

# **The Zapatistas and the International Circulation of Struggle**

**Lessons Suggested and Problems Raised**

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For a long, long time many activists have recognized two things: first, that capitalism operates on a global level and second, that to achieve enough power to overthrow capitalism the working class must find ways to organize its own struggles at the same level.

The title of this conference implies a critique, with which I agree, that something has been missing from a great many accounts of the global character of capital. We have an enormous literature, generated by several generations of historians and economists, anthropologists and cultural critics on the character of capitalist operations at the level of the world as a whole. From the study of imperialism through that of the international division of labor to current preoccupations with the latest phase of “globalization” we retain a substantial literature and considerable understanding of the cleverness and brutality of those operations. On the other hand, the extent and depth of the study of the international character of working class struggle is considerably less. Fortunately, that situation has been changing somewhat with the urgency to find new effective ways to counter capital’s world-wide offensive during these last years. Indeed, there are reasons to believe that the force of necessity has been pushing innovation of such resistance from below faster than many have recognized or been able to study and theorize. It is not at all clear, however, that what we need is to oppose the globalization of capital from above by a homologous globalization from below. The formulation risks repeating past errors in which oppositional movements mirror that which they would overcome and therefore fail to transcend it even when they succeed. We are engaged in a war for our future and for the future of the planet and the last thing we need is more Pyrric victories in which we discover with horror that we have not won at all. It is paramount, therefore, that we accelerate both our absorption of recent experience and our efforts to derive lessons from it for present and future tactics and strategy. In this talk I want to discuss one set of experiences and discuss some of the questions they raise for our study, our strategic thinking and our organizing.

## **The Zapatistas and their impact**

The experiences that I want to address are those of the Zapatista rebellion in Southern Mexico, the world wide networks of support which were woven for it and the way the elaboration of those networks have transcended the traditional framework of solidarity to interweave a whole spectrum of different struggles into a fabric of interconnections highly suggestive of directions in which we might want to move.

A movement of primarily low waged and unwaged indigenous Mayan peasants, the Zapatista rebellion became public on January 1, 1994 when the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) came out of the jungle to occupy several towns in the highlands of the state of Chiapas. Since that day the images of their black ski-masked soldiers and the words of their primary spokesperson Subcommandante Marcos have become familiar to millions of people around the world. If this particular struggle in this small, relatively unknown part of the world had only generated its own handful of supporters in a widespread solidarity movement as so many other struggles have done, it would still be of interest to the issue of resistance to globalization as far as any such movement would be that has been able to reach beyond its own locale to connect with others. But the case of the Zapatistas is of particular interest, it seems to me, because it has not only generated wider support than might have been expected, it has also achieved what no other recent struggle has been able to do. It has set in motion the beginnings of a world-wide discussion about the current

state of the class struggle and of a world-wide mobilization aimed at finding new and more effective ways of interlinking both opposition to capitalism and mutual aid in the elaboration of alternatives. It has done this not only across space but across a wide variety of very different kinds of struggle. Both of these phenomena –discussion and mobilization– are now widespread but still limited in scope –there are many who have not joined in these discussions and many struggles that remain disconnected– but these processes do seem to point in the right direction and therefore merit attention.

There are several aspects of this struggle, the way it has developed and the impact that it has had that I would like to discuss. First, its indigenous character and the ways its own internal and culturally determined political processes have struck a nerve among those from quite different ethnic backgrounds in Mexico and elsewhere in the world. Second, the key role of computer communications in the global circulation of solidarity and the ability to link up with other struggles elsewhere. Third, the way its analysis of current capitalist policy and strategy has furthered the recognition of the common enemy at this point in history –and thus encouraged a search for common strategies of resistance. Fourth, the insistence of the Zapatistas on the creation and elaboration of a diverse array of alternatives to replace current capitalist institutions and relationships. Fifth, the experiences we have had with the extension of its very local practices of encounter to the large-scale meetings of people from many languages and different backgrounds. Sixth, the serious obstacles that have been raised by our growing experience in cyberspace for improving the effectiveness of the international circulation of struggle.

## **1. An indigenous rebellion**

Despite all the efforts of the Mexican government to prove otherwise, it has become widely understood that the Zapatista rebellion has been an uprising of indigenous peoples, not of one people, but of several, with different, though interrelated languages and cultural practices. It has been, in one sense, a renaissance of “Mexico profundo”, of mesoamerican civilization 500 hundred years after the conquistadors destroyed its classical form. Less widely understood has been the fact that this indigenous rebellion –like so many other indigenous struggles around the world– is no romantic revival of cultural remnants but a newly constructed political process that has interwoven the old and the new, tradition and radical change, attachment to the land and hard experience with wage labor. What appeared at first as a disturbance on the margins was soon revealed as an embodiment of the most contemporary forms of struggle. The rebellion has sprung from regions in Chiapas which, over the last twenty years, have been scenes of dramatic changes, not stagnant backwaters. The Zapatista movement grew out of the efforts to cope with those changes both within communities and in the relationship among communities, from older more established villages to those of recent vintage carved out of the jungle by immigrants in processes of colonization. In a very real sense, the Zapatista movement emerged as a tentative and transitional solution to precisely the problem which confronts us everywhere: how to link up a diverse array of linguistically and culturally distinct peoples and their struggles, despite and beyond those distinctions, how to weave a variety of struggles into one struggle that never loses its multiplicity. If for no other reason, all of us who are interested in accomplishing the same goal at a wider level would do well to study carefully this microcosmic experiment which so suddenly exploded in the political firmament with the brilliance of a supernova.

But at the same time this indigenous rebellion speaks to those of us far from the mountains of southeastern Mexico because it has organized itself in ways which constitute profound critiques of all those modern political forms in which we have lost faith and offers one example that proves viable alternatives can be, and are being, constructed. Instead of demanding admittance to the established political arena, the Zapatistas' have presented a severe critique of representative democracy. The Zapatistas have gone far beyond Mexican social democratic reformers –who merely wish to constrain the ruling party in order to carve out a larger piece of the pie of governance for themselves– to demand the elimination of the constitutional structure of the state that has sought to confine politics to the formal electoral arena where professional politicians act out a simulacrum of democracy while perpetuating the brutal exploitation by capital and the genocide of whole peoples.

This demand was implicit in the 1996 Zapatista call for the formation of a national “front” –a misleadingly named network of interlinked local and regional mobilizations– without political party affiliation and with a scope of political action that bypassed electoral politics. Its formal initiation in the Fall of 1997 sent a tremor of fear through the entire Mexican political establishment, both PRIista and oppositional. The explicit demand for fundamental constitutional reforms that would dismantle the current structures of power was enunciated by the Zapatistas in their forum on the Reform of the State and in the San Andres negotiations on Indigenous Rights. They were written into the final San Andres Accords –which were signed by government representatives but later repudiated as threats to the integrity of the nation. This rejection of the dominant illusions of democracy and the organization of creative, viable alternatives outside and against the state has had enormous appeal not only throughout Mexico but in many other countries as well –for many cynical resistance has begun to change into a new willingness to once more take up the problem of achieving real, democratic self-determination.

On the other hand, the Zapatistas have quite explicitly rejected the dominant revolutionary project of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century: the seizure of state power and its consolidation in the hands of a revolutionary elite. While many have yearned to see one of those massive gatherings of hundreds of thousands of Zapatista supporters in Mexico City's Zocalo suddenly turn into a seizure of the Presidential Palace and a toppling of the PRIista state, the Zapatistas themselves have rejected such non-solutions and called for people to organize themselves autonomously from the state in ways that can lead not to its seizure but to its eclipse and abolition. This rejection has included an explanation of how they see the EZLN itself as but a mirror image of the Mexican Army and therefore entirely unqualified to replace it. The Zapatista Army with all of the formal hierarchies of any army is viewed as a distasteful and temporary tool to be discarded as quickly as possible. Indeed, in many ways their successful creation of new political spaces has already led to the demotion of the Zapatista Army to a largely symbolic role.

The Zapatista political proposal is quite different. They offer their own experiences of successful community self-organization and of the effective weaving of networks of cooperation and collaboration among diverse communities as one, but not the only, example of practical alternatives to the modern state. This experience has been a complex one which has evolved over a period of many years and has confronted many obstacles within and among communities as well as those created by the efforts of the PRIista state to maintain its own structures of political control and the economic and social subordinations of those communities. Among those internal obstacles are racial, ethnic, linguistic, religious and gender differences which have long weakened the abil-

ity of these indigenous communities to develop alternatives capable of transcending a profound passive resistance to the dominant order.

While discussion of these differences go beyond the scope of this talk, I do want to dwell briefly on one of these internal obstacles which has by no means been completely transcended but which has been confronted to the point of bringing about substantial and inspiring change. That obstacle is the profound patriarchal hierarchy which has pervaded indigenous communities and kept women in distinctly subaltern positions where they had little power over their own bodies and destinies and were forbidden to own land or exercise public responsibilities (cargoes). The Zapatista way of dealing with this obstacle has proceeded in at least two phases: first, the acceptance of women into the EZLN and a willingness to accord them rank, responsibility and command just like men, and second, the acceptance of an autonomous initiative of indigenous women to define and specify a series of women's rights that dramatically challenged the traditional structures of patriarchy. This was not, the EZLN leadership has emphasized, an according of rights from the top down, but an acceptance of rights demanded autonomously. This acceptance and embrace of women's autonomy on their own terms is prototypical of the centrality of autonomy in the Zapatista articulation of indigenous demands more generally.

## **2. The key role of computer communications**

Chiapas, despite some long standing tourist interest in its ancient ruins and local indigenous color, occupies a relatively remote corner of Mexico. The daily travails and struggles of its largely indigenous and peasant population have historically been mainly of interest to anthropologists and linguists. The initial explosion of rebellion on January 1, 1994 led to spurt of media attention because it tore away the illusions crafted by the Mexican government and its Northern backers to surround and celebrate the initiation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) on that same day. But as the Mexican government responded to the rebellion by pouring some 15,000 troops into the highlands and the Zapatistas retreated into the jungles, this public visibility risked being purely momentary. Certainly the Mexican government downplayed the rebellion and sought to isolate it. As the body count dropped and fighting dwindled the Mexican government expected media presence began to evaporate and looked forward to the prospect of cleaning up an untidy and embarrassing situation out of public view using its normal brutal methods.

This hope, however, proved futile as a wide variety of observers from elsewhere in Mexico and from abroad poured into Chiapas and solidarity crystallized in huge demonstrations in Mexico City and elsewhere. Before long such mobilization became an endless nightmare for the Mexican state and forced it to abandon an overt military solution and enter into the last thing it wanted: a formal dialog with the rebels in which it was forced to recognize the indigenous character of the rebellion and to negotiate. In this new political space the government did not know how to act and performed very poorly. The Zapatistas, however, won not only an ever wider audience but also ever wider respect and support. Eventually it would be revealed that the government's negotiations were extremely hypocritical and that not only were they laying the groundwork for an extensive low intensity (i.e., terrorist) war against the Zapatista communities but that they would –in the Spring of 1995 and again in the Winter of 1997-98– return to the use of overt military force.

Nevertheless, during the long hiatus between the end of fighting in January 1994 and the government's unilateral violation of cease-fire accords in February of 1995 the Zapatistas had the time not only to develop a spectacular political initiative, e.g., the National Democratic Convention that brought together grassroots and political movements from all over Mexico, but also to get their message out to the wider world in such a way as to inspire not only solidarity but new discussions and mobilizations about common concerns.

Within Mexico the circuits of communication through which the Zapatista communiqués, interviews and stories circulated were largely traditional ones: a spate of books and collections, a few liberal newspapers and magazines, especially *La Jornada* and *Proceso*, the publications of formal political parties and organizations and a wide variety of informal networks in urban barrios and rural communities. Within Mexico the relatively new networks of computer communications played a subsidiary role, probably most importantly among those Mexican groups which had mobilized in opposition to NAFTA in the early 1990s and had elaborated Internet connections with their counterparts in the United States and Canada. It is important to remember that the Zapatistas themselves had no direct connection to the Internet, nor to any other means of wider communication and relied exclusively on the mediation of sympathetic individuals and organizations to get their message out.

Outside of Mexico, however, the story was quite different. In the extremely rapid circulation of information about the Zapatista rebellion and of subsequent discussion and mobilization around the world computer communications played a decisive role. Whether media coverage was intense or non-existent, the Internet hummed with a steady and quite impressive flow of information generated from a wide variety of on-the-scene observers and distant analysts and commentators. The Zapatistas' ability to produce a surprising array of communiqués, letters, metaphorical stories and news bulletins provided a massive counterweight to government disinformation and media neglect. In moments of intensified conflict such information and analysis were downloaded by the megabyte and transformed into pamphlets, leaflets, newspaper articles, teach-ins, lectures and letters to the editor, all of which gave people far from Mexico a intense sense of the situation and fed local mobilizations protesting Mexican government repression. Within the context of a previous widespread organized opposition to NAFTA and equally widespread computer networks concerned with human rights violations, indigenous struggles, and women's issues, this flow of information generated an almost unprecedented breath of discussion political action.

As more and more people became involved in these processes they brought their computer and artistic skills to elaborate discussion lists, PeaceNet conferences and an explosive proliferation of web sites. Larger numbers also meant a greater capacity for translation from Spanish into other languages and a further acceleration of the circulation of struggle. This was by no means the first time computer communications had played a key role in social struggle, but it quickly became a highly effective and widely recognized one. Even the media began to pick up on these hitherto largely invisible currents of communication that undermined and eclipsed their monopoly of and ability to limit and distort information but by providing means of almost instantaneous interactive discussion and collaboration dramatically accelerated the possibilities of long-distance organization.

One interesting Zapatista initiative which reached out to the world using the Internet to involve others in the political debates inside Mexico was their Call for a plebiscite on their future political orientation. In an unprecedented move, that caught the government entirely off guard

(once again), the Zapatistas talked Alianza Civica –a pro-democracy NGO– into setting up thousands of polling booths in cities throughout Mexico where people could vote on a series of questions about the Zapatista program and methods. Participation was simultaneously opened to people throughout the world through the Internet which provided the means for circulating the questions and gathering the answers. Over a million people participated in this plebiscite in Mexico and over 81,000 people in 47 countries took part through the Internet.

By early 1996, two years after the public appearance of the rebellion, these cyberspatial circuits of communication had reached into a wide variety of other struggles around the world. They provoked such extensive discussion of Zapatista politics and proposals that when the EZLN issued a Call for continental and intercontinental encounters to exchange experiences of struggle and to compare notes of capitalist policies and strategies of resistance the response far outstripped all their expectations. Indeed, the Zapatista Call, which they issued with some trepidation, high hopes but low expectations generated a mobilization of a scope and depth that no other individual group has been able to do in recent memory. Not only did thousands of people respond enthusiastically to the invitation and move quickly to organize a series of preliminary continental meetings. The organization of the European meetings, the Internet played a role in circulating ideas and proposals and the results of a series of face-to-face meetings. In North America, with the organization of the continental encounter in the hands of the Zapatistas, the Internet served mainly to circulate information about the event and collect applications for participation. The same pattern would be repeated for the Intercontinental Encounter, also held in Chiapas. For security reasons registration and certification was required for these meetings in Chiapas and was handled in each country. The Net circulated information about requirements for certification and communication between applicants and organizers.

Over 3,000 grassroots activists from over 40 countries gathered in Chiapas in the Summer of 1996 for the Intercontinental Encounter. As many expected the meeting was tumultuous, even arduous, as a wide array of individuals with equally diverse backgrounds (in terms of both their struggles and organizing experience) came together to attempt a multi-sided, multi-lingual conversation about the state of the world and how to change it. Different kinds of people working within different political and theoretical perspectives shared their views on the state of the world and their proposals for struggle. All sorts of Marxists, feminists, environmentalists, indigenous organizers, social democrats, and human rights activists did their best to engage each other and to find common ground.

This Intercontinental encounter was remarkable not for its difficulties but for achieving such a degree of coherency that virtually all concerned decided that they should be repeated as one vehicle for the continuation of the conversations begun. Out of that meeting came the decision to organize another –in Europe– and enthusiasm for finding or creating not just periodical but an on-going conversations on a global scale about fighting capitalism and building alternatives. The Second Intercontinental Encounter was held in Spain in late July, 1997.

Like the First Intercontinental the Second was largely organized via the Internet coupled with a series of face-to-face meetings of various groups in Spain. Ideas were circulated and discussed over various lists and conferences. As the time of the Encounter approached web sites were organized both in Spain and elsewhere in the world to carry the dozens of papers prepared for the meetings to all interested parties who were unable to attend. Voluntary translators multiplied these texts across linguistic barriers and made possible a multilingual multilogue at the meetings themselves. There was a quite conscious attempt to extend the Encounter beyond the



4,000 who showed up in Spain by providing daily reports on the Internet about the discussions being held. Originally, there were hopes to create real-time interactive text and video reporting from the Encounter but technical limitations on facilities available in Spain proved insuperable. Nevertheless, textual reports were generated regularly and the Italian participants proved adept at returning digitized audio and photographs from the meetings to their web sites. This material was not interactive but they certainly added depth, color and immediacy for those who were following events from afar.

In the wake of the Second Intercontinental Encounter the associated web sites have maintained an archive of material to feed into future discussions and a variety of post-event evaluations and summations have circulated on the Internet and been added to those archives. Today computer communications with their networks of lists and web sites continue to provide an interactive flow of information about the ongoing struggles in Chiapas as well as of discussion about related struggles elsewhere. The explosion of net activity in the wake of the December 22, 1997 massacre of 47 men, women and children in Acteal, Chiapas and the widespread protests to which it has given rise is only the latest moment of the vibrancy of this technology at an international level. What we have experienced here seems to represent an historically new level of organizational capability whose potentialities we are only beginning to explore. Moreover, the legacy of these meetings has been an elaboration of an ever widening network of contacts and collaboration which has complemented, reinforced and expanded already existing networks.

### **3. The Recognition of a Common Enemy**

From almost the beginning of their communications with the rest of the world, the Zapatistas have situated the policies of the Mexican government within the wider framework of what in Latin America is called Neoliberalism. By this is meant a set of policies which 1) privilege the market over government regulation, 2) mandate the privatization of state enterprises, 3) reduce constraints on business activity through the deregulation of both industry and finance, 4) reduce barriers to international trade and investment (both real and financial) and 5) impose the costs of these changes on both waged and unwaged workers through the slashing of government supports to consumption and the standard of living more generally. These have been the dominant policies in Mexico since the onset of the international debt crisis in the early 1980s and have been deepened under the recent regimes of Salinas and then Zedillo. The Zapatista rebellion and the pro-democracy upsurge to which it added emphasis helped precipitate the crisis of those policies by the end of 1994 as the flight of fearful hot money brought about the Peso collapse, a \$50 billion bailout and renewed austerity and depression in Mexico. The Zapatista attack on Neoliberal policies, both before and after the Peso Crisis, has resonated across the Mexican body politic and forced a debate on these policies in which the government has been pushed back on the defensive and opposition has deepened and spread.

As their discourse on this subject has circulated around the world it has also resonated in many other countries and social struggles as well. The Intercontinental Encounters, mentioned above, were subtitled "Against Neoliberalism and For Humanity." This provoked among the organizers and participants a comparison of Neoliberalism in Mexico and the rest of Latin America with Thatcherism in Britain, Maastricht & Schengen in Europe, IMF structural adjustment programs everywhere, Reagan – Bush – Clinton supply-side policies in the United States and so on. The

result has been a widely shared perception of the unusually homogeneous character of capitalist policy in this period. Whereas we used to be able to contrast policies of development with those of underdevelopment in changing patterns of the global capitalist hierarchy of wages, income and standards of living, today we find, virtually everywhere a systematic attack on working class income coupled with continuing restructuring to decompose class power into new, more manageable configurations of capitalist accumulation.

After several years in which the politics of resistance and struggle have been fragmented and weakened by certain theoretical tendencies so preoccupied with the rejection of “master narratives” that they blinded themselves to capitalist efforts to re-impose its own master narrative of exploitation and alienation on the entire world, this coalescence of recognition of a common enemy has provided a powerful sinew to knit together widely scattered struggles. Whereas the Zapatista demands for indigenous and women’s autonomy and the rejection of any singular formula for political or social organization has made their struggle attractive to many so-called “post-modernists”, their critique of Neoliberalism and capitalism has linked them firmly with the Marxist tradition of the revolutionary transcendence of capitalism. At the Intercontinental Encounters there were many who worried that while a great many participants might be willing to condemn and fight against Neoliberalism –because of its particularly nasty and retrograde character– they would hesitate to embrace a rejection of capitalism tout court. These worries proved suprisingly and encouragingly unfounded and throughout the fabric of interconnections strengthened and expanded through these meetings the common rejection of capitalism is pervasive.

#### **4. Alternatives, Plural**

The insistence of the Zapatistas on the creation and elaboration of a diverse array of alternatives to replace current capitalist institutions and relationships has been both the result of a conscious rejection of the revolutionary tradition of imagining the replacement of the current despised capitalist order by another preferred one, e.g., socialism or communism, and an outgrowth of their own experience with the politics of diversity in Chiapas.

On the one hand, they have been critical of the way such replacement has in the past and would likely in the future only invert the structures of class power, e.g., the substitution of the dictatorship of the proletariat for the dictatorship of capital, and maintain rather than do away with the very class structures that need to be abolished. Thus, their refusal, mentioned above, of a politics of the seizure of power.

On the other hand, the experience of their communities, out of which their politics have emerged has been that it is not only possible but highly desirable to eschew the generalized imposition of common rules in favor of a much richer diversity of cultures and ways of organizing and settling local affairs. That this is not a simple-minded withdrawal into localism can be seen in the willingness and abilities of these communities to collaborate with each other locally, regionally, nationally and even with others internationally. The EZLN itself was created by the communities as a collective project and its leadership is made up of people from many different ethnic, cultural and linguistic groups. Over the last four years the indigenous Zapatista communities have reached out across Mexico and helped weave hundreds of distinct groups into a linked web called the National Indigenous Congress. This organization of collaboration has

no permanent institutional form, no central committee or steering group but a multitude of connections among autonomous "knots" which from time to time coalesce into assemblies for specific purposes. A key subset of these "knots" are now linked via computer. The Zapatistas have also provided key support for the formation of the Zapatista National Liberation Front that was formally inaugurated in Mexico City in September of 1997 and involves not only indigenous communities but a wide variety of grassroots movements both rural and urban. Once again, the object has not been the construction of a unified program or formal organization but the acceleration of the circulation of struggle and mutual aid.

This insistence on the revolutionary project being a rupture of uniform rules has challenged the traditional rigid structures of Western constitutional states and offered the alternative of working out a more multidimensional politics across a greater array of social practices. While the Zapatista communities have considerable experience with such politics they have refused to recommend their own solutions to others. Instead they have pointed to the intolerability of current capitalist structures and called for others to apply their own imagination and creativity to the invention of other solutions. This open-ended proposal has stimulated widespread discussion and debate within Mexico and elsewhere. The guardians of the present order have rejected it out of hand evoking fears of chaos and the collapse of civilization. Those wedded to traditional notions of creating a socialist or communist system to replace the present one have also reacted with disdain and evoked similar fears. A common reference has been the collapse of what was once Yugoslavia into civil war, ethnic cleansing and barbarism. But others, disabused with both the current system and old alternatives, have been fascinated by the effectiveness of the self-organization of the Zapatista movement and its ability to build and elaborate a variety of political linkages across vast differences in culture, tradition and language. Even if that experience cannot be duplicated elsewhere, due to different traditions and practices, it at least suggests that the invention of new ways of doing politics is possible and on more than a local scale. Thus the inspiration which many around the world have found in the Zapatista movement. One part of the world where this apparently esoteric indigenous movement from the margins has resonated most strongly has been, of all places, Western Europe. But while some have smelled a kind of desperate return to the Third Worldism of an earlier era, there are good reasons for suspecting a much more profound source: a surprising convergence not only of resistance to capitalist policy but a growing tendency to discover new forms of political practice that resemble, in general terms, those in Chiapas. Nowhere does this seem to be more pronounced than in Italy. In both 1996 and 1997 one of the largest and most enthusiastic collection of people to participate in the Intercontinental Encounters were Italian. In a recent survey of pro-Zapatista demonstrations in the wake of the Acteal massacre, a disproportionate number of actions and people took place in the streets of Italy.

If we investigate the sources of this connection, of the sympathetic response of young Italian militants to both the Zapatistas and the struggles they have influenced, we discover some interesting parallels. First, at the level of political practice, the cutting edge of Italian social struggles have embraced a refusal of representative political forms similar to that of the Zapatistas and, at the same time, elaborated a multiplicity of autonomous struggles such as the squatted youth centers that have been created throughout Italy. These centers, in turn, are often linked to each other through the European Counter-Network of controinformazione which has played a vital role in circulating not only information about the struggles in Mexico and Italy, but those throughout Europe. Many of those who came to Chiapas or Spain for the Intercontinental Encounters also

participated, or had friends who participated in the European-wide demonstration against unemployment and Maastricht in Amsterdam. Over 3,000 militants in Italy demanded free trains for transportation to that demonstration and got them –much to the annoyance of the Swiss, German and Dutch governments. When the police of those countries harassed the Italian protesters, they used cellular phones, the ECN and the network of free radios to mobilize immediate support throughout Italy. A few days ago, on January 14, 1998 another free train was apparently obtained to transport thousands of demonstrators from all over Italy to a nation-wide demonstration for Chiapas and against the Acteal massacre in Rome. We thus see the circulation of ideas, people and methods of struggle between Chiapas, Italy and the rest of Europe.

At the level of theory, some recent expressions of militant Italian thought bare an uncanny resemblance to Zapatista ways of thinking about revolution and the displacement-eclipse of state power. In this regard I will only mention one revealing collection of materials: *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, edited by Paolo Vierno and Michel Hardt. Although the language and formulations differ markedly from those of the Zapatistas, there are many striking parallels.

The Italians may speak of self-valorization and constituent power instead of indigenous autonomy and the power of self-determination but the ideas are homologous. The Italians, coming from a Marxist tradition may ground their appreciation of the power of a proliferating multitude of alternatives in the spread of so-called “immaterial labor” and “mass intellectuality”, whereas the Zapatistas may spin tales that draw from both mass culture and indigenous mythology but both have grasped the power potential of imagination and creative energy freeing itself from the bonds of subordination to capital. Where the Italians discover an exodus from alienations of capitalist work in favor of new spaces of self-valorization, the Zapatistas speak of the struggle for land as a means to avoid the brutalities of waged labor on cattle ranches and coffee plantations and as a means to the further elaborations of new communal practices and politics. I could continue drawing parallels between the two bodies of thought but I think that I’ve said enough to suggest why the resonance of Zapatista struggles in Italy and perhaps elsewhere in Europe may not be grounded in simply solidarity but rather in experiences of struggle and reflection which despite their differences still embody many common elements that are rooted in both the globality of capitalist exploitation and the struggle against it. To the degree that this is so, the rapid circulation of the Zapatista resistance to Neoliberalism and its positive projects of social transformation must be seen as being of potentially much greater import than we have already observed.

## **5. The Encounters: Energy and Difficulties**

From this perspective the unexpected enthusiasm of thousands of activists from dozens of countries to trek into the jungles of Chiapas in 1996, or to cope with the expense and difficulties of traveling to several different, widely separated towns in Spain in 1997, and the ongoing energies for the elaboration of intercontinental circuits of communication and struggle can be seen to derive not only from shared perceptions of new possibilities for join action against a common enemy, but from a spreading understanding that Zapatista politics are not entirely unique but perhaps symptomatic of those directions of class struggle that hold the greatest potential in this period.

The Zapatista proposal of these Encounters grew out of their own practice in Chiapas. One of an array of interrelated institutions of community consultation and decision making, the gathering together of most of those from a village or from many villages in a setting where all voices can be heard and issues decided upon is central to the Zapatista politics. A first experiment with the usefulness of this process on a much larger scale were the meetings of the National Democratic Convention –that brought together thousands of activists in Mexico. The Continental and Intercontinental Encounters were another. In both cases the experiments were exciting and productive but also difficult and fraught with problems.

The most obvious problem with this extension to a world scale of this form of doing politics is the difficulty of gaining experience and learning how to do it. In the Zapatista communities this way of doing things has been going on for years over and over again so that the participants are familiar and practiced with the way things go. Even when multiple communities with different cultural practices and languages are involved, a whole set of modalities have been worked out, are familiar and contribute to making the gatherings a vibrant part of political life. In the case of the Intercontinental Encounters, because they can happen at best only once a year, gaining experience and working out effective methods is much more problematic, as we will see. It is one thing for academics to gather from time to time to exchange a few ideas and then disperse with no collective follow-up, it is quite another to construct an on-going productive political process.

The First Intercontinental Encounter was certainly colored by the moral and political aura of the Zapatista movement. Organized in five different campesino communities in various parts of Chiapas, the thousands of participants moved from place to place under the very noses of the Mexican police and Army. In this dramatic defiance of those forces, the Zapatistas carried out a virtual military operation, demonstrating to the state and to the world that neither they nor their friends could be isolated or immobilized through repression. In each of the five sites participants discovered that the community had crafted, out of local and donated materials, sufficient infrastructure to host hundreds of outsiders, providing places to sleep, to bathe, to eat, to gather for roundtable and plenary discussion during the days and for music and dancing at night. They discovered rows of porcelain latrines and libraries with shelves of books and electrical outlets for computers and printers. The participants also discovered that these spaces had been created for them to engage each other, with only marginal participation from the Zapatistas themselves. They framed and hosted the meetings but besides the welcoming and closing plenary speeches and the beginning and end of the week of work, they participated very little in the week of discussions.

In workshop session after session papers were presented and discussion and debate swirled in several languages and translators struggled to keep up and to make the arguments and points intelligible to those who couldn't understand the speakers' languages. People were coming together from widely different backgrounds and practices with very different conceptual frameworks and was of expressing them so that the "cross-language" problem was multiplied on several levels. Nevertheless, a week-long struggle for dialogue and understanding went on day and night, often in the rain and deepening mud, broken only by meals, music, dancing and sleep. Under the quiet and dignified eyes of the people of the Zapatista communities, desires for understanding almost always won out over impatience traditional prejudices, at least to the degree that there were few truly hostile moments and an amazing degree of good will and patience. As the discussions drew to a close the participants managed to draw up documents that would reflect the complexity of the perspectives and opinions that had come together.

The 1997 Intercontinental Encounter in Spain replicated in many ways the experience of the first but in an entirely different context. Instead of the unifying backdrop of the Zapatista communities, the organization of the Second Encounter emerged out of the conflicts and negotiations among various political groups in Spain. The distribution of workshops over several cities in part reproduced what the Zapatistas had done, but with a different rationale. Instead of a defiant military operation, the dispersion in Spain seemed aimed primarily at satisfying diverse and competing local claims for significant political roles. In other words, the organization of the Second Encounter and many of the difficulties that arose reflected the much less mature state of cross struggle networking in Spain as opposed to that in Chiapas. Whereas in Chiapas old sectarian prejudices and ideological tensions were muted in the presence of a highly respected population of people in struggle –a people whose own ideas could not be fit into any familiar ideological category– in Spain such old prejudices and tensions rose to the surface much more quickly and frequently. Nevertheless, once more thousands gathered, discussed, debated and sought to build linkages across previous gulfs and to replace silences or harsh words with productive political dialogue. That neither the meetings nor ex-post assessments dissolved into sectarian diatribes and condemnations testified to the presence of a new spirit of cooperation and collaboration.

As mentioned above in the context of sketching the role of the Internet, the organization and unfolding of the Second Encounter made much greater use of e-mail and web sites than the First. Not only were a very large number of papers made available on the web –and sometimes circulated in e-mail discussion lists– ahead of time, but this made possible some discussion even before the conference began. However, in part because of the absence of such means the previous year, most of the papers and documents which had been presented at the first Encounter were NOT available as background to the Second –despite repeated suggestions that discussions in the Second should build upon those of the First. There were a few exceptions, such as the publication in Italy of a translated collection of papers from the previous year, but for the most part participants to the Second Encounter arrived without benefit of familiarity with earlier discussions. The result was much more repetition and less progress than many had hoped. Many who had attended the First Encounter had been impressed with the consensus both about the nature of Neoliberalism and the willingness to identify the common enemy as capitalism and not just one of its forms. They therefore hoped that in the Second Encounter less time and energy would go into discussions of those issues and more into the sharing of experience of struggle and attempts to design more coherent networks of communication and struggle. While there was some progress in this area it was far less than many had expected because so many of the old discussions had to be repeated among new participants who had not attended the first and had had no opportunity to familiarize themselves with what had happened then.

Although the Intercontinental Encounters were by no means academic affairs –there were certainly some people from universities but also lots of other kind of grassroots activists– the formal workshops all too closely resembled typical academic gatherings. The presentation of papers –even when they had been available ahead of time– took far too much time and although there was much more time for discussion and debate than is common in academia, it was still too small a percentage of the total for a great many people’s tastes. Similarly, there were the language problems familiar to academic and political gatherings across borders and neither in the villages of Chiapas nor in the cities in Spain was there adequate provision for simultaneous translation to overcome this barrier in a satisfactory manner. In both sites same language individuals often sat clustered around one grossly overworked translator who struggled to keep up, often with

little relief. The efforts were valiant and much appreciated but the deficiencies of the situation was a major obstacle to a clear circulation of ideas and debate. In Chiapaneca villages where provision for high tech multichannel earphones and teams of translators was hardly imaginable, this obstacle was annoying but understandable. In Spain where such technology certainly exists, its absence was less well received.

On the other hand, there was some progress in the Second Encounter in the thematic organization of the workshops. The Zapatista organization in Chiapas had corresponded to some of their own categories of organizing discussion: economic, political, cultural, social, and indigenous. But during the First Encounter and during the organization of the Second there was considerable discussion about alternative ways to regroup discussion. The thematic organization became: "the neoliberal economy," "our world and theirs," "struggles for culture, education and information," "the struggle against patriarchy," "struggles for land and the Earth," and "against all forms of marginalization." It was generally recognized, however, that the appropriate categorizations would evolve over time and the willingness to embrace that evolution and see the process of organization as an endless, ever renewed process was encouraging.

Once again as the Encounter drew to a close, great efforts were made to draw up summaries of discussions and exchanged experiences not so much to issue some formal declarations but to document the progress made and the directions of movement to facilitate further advances in the future. There was considerable discussion about the desirability of organizing a Third Encounter but no decision was reached and that project is still under discussion, both within groups and among them through the Internet.

To summarize these experiences, let me just say a couple of things. On the one hand, they reflected a new desire for organization at a world level and they also demonstrated a new capacity to actually achieve such organization. They brought together a tremendous amount of activist energy for struggle and these comings-together generated more energy than they absorbed. Most people seem to have come away from them enthusiastic and fired up for future efforts. On the other hand, they also embodied only partial solutions to many of the obstacles which still impede the acceleration of the formation of ever more effective circuits of struggle capable of subverting and substituting for capitalist initiatives and programs. Old obstacles such as different languages, modes of expression and practices of interaction persist while new obstacles such as finding complementary and mutually reinforcing modes of action among quite diverse struggles challenge those who have set aside the old, simplistic solutions that they now know have not, and cannot work, e.g., "join the party and smash the state". In as much as the Encounters grew out of ongoing processes of networking and discussion, no one expected them to generate some kind of collective singular solution, and discussion continues the best use of such periodical large-scale meetings and their relationship to other means of collaboration.

## **6. Difficulties in Cyberspace**

As described in point two above, cyberspaces have been created as extremely important terrains for the rapid circulation of information, discussion and effective cooperation. Those who are plugged into the flows are far better informed than those who are not. Those who participate have access to and are able to dialogue with a much greater array of individuals and groups than they could ever do locally. In moments of crisis and mobilization, such as January and February

1994, February and March 1995 and again in December and January of 1997 – 1998, the rapid exchange of information, ideas and experience of struggle, the coordination of methods and timing of protests, the mobilization of observers and material aid and the coordinated counterattack against the Mexican government the Internet has made possible a quickness and effectiveness of organization across dozens of countries and regions of the world almost unprecedented in human experience. Furthermore, the interpenetration through the Internet of the Zapatista struggle with those elsewhere, both in Mexico and around the world, has contributed not only to an acceleration in the circulation of struggle, but to increased complementarity among struggles and ways of thinking about them. All this has been inspiring and demonstrated the absolute necessity of pushing forward in the exploration and elaboration of these new circuits of communication and cooperation among peoples.

On the other hand, this experience has also highlighted some serious difficulties. The best that we can hope is that by clearly perceiving the difficulties we have a better chance to overcome them.

First, the rapid elaboration of cyberspaces devoted to keeping track of and circulating information about the struggles in Chiapas and the pro-democracy movement in Mexico have grown to include all related activities around the world. The flow of information simply from within Chiapas is heavy and when you add in all the rest, as we have done, the flow is huge. Even on the filtered Chiapas95 list the number of e-mail messages with related information ranges from an average of 20 to 70 messages a day, and even more in periods of crisis. Even for activists who want to keep track of events and know what all is being done to support the struggle that is an enormous amount of information, in several different languages. As a result there is now a Chiapas95-lite and a Chiapas95-english for those who just can't handle the flow and get tired of deleting all the stuff they don't have time to read and process.

With the growth of interconnections among struggles and the search for mutual understanding and complementary action the practice of cross-posting material from different struggles has spread. In the case of the Chiapas lists, I am not just talking about say, stories from Guerrero or those of demonstrations in Italy, but material from efforts like the one to save the life of Ken Saro-Wiwa, spokesperson for the Ogoni people in Southern Nigeria. During that campaign – which failed unfortunately – material from the African lists were cross posted to the Chiapas lists and material from the Chiapas lists cross posted to the African lists. The intent was not only to gain names and signatures on protest petitions, boycotts, etc. but to compare and understand the similarities between the struggles in Southern Nigeria and those in Southern Mexico. There have been any number of such interpenetrations and linkages between cyberspatial circuits. This kind of phenomenon was only multiplied by the Intercontinental Encounters which brought diverse people from many different struggles together where they got to know each other and discovered how they might interlink. It is now possible to imagine, given the exponential growth in the Net and the rapid spread of its use by groups in struggle, that before long we may have access to detailed information about most struggles on Earth and the possibility of building linkages among them all. The implications are both gratifying and sobering.

While the possibility of having access to such a rich array of material and ready access to the means of linking struggles would seem to hold enormous potential for building networks capable of transforming world history, already the flow of information has grown so large as to threaten instead to overwhelm and paralyze activists. It is too much for anyone to absorb. Future



development will only add to this problem. Yet we must find a way to cope with this situation if we are to realize the potential latent within it.

This problem is a familiar one to capitalist policy makers, if not to grassroots activists. Because their job is to manage class relationships all over the world, the policy makers of the US State Department, or those of the World Bank or International Monetary Fund have created huge bureaucracies and networks of scholars and analysts to not only gather information but to sort, sift and distill it into manageable quantities. Such is the role of individual researchers in universities, teams at various country desks at the State Department and sub-units of specialists at the Bank or the Fund. They carry out their work within a highly refined division of labor which has been constructed and framed by the policy concerns of those at the top. Unlike activists involved in struggle, these specialists don't have to do anything except generate information and process. Their superiors will take what they have done, boil it down, synthesize it and hand it over to the decision makers. That small elite will survey the overall picture that emerges from the syntheses and make judgments about policies. If they have doubts about the briefs they are handled they have the power and channels of communication to tap the raw data and re-evaluate the analysis drawn from it. In the most efficient situations they will have an educated overview of a complex array of situations and will take action based on it.

This top-down, hierarchical system, however, is clearly inappropriate to any kind of democratic, non-elite network of decision making. On the one hand, the cogs in this machine accept their subordination to the whole, the outside definition of their roles and their exclusion from policy making only in return for the kinds of income and status which no contemporary social movement or network of movements have to offer. On the other hand, the very structure is anti-thetical to our aspirations to democracy and we would have no business replicating it even if we could afford to. So, what to do?

Perhaps we might approach the problem by contemplating our own needs and limitations.

First, our needs. In order to confront capitalist globalization, we do need something homologous to what capitalist policy makers need: an overall grasp of the pattern of development of lines of force and directions of movement, a clear assessment of our own strengths and weaknesses and those of the enemy. But we need this for all of us, not just for an elite, if we are to construct truly democratic patterns of interaction and decision making. Like the current elite we also need to be able to reach behind syntheses to the materials on which they are based when we doubt their formulations or conclusions. Because we are also, all of us, engaged in particular concrete struggles and intersections of struggles, we also need to be able to generate reports from our own experience and to use that experience to evaluate and critique others' analyses and propose alternatives. We need, therefore, to be able to participate freely and effectively in both the production and consumption of information, or, better, to be able to both speak and listen effectively.

These are neither small, nor simple things. We bring to cyberspace our habits acquired in other spaces and many of those have been counterproductive and continue to be so in this new terrain. Personality conflicts, arrogance, sexism, racism and all the other behavior patterns that have tortured or destroyed other kinds of political efforts have been reproduced on the "Net". Few are the activists who have not abandoned a discussion or unsubscribed from a list or avoided returning to newsgroup because of flame-wars, unbridled antagonisms or endless dialogues of the deaf. The history of struggles to develop generally accepted rules of "netiquette" shows the difficulties involved. Cyberspace is no privileged arena. All of the problems and battles we are

familiar with elsewhere reappear there in all too familiar forms and constitute the first set of limitations to our ability to get our needs met.

Other limitations. Clearly we cannot as individuals be simultaneously engaged in a multiplicity of concrete struggles that take different forms with different contents. Anyone with activist experience in cyberspace is familiar with the frustrations of being confronted not only with detailed reports but also with urgent pleas for action on the part of those in struggles and situations that we know little or nothing about and feel incapable of evaluating. As successful mobilizations like those around the Zapatistas have demonstrated the potentialities of such efforts and as those in other struggles come on line, the barrage and the frustration can only mount. While we need to act in ways which are effective on a wider scale, we know that we can only be truly well informed about a limited range of experience.

On the other hand, needing to develop strategies and tactics that are complementary to struggles elsewhere, and that we judge can contribute the most effectively to advancing the overall movement, we need to situate ourselves within broader patterns which we can only do by confronting and contributing to the processes of synthesis, overview and contemplation of what the military calls "Grand Strategies" being wielded both from the bottom up and from the top down. Now, I know from experience that different people will spend different amounts of time and energy in these two different kinds of study and creative thinking. Some will spend a lot of time grappling with the large picture, others will spend a lot less, and focus their energy on the struggles in which they are most intimately engaged. I don't see this as a problem, as long as all flows of information and intersections of analysis and debate are transparent and easily accessible. In corridors of power, this is not the case. The higher you go the more and more access is restricted to "need to know" and data, reports, and summaries are "classified", "restricted" and "top secret". This secrecy is dictated by the structure of power and its exclusivity. Even when you move out of such restricted domains, it is often the case that access to the conversations of the elite is restricted by the high prices of books, of subscriptions to elite journals, and of admission to the spaces of elite discussion. Our need for transparency is dictated by our refusal of such configurations of politics that are based on the desire of the few to control the many. The free flow of information on the Internet makes such transparency more possible than ever before. As more and more relevant material takes digital form and is archived in cyberspace, the easier it is to trace and cross-check data and references. For academics accustomed to the long and painful process of reconstituting the evolution of interacting ideas and verifying information, the advent of hypertext papers where a click of the mouse can take you directly from a footnote to the referenced document or piece of data dramatically simplifies such processes. Exactly such interlinkages give everyone with access to the Web such facility.

Which raises another much discussed limitation of the role of cyberspace in the elaboration of struggles and the interlinking of struggles: the fact that not everyone has immediate access to that space. Its population is a very small subset of all of those engaged in struggle. From the perspective of those spheres of struggle with extremely high computer-population ratios, the existence of other areas of the world with very low ratios looks like a major obstacle to generalized participation in this dimension of political mobilization. Those preoccupied with this limitation have taken some heart from the extremely rapid spread of the "Net", even into sectors of society traditionally deprived of effective means of communication. The very rapid spread of computer networks among Native Americans, for example, has proceeded much faster than anyone expected, even in rural, isolated areas. On the other hand one has only to look South,

towards Africa say, to see that vast areas not only lack any kind of Internet backbone, but even telephone lines through which computer communications could be established if the computers were available.

However, the experience of Chiapas and of the Zapatista communities in particular suggest that thinking about this problem in terms of computers and modems per capita is often quite inappropriate. As mentioned above in point two, neither the EZLN nor any of the Zapatista villages in Chiapas are directly connected to the Net. Their connections have always been mediated, at first through journalists, then through NGOs and today through groups like the FZLN or Enlace Civil. Yet we have seen how they have not only learned to use the Net despite this handicap but to use it extremely effectively. Today, this experience has led many of the Zapatista communities to want to be tied directly into the Net, but not through a computer in each home. What they have in mind is a computer in each village or town through which the community can collectively participate interactively with each other and with the larger world. Therefore, although major obstacles remain to the realization of this goal, it does suggest that the common comparison of computer per capita data dramatically overstates the problem of accessibility.

To conclude. Recognizing such needs and limitations –and there are surely a great many others– is one thing. Finding effective ways to meet the needs within the constraints of the limitations or to find ways around the limitations is quite another. Within the evolution of the Internet dimension of the Zapatista struggle –as well as in others– we can see a slow painful process of tatonnement as we have groped both toward better understanding of our needs and more and more effective methods of meeting them. It is very much an ongoing process. For all of the difficulties, I must admit that I am basically optimistic. Partly this comes from studying the anxious efforts of the state to cope with what we have been able to accomplish so far. While capital, in both corporate and governmental forms, has plenty of money and therefore easy access to equipment and skilled manpower the fact of the matter is, as far as I have been able to see, we are still way out in front. We have more experience, a vast network of expertise and far better ideas about elaborating this electronic dimension of our political struggles than it does. We can not rest on our laurels, but we can certainly draw courage from what we have accomplished and the directions in which we are moving.

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