaves way too many questions unanswered. Is it true that all the Maya, men and women, are from the same class? To what extent is their society materially based on an ancient communalism, predating class society? Is the Zapatista movement a multi-class national liberation struggle? How should we think about Indians who perform mostly wage labor but look to their native land and community as their social anchor? (I think that “Commune” seriously underestimates the economic and social role of paid labor among the Indians.) How about the Maya who live in the cities, or migrate to the U.S., but try to maintain traditional ways and ties? How should we analyze the labor—often extensive—that is performed as a communal service in the traditional manner? “Commune” isn’t interested in these questions, and doesn’t give enough hard information about Mayan economic life to allow us to even speculate.

Calling the Indians “peasants” is not as illuminating as it sounds. For starters, I question whether any of us —Marxist or otherwise—understand in a rigorous, scientific way exactly what “the peasantry” is. Clearly it isn’t the unmitigated bastion of reaction that

colonialism. And this—not peasant superstition—is why so many diehard Indian revolutionaries, past and present, have identified themselves as ‘traditionalists.’ (One world-famous example is Leonard Peltier, still a captive of the U.S. government, who is respected by Indians both for his traditional understanding and for his armed struggle for Indian self-determination.)

So what about the class nature of the Zapatista struggle? Are the insurgents “semi-proletarian peasants”? I don’t know—and neither do the authors of “Commune,” as far as I can tell.

I think that class analysis is key to revolutionary theory, strategy and tactics. But naming people as a particular class has never worked as an easy shortcut for explaining how they act. Classes are living, developing organisms. They rise and fall, absorbing new elements and losing others as they evolve. In some social formations, class is expressed most powerfully through race, or nationality, or gender, or religion. Classes make decisions. Even “pure proletarians” sometimes choose the wrong path and embrace disaster. On the other hand, non-proletarian classes sometimes rise to history’s occasions, transforming their class stand and even, sometimes, becoming proletarians as part of the revolutionary process.

We also should acknowledge that it’s time to take a fresh theoretical look at class. Previous conceptions have brought revolutionaries a long way, but they haven’t been adequate to explain, let alone prevent, the defeat of the last wave of global revolutionary struggle. And the world has changed radically in the meantime. The emerging economic order is almost certainly characterized by new classes and new class configurations. That doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t use the tools of class analysis available to us, just that we should be careful about jumping to easy conclusions.

Obviously this is a huge subject that can’t be addressed here in any depth. But it’s relevant, because “Commune” uses class categories in such a rigid way to make such bald generalizations. It’s simplistic view of class in Chiapas is tied to its Eurocentrism. Guillermo Bonfil points out that European paradigms of class and

long-standing practices of the indigenous communities. This aspect of Zapatismo has attracted particular interest and support from anti-authoritarian radicals worldwide.

Marcos: “In this interweaving, in this exchange between two different forms of decision-making, the most orthodox proposals of Marxism or Leninism, theoretical concepts or historical references...were confronted by an ideological tradition...born of war—in this case, the war of the Conquest that began, well, not exactly five hundred years ago, and that continues through different historical periods. It continues...it continues, and it grows. If we had been orthodox leftists, we would never have worked with indigenous peoples. Now, today, I believe there are many theories in crisis.”

Here Marcos is describing a process familiar to generations of revolutionaries: “outside” organizers being transformed by the oppressed, the oppressed absorbing and taking over the tools of the organizers for their own purposes. He is also describing his own adjustment to the fact that the Indians’ struggle had a fundamentally anti-colonial character. The authors of “Commune” have no confidence in either of these political developments—but many of the Indians did.

Revolutionaries in Chiapas—indigenous and ladino—were divided about the wisdom of attacking towns and cities. People had different ideas about what the purpose of such an offensive would be, and what its prospects for success were. In practice, the question was decided by the Indians in the Zapatista communities, who undertook a long process of discussion, deliberation and voting. According to some sources, Marcos personally opposed the nature and timing of the offensive, but was democratically overruled by indigenous cadres. As a members of the CCRI General Command told a reporter, “It was the people themselves who said ‘Let’s begin already.’” Shortly after the uprising, Marcos described it like this: “One year ago, towards the end of January, the Clandestine Committee said, ‘We are going to take arms.’ And

they gave me the order, 'Hey you, take charge of this, we're giving you a time limit to work with, choose when.'

I quote Marcos not because I think he understands everything, or because I think the Zapatistas are flawlessly correct. Mainly, I think it's important to understand that the relationship between the urban revolutionaries and the indigenous social base of the rebellion is a complicated, mutual, dynamic interaction. An important one. It's not the clichéd "mediation" that "Commune" conjures up. The Indians are not backward innocents being led around by the nose. Nor are the ladino revolutionaries dictating a rigid, unvarying political formula from on high. The real-life process by which Marxist ladino militants fused with a rooted, experienced indigenous struggle needs to be carefully studied by serious radicals, not dismissed out of hand as an ideological poison.

Of course, some might argue that Marcos is lying about what happened, and covering up his slick manipulations. Among revolutionaries, that's a pretty serious charge. But that's exactly what "Commune"'s authors want us to believe. Based on distorted interpretation of John Womack's book, *Rebellion in Chiapas*, they allege that "until September 1993, Marcos and the Indian cadres were following orders from the High Command of the FLN in Mexico City, though he has since made every effort to hide it." (September 1993, of course, would have been just a few months before the uprising.) The authors also tell us that Womack has "destroyed the image Marcos has tried so hard to portray of Indigenous forcing urban leftists to abandon their ideology in the years before the uprising took place."

Rebellion in Chiapas, a reference book written by a Harvard historian who is generally supportive of the Zapatista cause, is a valuable resource. One of its useful characteristics is that, while it's full of human sympathy, it is also ruthlessly skeptical towards all the actors involved in the drama in Chiapas. Womack is a student of *realpolitik*, who digs to get behind the rhetoric and spin. He is rather cynical about some things, including, at times, the politics

Durham comments: "From the earliest times the wars against Indians were not only to take over land but also to squash the threatening example of Indian communism....So we have always defined our struggle not only as a struggle for land but also as a struggle to retain our cultural values. These values are communistic values."

It's not that whatever the Zapatistas or other Indians do is automatically wonderful. The EZLN, for one, never claimed to have achieved the perfect society, nor that their activity is immune from criticism. But criticism should be specific, based on what is happening in the struggle, not on reductionist class schemes (or innuendo). Unwilling to even consider that the Zapatistas might have something to teach THEM in the way of revolutionary insight or leadership, "Commune"'s authors consistently evade the fact that there is a powerful material basis for militant, anticapitalist Indian traditionalism, a basis quite different from what Western radicals know in their own societies. As Durham says, "We do not need to go through an industrial revolution so that we can come out as communists on the other side."

To be a traditional Indian doesn't mean to be ignorant of what's going on outside your territory. Nor does it mean to be provincial in outlook. Peoples facing genocide don't have the luxury of hiding their heads in the sand. Many traditional Indian societies are quite flexible, and willing to adopt lifeways, ideas and technologies that they find useful from other cultures. (One of these, obviously, is the gun.) Anthropologists and historians have commented specifically on the Maya as a people who have been quick to incorporate the things they wanted from other societies, often transforming what they have appropriated.

On the most general level, indigenous traditionalism means simply to value the ways and wisdom of your people and to defend them against annihilation. This continuity and community is a source of great strength; a weapon that's been deployed for hundreds of years to fight against, and survive under centuries of

patista uprising has raised the level of indigenous struggle worldwide. Not coincidentally, the revolt helped galvanize the wave of international anti-globalization protest of recent years. (In case we're tempted to forget, that opposition didn't start in Seattle.) The EZLN exposed underlying weaknesses in the new capitalist world order, demonstrating that its interdependent fabric is vulnerable to revolution. Can this all be dismissed as "failure"?

The success of the uprising, although clearly partial, is actually the most important thing for radicals to understand about the Zapatistas: How could a revolutionary struggle that seemed so isolated, so doomed by our default parameters, end up striking such a heavy blow against neo-liberalism? Yet that success is exactly what "Commune" declines to examine. Because this leads into "forbidden" terrain. That is, into the real world of armed struggle and of Indian resistance, where traditional leadership and traditional culture are often part of anti-colonialism and world revolution instead of being backward, feudal, "peasant" remnants.

Not all Indians who call themselves "traditional" are freedom fighters, as we know. In Chiapas, both religious reactionaries and PRI hacks have sometimes hidden behind a facade of Indian cultural identity while attacking Indian interests. Still, because of the particularities of Indian history, traditional leadership and culture throughout the Americas tend to be more communal, more suspicious of capitalism and commodification, more woman-centered and more radical than their assimilationist counterparts.

After all, the traditions we're talking about aren't European feudal traditions. In most cases, what traditional Indians seek to defend is simply the continuance of their civilization—a civilization just as valid, and just as relevant to the solution of modern problems, as what the West has produced. (To take just one example, Euro-environmentalism often looks pretty superficial from the perspective of traditional Native beliefs.)

In "American Indian Culture: Traditionalism and Spiritualism in a Revolutionary Struggle," Native American activist Jimmie

of indigenous activism. (One thing to keep in mind in that regard is that Rebellion is a documentary history—and much of the revolutionary Indian perspective is not available as written documents.) But overall, Rebellion manages to demythologize the EZLN without disrespecting it. The same can't be said of "Commune," which misuses Womack's analysis, twisting his facts and putting words in his mouth.

There's some interesting information about the FLN in Womack's book, mainly from the 1980s, that reveals limitations and dogmatism in its politics, along with revolutionary commitment and insight. What Rebellion does not show is what the authors of "Commune" wish it to show—that the Zapatista uprising was secretly stage-managed by ideologues in Mexico City.

A small group of cadres from the FLN was definitely very influential in the rise of the EZLN in Chiapas. Taking a road of considerable sacrifice and courage, Marcos and his comrades offered their services as guerrillas to the Indian communities, and argued for a revolutionary path. But the indigenous leadership and base of the uprising were hardly naive or gullible. Rooted in a long tradition of anti-colonialism, and having experienced waves of would-be leaders and activist organizations, they were politically aware, and aware of who Marcos was. (The title "Subcommandante," by which he is universally known, was a rank of the FLN, one which he has held since the 80s.)

Moreover, the FLN militants in Chiapas, deeply committed to the movement there, started to break with the FLN national organization well before "Commune" says. John Womack, in correspondence, estimates that the Mexico City leadership "began to steadily lose control there to its 'bases' in 1992...This failure issued in the change of command in the EZLN in January 1993, when Marcos became military secretary and the CCRI formed. This was practically a coup within the FLN." There had to have been significant ideological conflict for some time leading up to the split. As Wom-

ack says, “There are many possible interpretations of this change” within the FLN.

For my part, I see no reason to believe that the basic transformation Marcos describes, with indigenous leadership and organization gradually taking over the struggle, is a fabrication. It’s compatible with the nature and timing of the split in the FLN, and it’s credible as a revolutionary dynamic. Marcos’ analysis, in fact, seems to explain much about the distinctive character of the Zapatistas—much that is admirable and worthy of study, too. I’m sure he has highlighted certain aspects of it for the benefit of the media, and he certainly hasn’t tried to put a spotlight on the FLN’s involvement. Neither would I in his situation. But if the authors of “Commune” have hard facts to back up their insinuations of gross manipulation and dishonesty, they should bring them forward. John Womack’s book isn’t going to do it for them.

“Commune” seems to want nothing less than a magically-pure, un-“mediated” struggle to spring up out of an idealized proletariat. Because the Zapatistas don’t fit this stereotypical scenario, and because they fight openly as Indians, the authors find them lacking. So they try to explain the Zapatista rebellion—whose dynamism is impossibly to deny—in a condescending and mechanical fashion. They cast the worst possible light on the “mediation” of the FLN guerrillas, while treating the Maya by default as hapless clients. Throughout “Commune,” this reductionist approach not only reflects cultural prejudice, but also trivializes the rich and virtually continuous history of armed struggle in Mexico. The heroism and creativity of generations of revolutionaries and oppressed peoples in Mexico are reduced to a series of ideological imperfections and blunders in which nothing fundamental was learned. For example, “Commune” brings up the working class upsurge of the late 1950s mainly to question “to what extent working class self-activity was mediated,” and to highlight how “all the ideological drag of Stalinism was present.” The guerrilla organizations of the 1970s, some of which had significant mass support, are dismissed in two sen-

tences as “tainted by the militarist ideology of Che or Mao.” How formulaic and lifeless this approach is!

As for the Zapatista uprising itself: Was the New Years’ Day rebellion a “failure,” as “Commune” says? This may be the pamphlet’s most revealing conclusion.

I guess it all depends on what you mean by failure. The Zapatistas didn’t necessarily expect that their revolt would trigger a general insurrection in Mexico. Here is Marcos, speaking in his trademark style: “We weren’t expecting the Mexican people to say: ‘Oh, look, the Zapatistas have taken up arms, let’s join in,’ and that then they would grab kitchen knives and go after the first policeman they found. We believed that the people would respond as they did, that they would say, ‘Something is wrong in this country, something has to change.’” On the other hand, John Womack thinks that the Indian cadres intended their uprising to result in a general revolt and the fall of the Salinas government. Not having insider knowledge, my only comment is that sometimes oppressed people are desperate, and feel that they have no choice but to fight back the best way they can, despite the risks, when an opportunity presents itself. “We have nothing to lose,” the Zapatistas say. Armed struggle under these conditions may not be pretty or perfectly planned. But, more often than many leftists admit, it’s how revolutions actually start; how leaps in revolutionary consciousness actually happen.

What’s undeniable is that the rebellion had an enormous impact, shaking Mexico to the core and sending shock waves far beyond. It initiated a period of armed class conflict that continues up until right now. The EZLN uprising was immediately followed by a burst of strikes and land occupations regionally. Nationally, it helped trigger armed struggle among Indians in Guerrero, Sinaloa and other states, as well as a range of other militant insurgencies and mobilizations—all of which changed the landscape of Mexican politics. Whatever happens in Chiapas now, indigenous Mexico has elevated its anti-colonial struggle to a new level. In fact, the Za-