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The Zapatistas, Anarchism and 'Direct democracy'

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Winter 1999

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ers in our part(s) of the world that such structures are a viable alternative to top down parties.

The Zapatista rebellion of 1994 has become the 90's equivalent of the Cuban and Nicaraguan revolutions. It has excited the imagination of a layer of active young. The balaclava and pipe toting Marcos is becoming the same sort of visual icon that the bearded and beret wearing Ché was 30 years earlier. And perhaps it is this similarity that has scared the organised anarchist movement into comparative silence on the on-going rebellion in Chiapas?

In Chiapas today we see an on-going Low Intensity War. On one side we have the Mexican state, 60 to 70,000 occupying soldiers and the shadowy presence of US advisors. On the other we have a rebel army calling itself the EZLN and over hundreds of rebel communities.

This could be a snapshot of any number of similar struggles. Why should anarchists single out the Zapatistas for solidarity. The Zapatistas are not and make no claim to be anarchists. The educated leadership of the Zapatistas have their political backgrounds in Marxism. The local leadership's political education is more likely to be from liberation theology and the practical experience of campesino and indigenous organisations.

The military organisation of the Zapatistas is also not one that anarchists would prefer. The army is hierarchical. But the army is not the decision making centre of the movement like it would be in a Marxist vanguard organisation.

The Zapatista army hasn't used its weapons since the uprising in 1994. Some of its supporters elsewhere may fetishise the guns but on the ground in Chiapas they are seen as a way for people to defend themselves against the organised violence of the Mexican state. What the Zapatista movement has been about since 1994 is the construction of a system of direct democracy.

These structures are what should be of primary importance to anarchists in determining how we relate to the Zapatistas. They form an organisational and decision making network involving hundreds of thousands of people. There are 32 rebel

municipalities, each one with 50 to over 100 communities. More than 500,000 people live as part of this decision making network. There are five language groups - these along with high mountains, jungle and bad roads make any form of libertarian organisation difficult. Yet this is exactly what the Zapatistas appear to have constructed.

There are extensive interviews with the main spokesperson of the EZLN, Subcomandante Marcos, which describe the decision-making structure and how it evolved. However anarchists should be sceptical about taking the word of the apparent military leader of any rebel group alone - even as in this case where it appears it may be accurate.

Village assemblies

The areas the Zapatistas openly organise in are rural and extremely poor. Small communities of a dozen to over 100 families are typical, forced to live off the land without the benefit of modern agricultural machinery. Some of the men will have worked outside the village in local towns or even as far as the USA but in the villages themselves the only political presence tends to come from the Catholic church's local variety of 'liberation theology' and the EZLN itself.

Prior to the rebellion many communities did not have sufficient fertile land and so the people had to work, often in atrocious conditions, for local landowners. With the rebellion the landowners fled and in many cases their abandoned land was taken over and sometimes used to establish new communities. In describing the structures of decision making at the community level I am drawing on my own experience in the community of Diez de Abril and on interviews with other people from the Irish peace camp there in the years from 1996 to 1999.

Diez de Abril is a new community founded on land seized in 1995. Those who moved onto the land had worked it before

"The communities of an indigenous zone or area are the ones who decide, at an assembly of all their members, whether or not they will belong to the autonomous municipality ... It is the communities who elect their representatives for the Autonomous Municipal Council, which is the authority for the municipality. Each representative is chosen for one area of administration within the autonomous municipality, and they may be removed if they do not fully comply with the communities' mandates ... Those who hold a position on the Municipal Council do not receive a salary for it, although their expenses should be paid by the same communities who request their presence, through co-operation among the members. In some cases, members of the Council are supported in their farm work, so they can dedicate themselves to their [Council] work, and not have to go the fields."

These structures are obviously ones compatible with anarchism or indeed revolutionary syndicalism. Their key checks of mandate and recall are there. The fact that these structures are not consciously anarchist but arise from a blend of indigenous practice, Marxism and Liberation Theology should not prevent us standing in solidarity with them.

More importantly, whatever their origins they offer a current model of some of what we talk about in practice. Chiapas is isolated and extremely poor, the fact that libertarian structures can flourish in such harsh conditions in the midst of a Low Intensity war can only demonstrate how valid they are.

Unfortunately there is not enough room here to go on to discuss the politics of the EZLN in any detail. But in many ways these are a secondary matter. For the community assemblies and the councils to survive they need our continued support. But centrally the question remains - how do we convince work-

This broadly ties into what observers who have seen consultas take place tell me. It was such a consulta that decided that the 1994 rising should go ahead, a year before Marcos and the army command considered they were ready. Consultas since have decided to enter into talks with the government, to accept the San Andres agreement and later to break off talks until the government implemented what had already been agreed.

The councils

These regional structures are designed to make the big decisions, the questions of war or peace etc. However obviously state wide meetings are far too unwieldy to settle smaller questions. The rebellion has also meant Zapatista communities refusing all contact with the Mexican state - right down to refusing to register births and deaths.

The practical problem thrown up by the need for inter community co-ordination saw the formation of regional councils. These are known as autonomous municipalities. 100 communities for instance make up the autonomous municipality named after the Mexican anarchist Ricardo Flores Magon. Tierra y Libertad, on the border with Guatemala contains a total of 120 communities.

"Within the newly created municipal structures, the communities name their authorities, community teachers, local health promoters, indigenous parliaments, and elaborate their own laws based on social, economic, political and gender equality among the inhabitants of diverse ethnic communities."

A Mexican NGO in detailing the government's attempts to smash these communities explains how they function;

the rebellion. They met in assembly on the land before the take over, decided how to divide up the land and decided to call the new community 'Diez de Abril' after the day (10th April 1919) when Zapata was assassinated.

The routine weekly assembly happens after or even as part of mass on Sunday. It is open to all to attend and all over 12 have speaking and voting rights although votes are very rare. This meeting can go on for hours and typically resolves practical questions concerning work in the community or expenditure of community funds. One long running debate was whether to buy a tractor or a truck. There may be other assemblies if needed during the week.

The assembly elects delegates called 'responsibles' to co-ordinate work in particular areas. These delegates serve a limited term (one to two years) and are subject to re-call within this time if it's felt they are not 'leading by obeying' (i.e. the Zapatista slogan for following the mandate given to them).

There are also collectives that carry out particular tasks within the community. They are set up by and answerable to the assembly but are otherwise autonomous. Collectives in Diez include ones for coffee, cattle honey, horticulture, bread, sewing and chicken. Some of the production of each collective goes to its members; the surplus goes into a central community fund controlled by the assembly.

Our direct experience of Diez de Abril contradicts the claim that visits to the rebel zone are somehow controlled so that "On a well-signed route, people have to agree to see only what they have to see and to believe in the leader's words". Issues of security of course determine that there are meetings we don't attend but our presence over three year's means little happens that we are unaware of.

When we move from local organisation to statewide organisation I can no longer rely on personal observation or the accounts of people known and trusted by me. I've talked to enough observers and radical journalists though to know that

although Diez may be one of the more politically advanced communities the structures are broadly typical of other communities. However to throw light on regional organisation I'm relying on reports from journalists, NGO's and interviews with individual Zapatistas.

CCRI

The 'Clandestine Revolutionary Indigenous Committee' (CCRI) is the body that actually commands the army. This body (or indeed bodies as there are also regional CCRI's) is composed of delegates from the communities. It is not in itself a military structure.

Regionally it is capable of making decisions that affect individual communities. For instance when one community in the region of Morelia wanted to occupy land shortly after the rebellion "the local Clandestine Revolutionary Indigenous Committee, (CCRI) ordered locals to wait, expecting a region-wide land settlement after the 1994 dialogue".

This in itself is not necessarily a problem if the CCRI is a genuine delegate body. In many revolutionary situations it makes sense to hold back militant sections in case premature action results in the suppression of the movement. In this case I'd probably have disagreed with the decision but the question is how it was made and who made it. The people of the region or some unaccountable body acting in their name?

A month after the rising the Mexican liberal paper 'La Jornada' which extensively covers the Zapatistas interviewed some members of the CCRI. One called Isacc explained the accountability of the CCRI ;

"If the people say that a companero who is a member of the CCRI is not doing anything, that we are not respecting the people or are not doing what

the people say, then the people say that they want to remove us ...

In that way, if some member of the CCRI does not do their work, if they do not respect the people, well compa, it is not your place to be there. Then, well, excuse us but we will have to put another in your place".

The Consulta

Even still the CCRI does not have the power to make major decisions, such as peace or war. These must instead be made through a 'consulta' - crudely a referendum but one where intense discussions in each community is as central to the process as the vote itself. These take months and have been a great source of annoyance to the Mexican government, which always wants an answer to its proposals on the spot or within days.

One EZLN communiqué explained the consulta process as follows;

"The consultations took place in every community and ejido where there are members of the EZLN.

The study, analysis, and discussion of the peace accords took place in democratic assemblies. The voting was direct, free, and democratic.

After the voting, official reports of the results of the assemblies were prepared. These reports specify: the date and place of the assembly, the number of people who attended (men, women and children older than 12 years old), opinions and principal points discussed, and the number of people who voted."