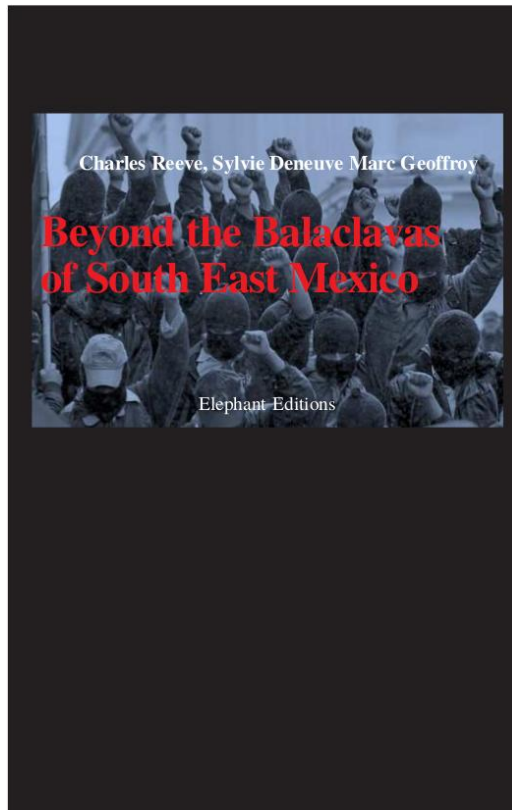


# Beyond the Balaclavas of South East Mexico

Charles Reeve, Sylvie Deneuve, Marc Geoffroy



1996

# Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>By way of introduction...</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Beyond the Balaclavas of South East Mexico</b>	<b>9</b>
The Indian communities: myth or alienation? . . . . .	9
The revolt of the ‘New Hanged’ . . . . .	11
From Mao to Marcos: The Success of the EZLN . . . . .	13
Indigenous Democracy in the Age of the Internet . . . . .	15
The interests of God, and women have had enough . . . . .	17
The land Question: The EZLN Between Occupation and Negotiation . . . . .	19
Patriots Against Neo-Liberalism, or the Impasses of the EZLN . . . . .	22
The Future Still has a Face . . . . .	24
<b>On ‘Solidarity with the Zapatistas’</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>‘Indigenism’ and Power</b>	<b>28</b>
1. The Political and Cultural Expressions of ‘Indigenism seen from above’ . . . . .	28
2. Indigenous Culture as a Commercial Product . . . . .	29
Conclusion . . . . .	30

# Introduction

*Up until now the revolutionary principle has struggled against this or that established order, that is to say, it has been reformist.*

Max Stirner

Books, conferences, videos, T-shirts, stickers, marches, committees and benefits abound, showing the many expressions of what has been defined as ‘the international of hope’. Yet no critique has been published on ‘insurgent Chiapas’ and the Zapatista National Liberation Army from the subversive point of view. Many anarchists have also given their contribution, without a word of criticism. Why is this?

Texts on the question, especially the EZLN communiqués and documents, certainly provide food for thought (for example: the organisation of the territories controlled by the ‘Zapatistas’, the creation of a ‘revolutionary provisional government’, the imposition of ‘revolutionary taxes’, ‘revolutionary laws’ and even ‘revolutionary prisons’). But why talk of the Zapatista army as though it were an organisation that has gone beyond Marxism-Leninism, a libertarian experiment etc?

Because one only sees what one wants to see. In other words, the Zapatista ideology is merely one more indication of the misery that exists generally. The spectacle has contributed to all this: the image of the balaclava, the mystery of the forest, the fascination of exotic places; then there is Marcos, with his poetic texts (‘gay in San Francisco, anarchist in Spain...’, ‘a country where the right to dance will be recognised by the Constitution...’) and his skill in toying with the concept of power. What has contributed more than anything, however, is the lack of perspective, the fetid united front of a left which has ended up defending the right to work and democratic guarantees against the ‘neo-liberalism’ which everyone, from Stalinists to anarchists, claims to be fighting, and the absence of any revolutionary discourse which, far beyond the void of historical celebration, might put the radical problem—the destruction of the State, the abolition of the economy and generalised self-management—in radical terms.

Lack of ideas and desires blinds us twice over. First, by concealing the real nature of the organisational forms that the exploited are developing in social confrontation all over the world (in this particular case, the methods of the EZLN and so-called ‘indigenous autonomy’). Second, by leading the problem of these forms and contents away from in the concrete arena of insurrectional rebellion where they belong. On the other hand, why on earth should those who consider rebellion here at home or the suggestion that the State does not collapse on its own but that something concrete needs to be done about it to be wild and reckless, get enthusiastic about guerrilla warfare in exotic faraway places? Does something link the image of the ‘Zapatista’ balaclava to the daily lives of those who work, consume, vote and pay taxes—something akin to passivity, that they might even defend with arms?

The rating of EZLN’s combative facade has actually fallen recently in the stock exchange of revolutionary ideologies. Their agreement with the French institutional left, the moving embrace

of Marcos and the leader of the Italian reformed Communist Party (Rifondazione Comunista), Bertinotti, has perhaps disappointed those who had troubled the insurgents of the Asturias, Duruti or Flores Magón in their search for historical paragons with which to justify their support for the Zapatista national liberation army. There are no doubt plenty of less demanding supporters waiting to take their place.

The following texts contain—for the first time—the necessary criticism of the EZLN and commercial indigenism. Basic common sense, if you like. Everyone will be able to find something to think about in them. But for our part we would like to take a quick look at the ‘International of Hope’—that is, at the Zapatista movement—before ending these short notes. It is interesting to read some of the transcriptions and summaries of discussions that took place during the intercontinental (‘intergalactic’) meeting that took place in Chiapas in August 1996. As far as the economy is concerned (a question specifically addressed by one of the five ‘debating tables’) the following premise can be found: ‘The globalism of neo-liberalism makes it necessary to think in terms of equally global alternatives. The struggle must be at world level.’ We can quite agree with the concept of globalism, in abstract. It is when it comes to doing something about it that problems arise. As we all know, it is not the answers but the questions that reveal the nature of a project.

Let us look at some of the points raised. ‘There is an urgent need to regain power over economic policies so as to solve problems such as the workers’ situation and wage disparity’. Who, for instance, can face the ‘problem’ of wage disparity, if not those who impose taxes, i.e. the government? So, to whom is this question being addressed? What they mean by the ‘globalism of neo-liberalism’ becomes evident in the following phrase: ‘Neo-liberalism also strikes countries that have an economic administration such as Cuba, victim of an intensification of the United States’ embargo.’ Is it that Cuba with its bureaucratic capitalism is to supply an example of work and ‘income equality’? Or that ‘neo-liberalism’ represents a kind of inhuman exaggeration by capital, which could somehow be attenuated? But let us move on to the ‘global’ proposals. ‘We propose launching the following slogan aimed at setting off struggles that can be reproduced at world level: writing off (some are simply talking about a reduction!) the debts of the poor countries; lowering interest rates; self-organisation of debtors; reduced working hours, equal wages and the creation of struggle networks of workers, unemployed, excluded, etc.’ Again: Who can write off the poor countries’ debts? Who are the ‘debtors’ who should be self-organising? Questions can never be revolutionary—global in other words—if the answers depend on the enemy, i.e., the bosses. The struggles of the exploited would be no more than a means of putting pressure on the State and capital (the underlying theory of social democracy), not the real possibility of the revolutionary destruction of the latter. An ‘extremist’ development of this discourse, the taking over of the management of power (and definitely not generalised self-management), is in fact Leninist.

What is meant by globalism is therefore nothing but broad reformism, a Political International. A discourse does not become global simply by using the same slogans everywhere, or through exchanges in information. A global dimension is reached when *all* social relations and *all* the conditions of life come under criticism: when problems are faced concretely, i.e. in their *whole* context. A struggle for a reduction in working hours—a problem now being faced by capital itself by through the spectacle and the reserve army of consumers—does not become global because it takes place in Belgium, Spain, Italy, Mexico or who knows where at the same time. Global implies

criticising the very *concept* of work, as wages, social organisation, the power of commodities, moral sacrifice, etc., irrespective of the number of those involved

Other debates merely confirm the above. In the transcription of the discussions at ‘table 5’ (entitled ‘Many have lost their place in this world’) we read: ‘Respect for the identity of peoples must be recognised as a right that becomes political through the support of its full cultural and material development’. At the risk of seeming pedantic: support by whom, if not by the State? To claim that government support self-determination, which if it is real—if it is not, precisely, a Right—would eliminate the latter, is either stupid or a mystification, subversive, never. To demonstrate this better: ‘On the other hand, as well as trampling on the rights of their own ethnic groups, States deny other States the right to self-determination (United States—Cuba and the rest of Latin America)’. Self-determination of States?

And finally before ending, so as not to bore the reader any longer, here are the two final, piercing questions. First, ‘Should specific cultural and socioeconomic regions within States acquire total autonomy or independence?’ (Such a problem is of far greater interest to autonomist parties than it is to revolutionaries—which says a lot about the concept of autonomy). Second, ‘We wonder whether the official left’s lack of attendance at this meeting means that it has given up the struggle against neo-liberalism?’ (Bertinotti, where are you?) To wind up: ‘parallel commercial networks’, ‘alternative tourism’ and ‘popular referenda’ are solutions that all go perfectly well with the problems that have been raised.

‘The society we are building does not have the traditional instruments and arms of the neo-liberal States, such as army, borders, nationalist ideologies’, a member of the EZLN has stated. Not bad for an organisation calling itself the Zapatista *National Liberation Army*. Subcommander Marcos no less, in his final salute after having said *poetically* that ‘the circle of power is closing in on the rebels, who nevertheless have the whole of humanity behind them at all times’, affirms *politically*: ‘We Zapatistas have proposed struggling for a better government here in Mexico’. As you can see, the Zapatista discourse works at three levels: the ‘revolutionary government’ for the Leninists; defence of democracy against ‘neo-liberalism’ for militants of the left wing parties; poetry against ‘power’ and the myth of sovereign assembly for libertarians. But reformism remains just that, even when it takes up arms, even when it talks ill of the powerful or claims, along with work, justice and a new constitution; even when it demands the right to dance.

Obviously, a slogan such as ‘for humanity against neo-liberalism’ caters for all tastes, just as it is obvious that the concept of ‘hope’ has a religious tinge to it. All the same, it is useful to criticise the real content of Zapatism, and certainly not so as to underestimate the revolts in Mexico or elsewhere (which should not be confused with their spectacular representation and commercial consumption). On the contrary, it is aimed at understanding them better and bringing about their globality; at realising the area of subversive theory and practice that has been colonised by the spectacle of revolution and movements which represent nothing but reformist negation. In other words, an anti-authoritarian and subversive International, an International that really knows how to upset the State’s projects of death, has yet to be invented. Recognising and criticising its opposite is just the first step.

Massimo Passamani.

## By way of introduction...

I do not set past and present limits as limits to humanity and the future.

Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*.

Because instant admirers and the suddenly convinced are rarely the salt of the earth.

B. Traven, *Dans l'Etat le plus libre du monde*.<sup>1</sup>

*It is not our intention to reduce the collective revolt of the proletarians of Chiapas to the organisational forms they have given themselves or, and this remains to be confirmed, that have grafted themselves on to their struggle. We believe there is a relationship between the two things, a relationship that rightly deserves to be analysed.<sup>2</sup> The task of those who choose social emancipation must always, as far as possible, strive to emphasize what there is that is autonomous in a struggle, and criticise the organisations that claim to represent those who are fighting. This means setting oneself aside from all paternalism, which is inegalitarian by definition and tends to enclose the exploited in struggle within specific categories, identity-based or otherwise. Anyone who is prepared to accept for others that which is unacceptable for themselves is close to accepting the unacceptable. In the name of tactics, future demands are seen in decline. By yielding on essentials one becomes a disciple of realism and falls behind statist projects promoted by hierarchical organisations.*

*Towards the end of the 80s a friend, a publisher in Madrid, was invited to the book fair in Managua (Nicaragua). Times were easier then for admirers of authoritarian socialism: the commandantes were promising that the glorious future was nigh in their little country. At the airport, a zealous civil servant (revolutionary, of course) discovered anarchist texts in our friend's luggage and*

---

<sup>1</sup> Translators' Note (T.N.): This is a translation from the French version. The English-language version, published in 'The Kidnapped Saint and other stories', reads: 'Such speedy enthusiasm and speedily acquired convictions are seldom the salt to be used as seasoning in cases like these.' We prefer the above. The text continues: 'The real need is not to persuade the great masses, to whip them up to flaming enthusiasm, to move them to adopt a resolution. Rather the great need is to convince individual human beings. The people of the future, and the people who are preparing for that which is to come, should not be argued into this without thinking things out; they should not believe unconditionally; rather they should be filled with the consciousness that this Revolution is right and feasible, whereas that other bourgeois order is wrong and not feasible. The people who today carry within them the will to future development, should not work for the coming society by relying on the mind of a clever Fuhrer, but rather with their own minds, with their own hearts, and with their own souls.'

But this they can do only when they know what it is all about, and when they also know and understand exactly what they themselves want.'

<sup>2</sup> The first version of the text *Au-dela des passes-montagnes* was written in 1995, after one of us was aroused to healthy anger against romantic support for the activity of the EZLN (see Annex 1). In response, some of our friends went through the roof, and a few insignificant enemies revealed themselves. How dare we criticise such a fine thing, which mobilised the youth and inspired the old activists? Radical publishers we contacted lacked enthusiasm. Finally, the text was distributed confidently via the local of a small anti-establishment association in Paris called *La Bonne descente*. While retaining the original spirit of the text, we reworked it by introducing into it additional analyses according to information gleaned from texts published since 1995.

hastened to confiscate them. In response to her protests, a political commissar (even more revolutionary) explained that these books could not be allowed to circulate, but would go to enrich the stock of the Sandinista Central Committee's library. The commandantes would thus be able to acquaint themselves with ideas that were forbidden to the people. As we know, the arrogance of American imperialism and the collapse of the USSR did not give them time. At that time libertarians gave their energy, sometimes even their lives, to the Sandinista revolution. In all sincerity, and in all naivety too. Today one might ask what became of these texts: were they 'subjected to the gnawing critique of the mice'? Has the library been privatised by the neoliberal idiots who took over from the Sandinista bureaucrats now recycled into the world of business? However that may be, the people of Nicaragua, plunged into the misery of the post-revolutionary disaster, missed the glorious future they had been promised, and still have not read Bakunin...

In the Golden Age of 'really nonexistent socialism' trips were organised to the countries of the glorious future. The devout were invited to show their enthusiasm for a reality that was being stage-managed by the lords of the manor. People thus visited the USSR of soviet socialism, the China of Maoist socialism, the Albania of miniature socialism, the Cuba of bearded socialism, the Nicaragua of Sandinista socialism, etc. Woe betide those who contested the objective, scientific and indisputable nature of these fabricated realities. Until the day these systems collapsed. We thought we had seen but had seen nothing! Have we learned from all this? Apparently not! Today the epicentre of the revolt in these regions has moved North. In the Lacandon forest and surroundings, the established truths of traditional Marxist-Leninist politics have been upturned by the upheavals of the world. A new world order having replaced the old division into two blocks, the political commissars have updated their identity and are even ready to quote Bakunin, though out of prudence they prefer the theological texts of Christian liberation or even Shakespeare. That was enough for the libertarians of France and Navarre to convince themselves that this time it was for real, and that a political and military movement could become bearer of the ideals of social emancipation. Was it the mere evocation of Zapata's name and the memory of 'Mexico-on-top-of-the-volcano' that seduced them? How can one naively throw oneself into supporting a movement that acts as a vehicle for the values of identity and patriotism, today in the heart of the most barbarous outbacks of the world?<sup>3</sup> These disciples of zapatismo, on the other hand, are unable to provide us with any information or direct account of what is actually happening in the Mexican countryside, whether it is about occupations, ways of organising chosen by the peasants in struggle, or their political aims and perspectives.<sup>4</sup> They are just as incapable of providing the slightest element of criticism that would allow us to deepen our understanding of the vanguardist organisation that is leading the armed struggle. Lastly, support for the EZLN has remained a prisoner of the latter's essentially nationalist nature. While the social situation has become explosive in all the societies of Latin America, and movements concerning the land question are spreading and radicalising more or less everywhere, these support committees are

---

<sup>3</sup> In this vein see the last-minute account by one of the pillars of Parisian 'ready-to-think' upon his return from Chiapas: 'Marcos has the history of Mexico in his blood. A strange libertarian who thinks like a patriot, commands a hierarchical army and reacts in communitarian, not individualist, terms.' Regis Debray, 'La guerilla autrement', *Le Monde*, Paris, May 18, 1996.

<sup>4</sup> One exception: the work by Nicolas Arraitz (*Tendre venin*, Edido not share the author's fascination with 'the difference', his analyses and his political conclusions (in which he tries to re-evaluate the democratic and nationalist positions of the EZLN insurgents), even less his contemptuous words about the 'complacent slaves' of the so-called developed societies. We must give him credit for having been among the first to provide us with first-hand information about how people really live in these regions of insurgent Mexico, Chiapas and Guerrero in particular. He was not satisfied with going to interview the leaders. He went into the occupied *fincas*.

*keeping their eyes glued to Mexico. Their lack of interest in the revolts and recent massacres of the poverty-stricken peasants in Brazil is significant.<sup>5</sup> Of course, the absence of charismatic leaders does not favour the fabrication of a media spectacle.*

*The support movement for the EZLN is about to reveal the crisis within which libertarian and socialist circles are debating. The anarchist and generally libertarian current seems to have been hit in full force by the collapse of the State capitalist model. While some expected them to take advantage of the ideological vacuum left by this collapse, quite the opposite has happened. These currents have been dragged towards impotence, and confusion is rampant. What might seem paradoxical is not really so if you consider that the dynamism and polemical energy of this milieu had in fact been fuelled by the existence of a 'brother enemy'. As soon as the anti-communist dimension disappeared, the libertarian current was left with its weakness in analysis of modern capitalism, which has now become a global system. Many are those whose short-sighted activism has made them incapable of resuming critical thought. As a result they are being led in the direction of social democratic humanism. Only those who are hanging on to the principles of an anti-State and anticapitalist libertarian ethic are managing to survive. Confusion is rife among the disciples of zapatism. One moves from Marcos to Guy Debord without the slightest hesitation, social movements in open revolt against the system are put at the same level as the great patriotic masses of the EZLN. Everything is the same, and lack of clarity abounds. Even more serious is this milieu's willing submission to the identity-based and nationalist ideas that are at the heart of the Zapatista project. At first there was some attempt to tone down this support in the name of tactics. Now voices are being raised to maintain that: 'Even though the idea of nation has been sullied by the ideological use the bourgeoisie has made of it, it preserves the idea of pluralist freedom that political parties lack. Even though the nation has been reduced to a purely fictitious condition, it still holds within it the idea of emancipation'.<sup>6</sup> This gives an idea of the distance that has been travelled in such a short space of time! In this sense, infatuation with the zapastistas reveals the crisis in broad sectors of the libertarian milieu that are incapable of defending internationalist positions in the face of the consequences of the capitalist globalisation that is taking place.*

*Paris, May 1996*

---

<sup>5</sup> See the appended text on the Brazilian situation.

<sup>6</sup> Yves Le Manach, 'La résignation est un suicide quotidien', *Alternative Libertaire*, Brussels, April 1996.



# Beyond the Balaclavas of South East Mexico

## The Indian communities: myth or alienation?

The authoritarian character of Maya and Inca societies is now an accepted fact. Despite that, the myth of an idyllic Indian community dies hard. This myth is partly sustained by the ideas that people have about community. As if the communitarian form of pre-capitalist societies somehow precluded a tightly structured hierarchy, centralised power and barbarous forms of exploitation of labour. Among the Mayas, for example—whose territory included the Chiapas of today—the peasants' surplus labour served to support a minority of aristocrats and priests who formed the ruling class of these city-states.<sup>1</sup> To speak of 'local traditions of democratic decision-making' and present the rules that governed them as forms of primitive democracy is to ignore the authority of the elders and chiefs which depended on a central theocracy to enforce orders and defend their interests. The organisation of social relations left little room for contestation or even discussion. In these communities, solidarity was that of constriction. Decision-making concerning the basic problems of material life escaped the members of this community, and social cohesion was rooted in submission to authority. On this subject, it is enough to refer to Aztec treatises which diffused the norms and principles that were supposed to guide social life: 'Be loving, grateful, respectful; be afraid, look with fear, be submissive, do what your mother's heart desires, and your father's too, because it is their due, their gift; because they are entitled to service, submission, deference by right. [...] Humiliate yourself, bow, bow down your head, bow down!!'.<sup>2</sup>

In the 9th century, the Mayan empire, defeated by the Aztecs, fell into decline. The authoritarianism that pervaded social relations did not disappear for all that, though the collapse of the old political system left more autonomy to the tribes and communities, especially to those living on the edges of the empire. They continued to pay tribute to their new masters while still respecting the old rules of the hierarchy. This new situation explains the resistance that some Mayan tribes put up against the European conquerors. We know that the Spaniards won military victories over the 'structured' empires more easily than over the tribes that were not enclosed within statist forms. This can easily be explained. The inhabitants of an empire like the Incas were already used to the *corvées* (forced statutory labour) for the Emperor or for the Temples of the Sun and the Moon. The transition—from Emperor to the Spanish *encomendero*—certainly did not take place peacefully; but was possible thanks to a recourse to violence. On the other hand, concerning the free populations with no State framework, violence was not sufficient: war became massacre and the survivors were reduced to slavery.<sup>3</sup> The Mayan tribes of the periphery found themselves in an intermediate situation. 'Contrary to the Aztec powers, there was no central authority that

---

<sup>1</sup> See: J.Eric S.Thompson, *Grandeur et décadence de la civilisation maya*, Paris, Bibliothèque Historique Payot, 1993.

<sup>2</sup> 'Témoignages de l'ancienne parole', p.48, translated from Nuhauti by Jacqueline de Thirand-Forest, Paris, La Différence, 1995.)

<sup>3</sup> Ruggiero Romano, *Les mécanismes de la conquête coloniale: les conquistadores* (p.46), Paris, Flammarion.)

could have been overthrown, taking the whole empire down with it. Just as the Mayas did not make war in the habitual sense. They were jungle guerillas.<sup>4</sup> In this way, since the Conquest, this region acquired a specificity which was to have an effect on the formation of the Mexican nation.

After being enslaved by the bureaucratic empires, then by the European colonisers, these Indian peoples were crushed by the capitalist machine. After being expelled from their communal lands many indigenous people became proletarians, subject to the violence of waged labour commodity relations. Those who are presenting themselves today as the representatives in arms of the 'Indian communities' never forget to patriotically proclaim their attachment to the ideals of Mexican independence! Yet we know that this was a crucial element in the transformation of the indigenous population into poor peasants and landless proletarians. Almost a century later those who made up the largest part of the Zapatista army during the Mexican revolution came from the State of Morelos, 'virtually the only southern State where capitalist relations of production ruled *everywhere*'.<sup>5</sup>

If it was their attachment to the aspirations of a past Indian communal life that had stirred up their revolt, it also explains their inability to go further in their emancipation. These peasants were deeply rooted in their land and traditions. Above all, they fought for the restoration of the expropriated communal lands and the right to own an individual plot. For those looking for historical truth beyond legend, it seems that 'the Zapatista movement is not socialist, nor even 'progressive' in the sense of wanting to transform the whole of Mexico in a revolutionary way. (...) It is only 'revolutionary' insofar as it was a response to the aspirations of a communitarian Indian past (...). It neither supposes nor proposes any kind of *rupture*.' Or, if one prefers: 'The traditionalism of the Zapatista movement was the basis of its solitude and isolation and, above all, its inconsistencies, ambiguities and profound contradictions. And this originality allowed it to survive; at the same time it legitimised its inability to develop in a dynamic way towards its self-transformation and really leave its regionalist 'ghetto'.<sup>6</sup> Besides, it is significant that in the same period the government succeeded in temporarily pacifying the insurgent Yaquis by promising their chiefs that it would return the communal lands to them and build churches...<sup>7</sup>...With the end of the revolution, capitalism's expansion has accelerated the destruction of traditional forms of Indian community by integrating most of its members into the 'community of capital'.

In Chiapas, the process of capitalist modernization was delayed for a considerable amount of time by the strength of the land owners who ruled there in an almost feudal manner. In a region in which the revolution had caused little upheaval, they were able to profit from the closed nature and traditionalism of the Indian communities, mobilising those they exploited against the official plan of agrarian reform and the liberation of the serfs.<sup>8</sup> This resistance against the

---

<sup>4</sup> Michael Coe, *The Mayas*, quoted in 'Insurgent Mexico', *Fifth Estate*, Summer 1994 (French translation)).

<sup>5</sup> Americo Nunes, *Les révolutions du Mexique* (p.151), Paris, Flammarion, 1975) In this brilliant critique of the progressivist myths of the Mexican Revolution the author shows, in particular, that 'the libertarian watchword 'Land & Liberty' was falsely attributed to the Zapatista movement' whereas it was actually the slogan of the Magon brothers' (anarchist) liberal party. See also: Ricardo Flores Magon, *La révolution mexicaine*, Paris, Spartacus, 1979.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 148, 150.

<sup>7</sup> Based in the State of Sonora (north-west Mexico) the Yaqui tribe revolted again and again against the expropriation of the land. It was finally crushed militarily, in 1926, by Obregon, a revolutionary general who had been allied... to the Zapatistas.

<sup>8</sup> Regarding this matter, see the interesting chapter, 'Le sang, le joug et la forêt', Nicolas Arraitz, *Tendre Venin*, Editions du Phenomene, Paris, 1995.

central bourgeoisie united exploiter and exploited in conserving the Indian communities to the advantage of the big landowners in Chiapas. From the 40s, 'The arid mountains of the Altos del Chiapas, divided by Cardenas' hypocritical agrarian reform, were to become a perfect labour pool for the *latifundios* of the Centro, the Fraylesca and Soconusco, who suddenly no longer needed to feed all these mouths outside the harvest season, since they more or less managed to survive on the communal land.'<sup>9</sup> Little by little, many of the communities only survived thanks to the wage labour of the Indians employed in the coffee plantations.<sup>10</sup> The ancestral values that remained rooted in their miserable material survival, are for the most part values of submission. These undoubtedly suited the big landowners. The communities whose democratic and emancipatory traditions are being mythified today, have for decades constituted the social structure that consigned the exploited into the hands of the big landowners. Only the development of the proletarian condition and consequent breaking up of communitarian forms were to set off revolts containing elements of social emancipation. The Chiapas revolt is the latest episode in the slow and particular integration which this periferal region of Mexican capitalism has undergone.

## The revolt of the 'New Hanged'

Revolts of poor peasants and land occupations are endemic phenomena in Latin American societies. In Mexico as elsewhere, the nature of these struggles has been affected by the convulsions of all the societies of the third world: expulsion of the poor peasants from the land, social exclusion, migration, proletarianisation. To understand the nature of the revolt in Chiapas we must take a brief look at the particularities of this region and the place it occupies in the development of social tensions in Mexico.

As a result of the survival of a quasi-feudal system of ownership, the peasants of the *ejidos* (communal land) and the small proprietors of Chiapas were among the poorest of Mexico. All the same, by the late 50s, numerous Indian peasants evicted from their individual plots of land began to emigrate to Chiapas. Although this movement was essentially spontaneous, it came to be encouraged by the government. The *expulsados* were urged to settle in the forest. 'Socially, the Lacondonian frontier was a safety valve; a region far from the centre of power, where the potentially explosive indigenous and peasant masses from Mexico's lower depths could be put to work. It was, if you will, a nature reserve for the poorest of the poor.'<sup>11</sup> In just a few years, over 150,000 landless Indians settled in the forest and the mountains.<sup>12</sup> Like any capitalist distribution of land, this came about in an unequal way. The new arrivals found themselves on the poorest land situated in the mountains and never had access to the fertile valleys. Shortly afterwards, this land was either abandoned (because it was too arid) or expropriated (by force or by legal means). The fact that these poor peasants were mainly Indians made it easier for the wealthy landowners linked to the agri-industry to seize their land.

The conditions for the emergence of new social conflicts now existed, and the 'safety valve' turned into a time bomb. The decline of the old Indian communities went side by side with the

---

<sup>9</sup> Nicolas Arraitz, *Ibid*, p. 219.. 5. Antonio Garcia de Leon, *Los motivos de Chiapas*, Barcelona, the journal *Etcetera*, November, 1995.

<sup>10</sup> Antonio Garcia de Leon, *Los motivos de Chiapas*, 16. *Rebellion from the Roots*, John Ross, Common Courage Press, 1995, p. 257.

<sup>11</sup> *Rebellion from the Roots*, John Ross, Common Courage Press, 1995, p. 257.

<sup>12</sup> Katerina, *Mexico is not only Chiapas, Nor the Rebellion in Chiapas a Mexican Affair*, March 1995, Hamburg.

creation of a new poor peasantry, composed of a mixed population (Maya and non-Maya Indians and *métis*). Already, at the beginning of the 70s, 'the old communities, which had been structured in the past, began to show the effects of an intensive process of internal social differentiation which was eating into their mechanisms of cohesion and self-defence. Peasants with neither land nor work started to concentrate in the miserable suburbs (of the towns of Chiapas). At the beginning of the 80s the number of people available for work had doubled while at the same time, the scorched earth policy of the Rios Montt government in Guatemala, drove into Chiapas more than 80,000 Maya refugees who fled the neighbouring country to join the reserve army of labour on the Mexican side of the border.'<sup>13</sup> The expropriated Indians were often marginalised since the landowners preferred to replace them with Guatemalan workers who were living even more precariously and were often in the country illegally.<sup>14</sup>

In short, 'The old system of buying and selling and reproducing the workforce was thus disrupted without being replaced by a new system capable of absorbing a growing mass of unemployed agricultural workers. Despair and crisis had begun to produce their most perverse effects.'<sup>15</sup> The social structure underwent a profound upheaval. The disarticulation of the countryside was accompanied by chaotic, uncontrolled urbanisation of the townships. 'Today, in Chiapas as in Guatemala, one can see all the forms of dispossession that are besieging the Indian communities'.<sup>16</sup>

In Mexico, the poor peasantry's attachment to the land was imbued with the aspirations of the communitarian Indian past and reinforced by the heritage of the revolution. These aspirations faded with the expropriation of communal land and the introduction of capitalism into the countryside. A few references might help to understand this and to go beyond the myth of communitarianism. Family ownership of the communal land was the first step in this expropriation. Although almost one third of the land is part of the *ejidos* or belongs to the smallholders, only 10% of the *ejidos* are cultivated collectively. Moreover, most of the cultivators of the *ejidos* (about 80%) are now also forced to work for the big landowners if they want to survive, which gives some idea of how poor the communal land is. Around the 80s, the expropriation of the *ejidos* was speeded up everywhere. Through the expedient of indebting the peasants, the banking sector took hold of the communal lands, forcing the poor peasants to 'become partners' with the rich landowners.<sup>17</sup> The crisis of communal ownership thus led to a rapid process of proletarianisation of the peasantry. In such a context, dominated by the private form of land ownership, the content of the demands of peasant struggles rarely went beyond the bounds of capitalist social relations. Quite naturally, the vanguardist political organisations that developed alongside the rural movements made respect for private ownership of the land one of the basic elements of their own reformist battle. The revolt in Chiapas occurred as this process was drawing to a close. The last region to suffer the effects of the expropriation of communal lands, a buffer-zone become a concentration of all the country's problems, Chiapas has become the powder-keg of Mexico at the very moment that the globalization of the economy is on the agenda. This revolt is a revolt

---

<sup>13</sup> Antonio Garcia de Leon, *op. cit.*

<sup>14</sup> The poor peasants of Chiapas—where historically borders mean little—who is Indian? who is Mexican? who is Guatemalan? The devoted supporters of the Zapatista cause remain strangely silent about the presence of this body of immigrants. What measure does the EZLN expect to take to solve this 'problem'? Is there a problem?

<sup>15</sup> Antonio Garcia de León, *op. cit.*

<sup>16</sup> Nicolas Arraitz, *op. cit.* p. 221.

<sup>17</sup> Katarina, *op. cit.*

of all the excluded, of the landless and unemployed proletarians, the emarginated, poor peasants and urban lumpenproletarians stuck where they are, between the forest, the mountains and the ocean. It is the revolt of the 'new hanged'. In fact, the mass of young people has no access to the land and cannot find work in the cities.<sup>18</sup> 'Today, the Zapatista army is mainly made up of this mass of young, modern, emarginated people who speak various languages and have some experience of wage labour. They do not much resemble the isolated Indians one tends to imagine'.<sup>19</sup> To insist on presenting the revolt as a specifically Indian movement amounts to denying oneself the necessary means with which to understand it. To go no further than the EZLN's democratic demands is to refuse to see that the political goals of the organisations speaking in the name of the peoples involved may well fall short of the latter's aspirations and rage. Moreover, it is unlikely that the young rebels of Chiapas are fighting for land, be it private or collective.

## From Mao to Marcos: The Success of the EZLN

In October 1968, the Mexican government, astounded by the vastness of an unprecedented student movement, massacre some 300 demonstrators in the Plaza of the Three Cultures in Mexico City. At the same time, a savage repression was unleashed against the organisations of the far left. Following these tragic events, the Marxist-Leninist-Maoist group *Politica Popular* decided to leave the student milieu to concentrate its activities on the 'working masses'. It implanted itself in the cities in the northern part of the country, where the rural exodus had led huge areas of shanty-towns to spring up—a favourable terrain for militant leftists. Their objective was to create 'red bases': a network of organisations to cover all spheres of social life and end up controlling these poor areas. Tactics were taken from the leftist tendencies of the Chinese Cultural Revolution: the political leadership of the Organisation was never to come out into the open, its decisions always being presented as the result of consultation with the masses in committees and assemblies. This is the classic project of an authoritarian vanguard organisation taking over and manipulating masses of people by masking itself with the demagogic discourse of grassroots democracy. While organising their 'political work' in this terrain, the Mexican Maoists inevitably came to meet older militants, progressive Catholic priests. Each competing for control of the same masses, Maoists and priests rapidly reached an agreement. Out of their miraculous cooperation was to come 'Torreonism' (from the name of the big northern town Torreón), the Mexican model for 'working on the masses'.<sup>20</sup> In the mid-70s the Mexican government, worried by the success of this current, unleashed savage repression against it in the course of which many militants were killed. Again, the leadership of the Organisation revised its positions: the 'mass line', which puts the emphasis on political work in the urban areas, was replaced by the 'proletarian line', giving priority to their implantation among the poor peasants. In fact, the adoption of this new line signified for the Mexican Maoists their withdrawal to areas where they thought they would be less exposed to repression: it was their 'Long March'. This was a troubled time in the life of the group, characterised by a whole succession of failed 'implantation', splits, renunciation and

---

<sup>18</sup> Today, 60% of the population of Chiapas is under 20.

<sup>19</sup> Antonio Garcia de Leon, *op.cit.*

<sup>20</sup> In this part of the text we have made extensive use of the work by John Ross, *Rebellion From the Roots*, see note 15, particularly the chapters 'Back to the Jungle' and 'Into the Zapatist Zone'.

internal settling of scores.<sup>21</sup> So it is not until the end of the 70s that the first 'brigades' of the Maoist vanguard arrived in Chiapas, where they met their 'fellow travellers' of the 'progressive' church, who were already present in the poor peasant communities.

It is not easy today to establish a clear linear link between this organisation's period of implantation and that of the birth of the EZLN. What we can be certain of is the existence of this link. After some time other Maoist groups arrived in Chiapas. Marcos himself belonged to one of the last 'brigades' it seems.<sup>22</sup> Many militants and political leaders disappeared as a result of the merciless repression carried out by the army and mercenaries employed by the landowners. As for the survivors, they had to revise some of their ideas in accordance with local conditions. Lastly, it is well known that the basic tactics of the leftist Maoists began to reappear in the peasant struggles: the constant recourse to assemblies as a means of hiding and protecting the political leadership.

Like their Peruvian counterparts of the Shining Path, the Mexican Maoists had, in their own way, criticised the Guevarist idea of the *foco* (insurrectional hotbeds). They had understood that political 'implantation' was doomed to failure if it were to limit itself to actions taken by a small group parachuted into closed Indian communities which were hostile to everything that came from outside. For tactical reasons they proclaimed the uniqueness of Indian culture from the start. The small groups of militants had to integrate themselves into the communities by using, among other things, their links with the 'indigenous Church'. In a second phase, the political organisation adapted its conception of leadership to the new historical conditions, characterised by the breakdown of rural communities and the proletarianisation of Indian peasants. The creation of peasant union organisations corresponded to this second phase. In 1991 the 'Emiliano Zapata Independent Peasants' Alliance' became a national organisation. This represented a fundamental political leap: the work of creating a 'mass base' had been completed and the 'regionalist' conceptions—demanded by the self-sufficient Indian communities and defended by the 'indigenous Church'—had become outdated. The time for armed action had arrived. Actually, and according to this model, the creation of the military organisation was to be the final phase of a long political effort of 'implantation'<sup>23</sup> among the local population. Today, the Zapatista army that has come from these 'mass' organisations, is merely one of the organisation's structures; it is its visible part. The texts of the EZLN and Marcos's statements often come back to this question. The success of the neo-Zapatista organisation is explained in large part by the political intelligence that its militants displayed throughout this long period.

Yet the strategy of the EZLN is criticised by other currents of the Mexican vanguardist far left, who have doubts concerning its chances of success. They define the EZLN a 'reformist armed organisation', whose social isolation explains its emphasis on negotiation: 'How can a national liberation army claim to negotiate its true objective of seizing power? And how can one negotiate with the State over such an objective?'<sup>24</sup> The EZLN has apparently built itself a media image

---

<sup>21</sup> This was when ties were established between the political bosses of the party in power, the PRI, and the leaders of *Política Popular*. Two big Maoist leaders of that period are now high-ranking cadres of the PRI, in the official peasant organisation...: on this subject see John Ross, *op. cit.* p. 276.

<sup>22</sup> John Ross, *op. cit.* p. 278.

<sup>23</sup> See the interesting analysis by Julio Mogel in *La Jornada*, June 19, 1994; quoted by John Ross, *op. cit.*

<sup>24</sup> Salvador Castaneda, 'Things are Going to be Difficult for the EZLN', interview, *Analyse & Kritik* no. 373. Castaneda was one of the leaders of the MAR (*Movimiento de Acción Revolucionaria*), an armed struggle organisation of the 70s.

which does not correspond to its true nature, with the tactical aim of masking its own weakness. First, on vanguardism: 'The EZLN continue to maintain they are not a vanguard. This leads to confusion. Of course a vanguard is precisely what they are, even if they maintain the opposite. It's what you do that matters, not what you say. If you start to struggle, if you put people in different camps, then you must take responsibility for this, organise the resistance and coordinate the forces that are involved'.<sup>25</sup> Then on the question of the demand for peace, 'Peace is fine for the ruling classes. They have always lived 'with peace' and that is how they keep power. (...) Marcos is constantly calling for the support of sectors of society who, when things start to get serious, will not want to hear any more talk of Zapatistas'.<sup>26</sup> The EZLN has no choice: it must play for time, create a support movement outside Chiapas, hence the constant appeal to 'civil society'. But in the long run, insistence on negotiation inevitably leads to stagnation in the organisation's positions and the end of outside support. 'But, in reality, what the Zapatistas are cruelly lacking in right now is massive support from the street, such as in January (1995) when they demanded a ceasefire. And the too little criticised vagueness of 'civil society' that turns out to be no more than a miserable poultice, without any strength of its own. The only place where it is a powerful reality, is here. And the local people prefer to say: 'The people in rebellion'.<sup>27</sup> Here we have reached the core of our critique. The EZLN's originality is at the point of becoming its greatest weakness. For ten years this movement was able to take advantage of the particular conditions of implantation in a geographically isolated region where problems concerning security forces and armed confrontation were nonexistent. This isolation, which permitted it to develop easily, has now become a trap. As soon as the EZLN appeared openly, it was encircled militarily, isolated and deprived of any possible line of retreat in the case of attack by the Mexican army.<sup>28</sup>

## Indigenous Democracy in the Age of the Internet

Speech control is one aspect of the bureaucratic nature of the EZLN. The voices of the rebels of Chiapas are reduced to one alone, which speaks and writes in the name of all the others. The fact that some of the caviar-left bourgeois defend Marcos because of an elitist conception, is hardly surprising. He is an 'artist' and 'the best contemporary Latin American writer', the representative 'of a handful of very gifted young people'. 'He (Marcos) doesn't speak on their behalf, he turns his companions into characters in tales or short stories. With this flaunted but collective subjectivity, he invents a new way of saying 'I' that resonates like 'we' without substituting itself for it, an open and mutable 'I' that anyone can take as they like and expand in their own way.'<sup>29</sup> Enthusiastic militants are occasionally embarrassed by the spectacle of the subcomandante. They go out of their way to reassure us that Marcos talks in the name of the people of whom he is merely their spokesman. There is no danger of *caudillism*. But how do you recognise the voice of the people if all you can hear is Marcos? Only Marcos is able to do it, of course! And we go round in circles. Lastly, others do not fear the stench of totalitarianism and explain that: 'The

---

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> N. Arraitz, *op. cit.*

<sup>28</sup> To deal with it, part of the Mexican far left proposed to the EZLN the constitution of a United Front of political organisations. Despite contacts with the EZLN, it refuses for the moment to consider any eventuality in which it would not have a dominant position.

<sup>29</sup> Régis Debray, 'A demain Zapata', *Le Monde*, May 1995.

mask says that all can speak through the mouth of one man. The mask says that no one is irreplaceable'.<sup>30</sup> Because everyone is equal, we could add cynically. For his part, the subcomandante justifies himself: 'What is new is not the absence of the *caudillo*; what is new is the fact that he is a faceless *caudillo*'.<sup>31</sup> For us, of course, the anonymity of the leader is not the end of the leader; on the contrary it is the abstract form of authority. The cult of the hero is not superceded—it appears in its pure form. Modernity presents itself to us in the form of a caricature of the past: we thought we'd got rid of Bolshevik vanguardism only to wind up with the vanguardism of Zorro. The EZLN is *dirigism* in a democratic balaclava.

However, a careful reading of the EZLN's prose reveals the existence of a clear separation between 'us' (the liberation army) and 'them' (the masses). The clear-sighted observer would have no difficulty in discerning in these words the basic principles of leftist Maoism and the '*torreonism*' of the 70s. The Zapatista organisation conforms to the model: assemblies at the base, clandestine political committees at the apex (the General Command to which Marcos is answerable). We are also told that the organisation consults tirelessly with the base: there are plebiscites, assemblies, referendums.

It's a 'democratic political process', a 'new political project', 'autonomous democracy for all (*sic*) levels of Mexican society', of a 'new political synthesis' etc. In interview after interview, communique after communique, Marcos repeats his own litany made up of democratic clichés that his audience like to hear. He speaks unflinchingly of the EZLN's democratic concerns. To the point that, intoxicated with fine words, sharp minds begin to doubt whether he himself even believes a word of it. Indeed, as soon as you get beyond the hackneyed phrases and attempt to identify the real content of the structures that will wield power, approximation is the rule. The man who uses the modern Internet network to spread his own texts reveals himself to be a confirmed devotee of the past: 'When a community has a problem, it meets in assembly, the people analyse it and resolve it together... This form of democracy is innate and natural, there is no need to teach it. It comes from our ancestors and their ancestors and is passed on for life.'<sup>32</sup> What one might dare to ask about the mythical content of this communitarian democracy would be somewhat disapproved of. Haven't we been told that 'indigenous democracy does not come out of drawing rooms. It is discussed up hill and down dale, it condenses in the surroundings, in the rivers, the water holes and the caves. You don't see it, you feel it.'<sup>33</sup> Assured of the respectful silence of his interlocutors, Marcos does not hesitate to propose this model of representation as a model of government for modern societies, apparently without realising that he is merely proposing a simplified version of what already exists. 'Let us organise the world this way, let us wield power, nominate someone to represent us; but we're going to watch him, and if he doesn't do his job we'll remove him, take it from him as is done in the Indian communities'.<sup>34</sup>

Patriotic nationalism is the second pillar of the EZLN's discourse, alongside that of communitarian democracy. An observer sympathetic to their actions still couldn't help but notice that

---

<sup>30</sup> N. Arraitz, *op. cit.*, p. 273.

<sup>31</sup> Interview in *La véridique légende du sous-commandant Marcos*, a film by T. Brissac and T. Castillo, La Seot/Arte, Paris 1995.

<sup>32</sup> Marcos, Interview in *Brecha*, Montevideo, October 1995 (translated and published by *Alternative Libertaire*, Brussels, March 1996).

<sup>33</sup> Declarations of principles of the EZLN quoted by N. Arraitz, *op. cit.*, cover page.

<sup>34</sup> Marcos, interview, *op. cit.*



‘Marcos himself exudes fanatical patriotism.’<sup>35</sup> Patriotic hysteria, which was one of the grossest defects of Maoist extremism, has had no difficulty in adapting to the new situation. In fact the EZLN has shown considerable ability to adapt to a situation born out of the collapse of State capitalism and the end of the division of the world into two blocs. It is the first guerilla movement of the post-communist period to try to find a way of operating in the era of the new world order. Its Marxist-Leninist cadres have never criticised the exploitative nature of the systems that have collapsed. Sometimes they go as far as describe them as ‘countries that were able to live freely’.<sup>36</sup> For the most part they limit themselves to noting the disappearance of what, for them, was socialism: ‘The Soviet Union is finished—there is no longer any socialist (*sic*) camp; in Nicaragua we lost the elections; in Guatemala, a peace agreement was signed; in El Salvador, peace is being discussed. Cuba is isolated; no one wants to hear talk of armed struggle any more, even less about socialism; from now on everyone is against revolution, socialist or not.’<sup>37</sup> So, what is left for those Marxist-Leninists who have lost the support of the ‘brother countries’ other than attachment to a crude anti-imperialist patriotism, praise for the nation and respect for parliamentary democracy. The EZLN is not a movement that ‘unites the past with the future’,<sup>38</sup> less still is it the ‘first revolution of the century to come’. It is a movement of the past that is trying to adapt to the new givens of a present which has no future. It is the last old-style movement of a century that is drawing to a close.

## The interests of God, and women have had enough

We have seen that, from the beginning, the Marxist-Leninist groups and the local Catholic Church reached an understanding. The political militants adapted very well to an ‘indigenous Church’ based on the principle of the autonomy of dioceses and the ability of rank and file militants to carry out the task of evangelisation and celebrating mass. The Dominicans, who were the majority in Chiapas, accepted this agreement which allowed them to continue their ‘work on people’s souls’, while the Maoists used it as a means to infiltrate the communities. Many Indian cadres of the EZLN were recruited in this manner following their local involvement in the religious communities and peasant organisations.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, their political reasoning is impregnated with the simplistic principles of liberation theology: there are ‘false ideas’ and ‘true ideas’, just as there is a false and true interpretation of the Gospel, depending on one’s perspective. Several themes of the EZLN’s ideology fit in perfectly with the positions of this religious current: rejection of central power, cult of the community, etc. When one of the comandantes says: ‘If Christ gave his life, if he let his blood be shed to liberate his brothers, I think we shall have the same weapons’,<sup>40</sup> He is just repeating the assertion of liberation theology which presents militant political struggle as the path to the realisation of the Kingdom of God on earth.<sup>41</sup> For liberation theology, access to religious ‘grace’ is accomplished by commitment as a militant. ‘*Grace is the*

---

<sup>35</sup> John Ross, *op. cit.* p. 294.

<sup>36</sup> Interview with Tacho and Moises, N. Arraitz, *op. cit.*, p. 343.

<sup>37</sup> Interview, *La véridique légende du sous-commandant Marcos*, *op. cit.*

<sup>38</sup> ‘Year 03’, text of a report by the EZLN support committees in Germany, Hamburg, February 18, 1996.

<sup>39</sup> See the interview with commanders Acho and Moises, N. Arraitz, *op. cit.*

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> Note that this mystical version of politics is not very different from that of militant Islam.

*gift that convinces a person to trust. From trust comes unity. And unity permits organisation. In this sense grace is opposed to the existing power structure.*<sup>42</sup>

This being the case, it would be a mistake to conclude that the Church and the EZLN have the same strategy. In its own way, the party represented by the Catholic church is trying to take advantage of the situation and pursue the aims that are characteristic of it. All the more so because, since the 60s, Protestant sects have been competing with the Catholic ones for control of people's souls. Tens of thousands of Indian peasants in Chiapas were expelled from their communal lands on the pretext that they converted to Protestantism and went to join 'the expelled ones' in the mountains.<sup>43</sup>

The EZLN could not ignore this religious competition. That is why it emphasises its independence from the Churches and accepts evangelists and members of other Protestant sects. For their part, the functionaries of the Catholic church distinguish themselves from the EZLN while at the same time respecting its political activity. The priest Ruiz, Bishop of San Cristobal and a key personality in the negotiations between the EZLN and the regime is, moreover, an old connoisseur of Mexican leftists, whom he has frequented since the 70s.<sup>44</sup>

In 1990, while the EZLN continued its militant work in clandestinity, the priest Ruiz and his underlings posted photos of foetuses on the facade of the Cathedral of San Cristobal.<sup>45</sup> They wished, in this way, to protest against the law on the right to interrupt pregnancy, which had just been passed by the provincial parliament.<sup>46</sup> As it was everywhere, the question of reproduction was a political matter of social control, and the *caciques* of the PRI, [*Partido Revolucionario Institucional*, the ruling party in Mexico] saw in it a means to reduce the birth rate among the poor. The celebrated 'progressive Church'—an ally of the Zapatistas—revealed its reactionary nature without any qualms. Today, Ruiz passes for a Church 'dissident', among other things because he criticises the celibacy of the priesthood. He knows that the survival of his little business is at stake. Because competition from the Protestants is not just a simple matter of theology. The Protestants implanted themselves easily in the communities because their organisation is more flexible and because men can fulfil the responsibilities of the Church office without any problem. Ruiz and his clique understood this and tried to join the parade. According to the 'Catechism of Exodus' of the 'progressives' the communities can elect deacons, but the fact is that there are still no indigenous priests... And for a reason: 'In the indigenous communities, the older man, the mature man, is invariably the head of the family. A man is not adult as long as he is unmarried.'<sup>47</sup> Community cohesion is necessary for the survival of the party of the Catholic Church (as it is for the EZLN) and the priests reject the struggle for birth control as a theory of the 'First World'.<sup>48</sup> It is interesting to compare this position with those of the racist currents of North American black Islam, for which the right to contraception and interruption of pregnancy are part of a plan by whites aiming at the extermination of the black community.) While they're at it they support the

---

<sup>42</sup> Taken from *Téologia Pastoral Operaria* (Workers' Pastoral Theology—instructional texts of the Brazilian current of libertarian theology), Domingos Barbe, Sao Paolo, 1983.

<sup>43</sup> John Ross, op. cit.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.* At the time, Ruiz experienced first-hand the work of Maoists and 'progressive' priests in the town of northern Mexico.

<sup>45</sup> The event is recounted by John Ross, *ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> Samuel Ruiz, interview, *El Pais*, October 5, 1995.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

political struggle, claiming that the means of subsistence exists and that the problem is 'to know who controls it and who distributes it.'<sup>49</sup> So convergence with the EZLN comes out in the end.

For anyone who hasn't understood it yet, these macho and pro-rising birth rate discourses do not call into question the living conditions of women in the communities. In these poor regions, women's living conditions are extremely harsh; alcoholism wreaks havoc and increases male violence. In Chiapas, the birth rate is very high, an average of about seven children per woman. '60% of the population is under 20; many adolescent girls are sold into marriage before they turn fifteen. 117 women out of every 100,000 die in childbirth (the highest cause of death in Mexico), and the infant mortality rate is double the national rate. Lastly, 30–40% of women speak only one (indigenous) language, and 60% cannot read or write.'<sup>50</sup> It is certainly true that the EZLN has been particularly attractive to women, who constitute around one third of the troops and more than half of the rank and file militants. This phenomenon is not particular to the situation in Chiapas; it is common to all the societies caught up in the process of transformation in which guerilla groups have formed. It was definitely under the pressure of the women who left the communities to go and fight, that the EZLN decreed its law regarding women at the start of the insurrection.

By their commitment, the women confirm the reactionary nature of the Indian communities that the Zapatista leaders continue to present as the new model of democracy to establish everywhere. On the other hand, women's integration into military structures remains the surest way to defuse the subversive potential of their choice to break with the past. Any desire to transform the social relations between the sexes is thus nipped in the bud. Recent historical experience shows that women are often used in the struggle and then subordinated to new general interests, indeed, to new policies favouring a higher birth rate. The example of Algeria should be enough to make us doubt the social 'gains' that the EZLN leaders like to take credit for. Since when has women's participation in military tasks and their rise in the chain of command been proof of women's emancipation? One can claim that 'the insurrection itself represents a process of revolution in traditional life and relationships of domination.'<sup>51</sup> It is an indisputable fact that the guerilla army is a modernist force insofar as it allows women to escape the social relations of the traditional communities. Nonetheless, it is still the case that no details are given about the new relations created inside the 'liberated' zones. It is to be feared that the militarisation of women will replace their submission to communitarian relations. And we should point out that, apart from a few rare remarks from the 'comandantes', women's words are hardly to be found in the texts of the EZLN.

## **The land Question: The EZLN Between Occupation and Negotiation**

EZLN sympathisers want at all costs to have us believe that its existence constitutes a rampart, a poor people's force of self-defence facing the State and the capitalists. And this is, of course, an extremely elitist argument: the weak people need an armed wing capable of defending them. Reality would appear to be different. The EZLN is not a classical armed group, it is the armed wing

---

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> 'Year 03', op. cit.

of an organisation that controls a small territory. When clashes take place beyond the controlled zone, it lacks the means to intervene and the rebel peasants are then fired on without restraint by the armed mercenaries in the pay of the big landowners (the 'white guard'). Its support for the land occupations is timid, to say the least. On this latter question, the EZLN has some difficulty in linking up with the direct action of the poor peasants and agricultural workers. Of course, the EZLN has a programmatic position on the land question: the Revolutionary Law on Agrarian Reform. Its content is particularly moderate: it talks of respect for private property, expropriation of part of the land of the great plantations, incitement to found cooperatives and production collectives on the land that has been expropriated, the need to nationalise the marketing boards, all in within a context of market economy.<sup>52</sup> Meanwhile, the Zapatista operations have encouraged the peasants to occupy land not only in Chiapas, but also in other southern States. At the beginning of '95, in the State of Chiapas alone, there were more than 500 squatted properties. The pro-Zapatista politicians do not try to hide it: '(The peasants) had been trying to get the land through the use of legal means for so long, without any result, that in desperation they have begun to occupy the land. The government has had them evicted, but as soon as that happens the peasants take the land back again'.<sup>53</sup> However, preoccupied about the need to negotiate with the power structure, they seem to be somewhat afraid of this movement. For the occasion, they trot out the same old song about manipulation of the masses and acts of provocation. 'While the peasants are occupied with expulsion orders and the legal struggle, the government distracts them to prevent them from participating in the great national Consultation (organised by the EZLN)'.<sup>54</sup>

In all the pages written glorifying the revolt in Chiapas it is very hard to find any material on the real movement of the individuals engaged in these occupations. Which makes the rare documentation that does mention them all the more precious.<sup>55</sup> It turns out that the most active militants 'on the ground' are not linked to the EZLN, but to another organisation, the *Union Campesina y Popular Francisco Villa*. Though they also support the Zapatistas, the *villistas* do not seem to agree with guerilla action and are critical of negotiating tactics. They say they prefer 'the defence of reclaimed land and the training of the *'companeros'*'.<sup>56</sup> These political divergences may also explain the Zapatista's attitude towards a movement of occupation which is escaping them. How do the workers organise production on the occupied properties? It seems that piece work continues there, even if it no longer has duties assigned daily<sup>57</sup> and the pay has been increased. Lastly, the organisation of work itself has not been changed. It is difficult to understand the organisational relationship that has been created between the militants who lead the occupations and the mass of those who are working, if only that the leaders seem to work less (or not at all...) and have a tendency to express themselves as bosses (for example, 'We prefer to lose the harvest rather than hire employees').<sup>58</sup> Who runs things and how? Finally, the marketing network remains the same. Learning that the mafiosi-like intermediaries constitute the social base

---

<sup>52</sup> Katarina, op. cit.

<sup>53</sup> A. Avendano (rebel governor of Chiapas), interview, *Solidarité Chiapas* no. 2, Paris, September 1995. See also N. Arraitz, op. cit., p. 203.

<sup>54</sup> Avendano, op. cit.

<sup>55</sup> N. Arraitz, op. cit.

<sup>56</sup> Words spoken by one of their militants, *ibid.*, p. 204.

<sup>57</sup> This information is taken from N. Arraitz, op. cit., see in particular the chapter 'La Saga des Orantes'.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.* p. 205.

of the party in power (the PRI), one can see how they are not too worried about the occupations. Besides, the local shopkeepers are delighted because the peasants are now spending their pay directly at their stores, without passing through those located on the properties. Here a particularly obscure and worrying aspect should be emphasized. It seems that on the occupied lands the old Guatemalan immigrant workers had been dismissed in the name of a so-called refusal of the *villista* militants to 'become exploiters in turn'.<sup>59</sup>

It is not clear why the immigrants cannot participate in the occupations and be paid like the Indians, unless xenophobia and Mexican patriotism have got the better of them. The impression one gets from the examples and the information available tells us that the peasants are not particularly interested in the land or its collective use. Attempts to help them get their production going again have met with little enthusiasm<sup>60</sup> and where the land has been occupied, the idea of dividing it up has only been put forward vaguely.<sup>61</sup> The occupations seem to have been lived more as an act of class revenge on the big landowners, the poor peasants being aware of the fragility of their own forces. Once the land is occupied they content themselves with producing at subsistence level. It is true that for some years now landowners have considered the local workforce to be vindictive and are replacing them with immigrant workers.

You need to have a good dose of romantic naivety (of the Stakhanovite kind) to see the premise of a social revolution in all this. 'You feel a kind of crazy joy to see them taking freely from the bosses' stores, invite us to a three course lunch, *come back from the fields covered in sweat but with their faces glowing with satisfaction*, joking loudly with *those among them who punch the very cards used by the administration* to count the baskets [of coffee] picked by each worker.'<sup>62</sup> Unfortunately, in Chiapas we are far from seeing the beginnings of a transformation of social relations, let alone a subversion of capitalist relations. The situation cannot be compared with other recent experiences of peasant movements that have put the question of the agricultural production in terms of rupture, whether it be in Sandinist Nicaragua (1979–1982) or under the regime of the Popular Union in Chile (1970–1973) or again during the Portuguese revolution of 1974. The agri-commerce multinationals, like the big Mexican landowners, are hardly threatened by the peasant movement in Chiapas. In the same way there are few references in the EZLN's discourse to a project of reorganising production and society on a new basis, and the weakness of its proposals on the social question is noticeable.

Certainly, 'The Zapatista uprising has created a new reality, a new balance of power, and has permitted the realisation of old dreams that were unattainable until then.'<sup>63</sup> The EZLN is double-dealing the young lumpen-proletarians who make up its base. It provides them with a collective identity at a time of intense social destructuring, but channels their revolt into a military framework, thus making it controllable and negotiable in high places. The EZLN is a factor of social pacification in Chiapas today and its leaders do not hesitate to point this out. 'If we were to disappear everything would become wild and hopeless. It would be Yugoslavia in southern Mexico. The federal State would no longer have interlocutors, only enemies.'<sup>64</sup> This 'new balance of power' also constitutes a weakness therefore, if we are speaking in terms of developing the exploited's

---

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.* p. 205.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.* p. 308.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.* p. 206.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.* p. 211.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.* p. 204.

<sup>64</sup> Marcos, statement recorded by Régis Debray, 'La guerilla autrement', op. cit. Emphasis ours.

capacity for autonomous initiative. As long as the Mexican proletarians do not give themselves the means to overcome their own weaknesses, as long as they count on the strength of the EZLN alone, they will be swindled. Because replacing autonomous strength with the strength of the party is a vanguard organisation's *raison d'être*.

## **Patriots Against Neo-Liberalism, or the Impasses of the EZLN**

The events in Chiapas are unfolding at a time when capitalism is going through a particular historical period. In the era of the world's separation into two blocs, any project of national independence involved the alignment of the new ruling class with one or other of the capitalist powers. However, the objective of the so-called 'liberation' movements was to break the links of this or that country with American imperialism. At the time, the Marxist-Leninist ideology identified itself with the nationalism of the new States in formation. Since the establishment of the 'new world order' born of the collapse of the State capitalist system, the nationalist project can no longer aspire to such a rupture. Any vanguardist organisation must review its tactics and strategies so as not to be condemned to disappear. As well as putting forward nationalist demands that exploit the anti-imperialist sentiment that is still very much alive in the countries dependant on the capitalist centres, this type of organisation must integrate into local political life and make alliances solely within the context of the contradictions within the ruling classes.

We know that the EZLN's military action in Chiapas was unleashed at the same time as the NAFTA—the free trade agreement between the three countries of North America—came into effect. The aim of this agreement is to create a formal legal framework to regulate a process that has been underway for years: the domination of the United States over its two neighbouring countries, Canada to the north and Mexico to the south. Given its structural economic fragility, Mexico is experiencing the ravages of the worst recession since the 30s. Investment is declining, noncompetitive industrial units are closing, unemployment is skyrocketing, inflation is reaching record levels, traditional agricultural production has been destroyed and the majority of the population pauperised<sup>65</sup> Added to all this there is a drastic disruption of the ruling class, as the Mexican economy is characterised by powerful State intervention. The breaking of the ties built over decades between the bureaucracy of the sole party—the PRI—and the private capitalist class is now on the agenda. As a result, the whole system of patronage and corruption has been threatened. The breakdown of the political class—the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI)—and the bureaucratic control of civil society is not recent: the student revolts of the 60s and the movements of self-organisation that followed the earthquake in Mexico had already announced this. Today rottenness has become the norm and the situation is such that there is a bloody settling of accounts at the very summit of the PRI. The 'neo-liberal' tendency is demanding the liquidation of the bureaucratic constraints that constitute the basis of survival of the PRI's antiquated sections. Of course, alliances between the different tendencies are far from being made on any clear-cut basis, because many advocates of neo-liberalism also come from the corrupt and speculative sectors of the PRI. Here, as elsewhere, members of the State bureaucracy are becoming fierce defenders of unrestrained private capitalism.

---

<sup>65</sup> Since the signing of the NAFTA, the peso has lost 50% of its value, more than a thousand factories have closed, a million workers have been laid off and consumption has dropped by 25% (*Le Monde*, August 9, 1995).

Within the Mexican bourgeoisie there are many who would prefer not to conform to the demands of North American capitalism. We can assume that the EZLN's military action and the worry it has caused in multinational capitalist circles might have become a factor in the conflict between this tendency and the defenders of American interests. The changeover to American control of Mexican oil—an operation carried out under the cover of repayment of debt—has reactivated these antagonisms and heightened the bourgeoisie's nationalist sentiments. The socialdemocratic opposition—united around the Revolutionary Democratic Party (PRD)—has also been forced to find a new place in the political arena. At first, the left wing of the PRD tried to ally itself with the EZLN's leadership by putting its own institutional connections, its political and trade union structures and its influence in the media at its disposal. However, this alliance did not survive the development of the situation. The EZLN could not let its activity be integrated into the national strategy of the PRD, which was too compromised by certain sectors of the Mexican bourgeoisie. Their differences became more pronounced after the elections of August '94 which saw the defeat of the PRD and the rise to power of the neo-liberal Catholic current of the National Action Party (PAN), a new political force that is promising to clean up the State whilst adapting it to NAFTA demands. For their part, the EZLN leaders know perfectly well, bearing in mind the historical situation and the balance of power, that they are not in a position to demand the power of the central State alone. On the other hand, the Zapatistas are in a position to negotiate the power to represent the marginalised and excluded strata of the proletariat, a power that they have gained thanks to the sympathy aroused by their actions. Having become the FZLN, the EZLN is trying to occupy a place in the political vacuum that exists to the left of the PRD.

The importance the FZLN attaches to patriotism thus assumes its full significance. The Zapatistas are presenting themselves more and more as guardians of the values of Mexican nationalism. More and more they are seeking alliances with sectors of the political class. And more and more they are running into the difficulties of such a project. That is why they are continually addressing themselves to the 'true patriots', those who 'still feel this something that cannot be explained, that you feel in your heart, which is nationalism, the feeling of nation, one's History, one's country'.<sup>66</sup> In the face of the threat of military action, they evoke the fascist threat and appeal to the patriots of the army and the 'men of honour' in its ranks. 'If there is a fascist outcome they will be able to do what they want with this country: take the oil and everything...why not the national flag?'<sup>67</sup> There is nothing new in this. These ridiculous outbursts are quite in keeping with the nature of the Zapatista leaders and are only too reminiscent of those of the Chilean left immediately before the military coup. But, in the era of the 'new world order', they are being forced to revise their analyses of the national question. Modernists, they are perching firmly on Chomsky, what with old Joe now out of the picture. From acknowledgement— of the destruction of nations by the movement of capital—comes their great regret: '...because in Mexico the ruling class, the banks and others have been very sensitive to the process of globalization, to the point of forgetting all ethical or moral values and standards. And I am not referring to religious ethical and moral standards, but to what people used to call their country, their national feeling. In this sense I believe that Chomsky is right when he says that the nation-States are finished, and the property-owning or national governing classes have disappeared.'<sup>68</sup> For the Zapatistas 'national destruction' is

---

<sup>66</sup> Marcos, interview, *La Jornada*, Mexico, August 25–27, 1995, reprinted in *Solidarité Chiapas* no. 2, Paris, September 1995

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

what characterises the new neo-liberal phase of world capitalism. They present their patriotism as a response. And as ‘it is very difficult to imagine that there are still sectors of the government ready to defend the national project’<sup>69</sup>, it is up to the ‘national liberation movement’ to respond to this alone, for want of being able to do so in a united front. Right off, the Zapatistas have taken two big steps backwards. First of all, they are taking up the classical Marxist-Leninist schema. ‘A revolutionary process must begin by rediscovering the concept of nation and country’.<sup>70</sup> Next, they propose a mystifying alternative to the capitalist globalization in course. Evidently the Zapatistas do not consider the present phase of globalization as an historical moment of capitalism. They present it as an aberration: ‘The neo-liberal project implies this internationalisation of history, it implies wiping out national history and making it international. (...) The fact is that for financial capital nothing exists, not even one’s country or property’<sup>71</sup>, the subcomandante cries with horror! To the Zapatistas internationalism is nothing but the sum of the fits of nationalism and protectionism against the capitalist system. The future they are proposing turns out to be the project of a bygone past.

## The Future Still has a Face

The explosion of the Mexican crisis and its financial aftermath have destroyed the myth of a neo-liberal economic miracle throughout the American continent. Thinking they are making a good deal with NAFTA, the American capitalists find themselves faced, in Mexico, with a situation that risks becoming explosive. Moreover, if there is an explosion, they will have to, on the one hand, deal with the discontent of the immigrant community—not just Mexican, but Hispanic in general)—in the United States itself<sup>72</sup> and, on the other, with the dangers of the spreading of the revolt to other countries of Latin America. Whatever happens, the political future of the FZLN-EZLN cannot be separated from the clashes taking place within the ruling class on the question of dependency concerning American capitalism. The Zapatistas’ activity is now part of the scene of bourgeois politics and part of this undertaking from now on. The major unknown factor will be the action of Mexican proletarians and their ability to free themselves from the control of the bureaucratic organisations, both ancient (the PRI and the PRD) and modern (the EZLN). If they engage in autonomous and independent actions, they will discover the gap that exists between their class interests and the nationalist interests of these parties and organisations will widen. Then we will see the old *caciques* and the new leaders in balaclavas sitting together at the negotiating table, in a hurry to reject the ‘unrealistic’ demands of the young lumpenproletarian rebels. In showing ‘proof of their responsibility’, the new faceless leaders will reveal their true faces. As a revolutionary at the time of Zapata remarked, ‘The cult of the personality can only win converts among the ignorant or those who are after public office and revenue.’<sup>73</sup>

Paris, August 1995 Sylvie Deneuve, Charles Reeve

\* \* \* \* \*

---

<sup>69</sup> Interview with Marcos, *Brecha*, Montevideo: see note 36.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> Despite the strengthening of patrols, the border between Mexico and the united states remains a sieve. Millions of Mexicans live and work in the united States, where their militant commitment is more and more visible in the schools, neighbourhoods and workplaces.

<sup>73</sup> Ricardo Flores Magon, *op. cit.*



# On 'Solidarity with the Zapatistas'

In Early 1995, the Hamburg magazine *Die Aktion* began a solidarity campaign for the Zapatistas.<sup>1</sup> This text was written as a reaction to this initiative.

I refuse to sign your appeal or actively collaborate in the informational campaign that you have set up. I already do so little 'politically' that it would be a waste of time for me to get involved in it. Worse, it would virulently contradict beliefs I have held from the very beginnings of my political thought and activity.

Now all of a sudden I am supposed to support an army (how is it that individuals call their form of organisation by this name; it started me thinking), whereas I have always defended the idea that the social revolution always played itself out on the terrain of the organisation of production and distribution and not on the terrain of military confrontation. What's more, this 'army' calls itself a *national* liberation army. Does that remind you of anything? Apart from the fact that this word is part of the Stalino-Maoist-Guevarist tradition, how can anyone defend 'national' liberation, when I for one am convinced that the 'nation' is a structure proper to bourgeois society and that the emancipation of humanity must necessarily proceed via the bursting of this constraint to be able to affirm itself as the human community, the subject of its becoming? These two aspects have always constituted the ABC of my critical thought.

Having said this, there are a slew of other things. The permanent reference to the people, to the rights of people, to the honour of the Mexican people (or any other, by the way), to its blood and other nonsense makes me feel disgust and an urge to throw up. Good god, all the swindlers and exploiter's of the world's nations, in the Third World and elsewhere, whose mouths run over with talk of 'their' people (which they belong to, obviously), when they are not its 'natural' spokesmen and it's a matter of defending or increasing their share of the profits extorted at the planetary level. When the word 'people' is being bandied about it's always the exploited in the flesh who risk having their chains modernised and being subjected by force to the dictatorship of capital. When one wants to see the Mexican government as nothing more than the agent of American capitalism and the IMF one passes over in silence the existence of a national bourgeoisie (and even its competing factions) that is determined to defend its own interests within the capitalist system of exploitation, by diplomacy or by arms (according to the circumstances) in the association of bandits that are the national States.

If this was really an 'Indian' movement it wouldn't give a damn about national borders. I will return to the subject of the social movement further on. But confusion has become total when people seem to say that the Indians are *the exploited*, as if blacks and whites were exploiters. It is true to say that in Latin America in general the majority of ruling classes are recruited among whites (not everywhere, as the case of Haiti shows); but the majority of whites and almost all blacks are among the exploited. One can't just ignore it. And then, how is it possible to see in

---

<sup>1</sup> 'Our Solidarity with the Zapatistas', February 13, 1995, *Die Aktion*, (*Am Brink*, 10, 21029 Hamburg). This appeal was reprinted in the review *Etcetera* (Apt. 1.363, 08080 Barcelona).

Indian tradition the remembrance of a community that was supposedly free and autonomous. It was precisely Inca and Maya societies that were characterised by a vast social hierarchy and brutal exploitation well before the arrival of the bloodthirsty *conquistadores*. Paradoxically, it's precisely because these indigenous populations had been subjected to indigenous exploitation for centuries that they submitted to the new exploitation from Europe without offering too much resistance and that their individual members were able to more or less survive. The Indian populations closest to forms of primitive communism put up a much more determined resistance. It was not possible to exploit them; they had to be liquidated. One can see the trace they left on the North American continent by the emptiness that remained, and which had to be filled by a massive supply of black slaves.

But let's return to the EZLN and its Sub-Commander. There's not just the 'people', there's also the national flag (sullied, of course), the country (sold, of course), national sovereignty, traitors to the country, and to top it off: 'everything for all, nothing for us'. In passing, this shows to what extent the EZLN ('us') and the movement ('all') are far from being united, but are instead opposed. I find this 'Serve the People' spirit of sacrifice altogether suspect.

And then there's the famous 'dialogue' that the EZLN wishes to have with the government. What's dialogue supposed to mean? How can there be a peaceful 'dialogue' between exploiters and exploited on the suppression of exploitation? This implicit recognition of the State as the appropriate institution to realize the bourgeois credo of 'peace, justice and equality' says a lot about the non-subversive nature of the EZLN.

As for Sub-Commander Marcos, who admits he is nothing more than a recycled guerilla, he has shown proof of his intelligence, sense of humour and even a sense of poetry. I admit it freely. That doesn't change the fact that content is meager and that he enjoys playing the role of the modest hero, the unknown and mysterious personality with a masked face (Zorro!). I see in him all the signs of a certain style of Latin-American machismo. His disappointment at receiving little correspondence from women can be interpreted as ironic; for me, it has the nauseating stench of the strong man, the focus for the gazes of admiring women. A real caudillo.

This impression is reinforced by the fact that Marta Duren, who came to interview the Indians, ended up for 'practical reasons' (?) interviewing their interpreter'. Here we are once again faced with the delegation of power for life. And it doesn't bother her at all! Moreover, Marcos doesn't seem to be embarrassed either, at no time does he insist on playing the role of a real translator and allowing other 'fighters' a chance to speak, still less does he do it for simple peasants (or rather semi-proletarians as the text by Garcia Leon shows rather clearly, casting at least some doubt on the 'Indian' character of the movement, whereas, if there is a movement it is a social movement tied to the situation of this population in the overall production of society).

Let's talk about it a bit. In Latin America movements of land occupation by semi-proletarianised peasants (very often women) who oppose the exactions of the big landowners is an endemic phenomenon. On the one hand, these movements are an example of social struggle, of insubordination, but on the other hand, they were never able to link up with urban social movements and are often impregnated with vague notions about land ownership, the 'return' to nature or a demand for financial and legal aid from the State, in such a way that the subversive elements of modern society are rare in them. These movements have my full sympathy, but are far from giving me hope of a total overthrowing of the structures of capitalist society.

So, given that I already find it difficult to see a source of hope in these social movements, I am particularly depressed with individuals in Europe who identify with a social-revolutionary

vision, get enthusiastic not about the social movement, but instead are apparently fascinated by the spectacle of masks and guns, by the myth of armed resistance. For me, this is the problem: what level of real despair do we have to reach in the face of everyday reality to have to hang on to the personality of a smooth talker? It is striking that in all the documents you have published, and despite the fact that access to the 'liberated' zones is relatively easy, there isn't one even slightly detailed description of everyday life, of labour, the sharing of tasks, the distribution of goods, of decision-making, of relations between the generations, between the sexes, of education, etc. Why do people ascribe more importance to political declarations, as poetic as they might be, than to the mechanisms of the material and social functioning of the supposedly insurgent populations?

I haven't had the opportunity here to touch on the aspects of Mexico's role in the United States' economy, of the use the Mexican government is making of the EZLN in its international negotiations, or the insertion of Chiapas into the social tensions present in other areas of Mexico. It would be necessary to devote more time to these matters to understand the real and profound nature of what is happening in the Lacandon Forest and the surrounding area. But this will not change much in my basic position regarding the attitude you have adopted.

Marc Geoffroy, Berlin June 1995.

# 'Indigenism' and Power

This text, written by libertarians in Peru, was published in January 1995 in the magazine *Contrafluxo*, based in Medellin (Colombia).

*A political and commercial traffic in the name of the people—or how 'indigenous culture' is becoming a ball for politicians to toss back and forth, and one more commodity*

Every day in an increasingly obvious way, we see how the collapse of authoritarian socialism has led to the flight of its professional partisans (intellectuals, politicians, members of the NGOs) toward two complementary ideological refuges: 'democratic' socialism and regional nationalism or 'indigenism seen from above'. The first is nothing but social democracy: the system that presents economic power in the hands of a minority that no one elects in the name of capitalism with a human face. But it's the second that we will be dealing with here.

As we have underlined in the text 'The Myth of the Fatherland', the phenomenon of ethnic nationalism is devastating the world, like a bull dancing on the ruins of 'real socialism' and which feeds on the growing poverty produced by the great offensive of capital since the beginning of the 70s, as much in the North as in the South of the planet. Ethnic nationalism takes on different forms and characteristics according to its place of origin. We would call the particular form that it takes in the Peru of today the 'indigenism of power'. Above all in order to distinguish it from the indigenism that has existed in other historical periods, and which as a result had a content and social base that was not necessarily identical.

## 1. The Political and Cultural Expressions of 'Indigenism seen from above'

The mayor of Cuzco, Daniel Estrada, has decided to exchange his leftist identity for that of an 'independent indigenist'. His electoral vehicle, the 'United Front', wishes to be a force that will please everyone. Like the movement of Javier Perez de Cuellar. Estrada's opposition to Fujimori can be explained fundamentally by the threat of the latter's centralising policies relative to all the regional governors, like Estrada, Belmont, Caceres and others. It is their own power which is at stake. The mayor of Cuzco thus represents a political current, linked to a broad sector of the regional intelligentsia, that has detached itself from a political identity to avoid being identified with 'outdated' ideological tendencies. This is how they found a new identity in 'indigenism'—until then a mere populist appendage of their discourse. This identity reveals itself insistently in the most varied fields: in university lectures and meetings of NGOs, in monuments erected by the municipality and in grants given to publications. These new indigenists are trying to identify themselves with the working classes, given that at certain historical moments, indigenism (like all forms of nationalism) assumed the form of a 'banner of the oppressed'. We refer in particular to the resistance movements led by Tupac Amaru the First, in the XIth century, and by Tupac

Amaru the Second in the XVIIIth century, as well as the Tahuantinsuyo movement between 1905 and 1939<sup>1</sup>.

The new indigenist vanguard wants to profit from the fame of these revolutionaries without having to pay the price. The objective was to appropriate the image of the revolutionary without having to run the risks. They evoke 500 years of resistance, but the only resistance that really interests them is that of the colonial period. Their indigenism is directly connected to their nationalist plan for a 'united Peru', in which they would like to integrate the indigenous populations, thus avoiding having to face the conflicts that are destroying the social fabric of a country following the path of capitalist development.

This peculiar historical vision of indigenism expresses itself clearly in one of its innumerable cultural manifestations: the mural by Juan Carlos Bravo, situated in the Avenue of the Sun. Without wanting to call its finer qualities into question, we should remark that in it, social struggles are illustrated only up to national independence. Having reached this moment in history, the artist suddenly carries us toward a florid dawn in which the entire people gaze at a rainbow. This historical leap from 1821 to our times is nothing other than the official representation of the last century and a half. All the trade union, peasant and guerilla struggles, and others, that marked the 'Red Cuzco' of those years so deeply are quite simply erased from the work, erased from *history*. As if social conflicts disappeared in the XIXth century with the advent of independence and the intensification of capitalist development.

Indigenism today allows the regional authorities and their intellectual allies in private and public institutions to identify with the oppressed thanks to an incomplete and mythified history which they disseminate via the multiple cultural and pedagogical channels that they themselves control. This is how they try to justify their status as representatives of the people in the face of a population that has always distrusted the elites that claim to speak in its name.

When indigenism is separated from a liberatory vision based on actual realities and manipulated from above, it can serve the dominant system without too many contradictions. Such a situation is not a new thing. Even during the colonial epoch, the Inca empire was the focus of the great myths which glorified it while the indigenous descendants of the Incas continued to be exploited. Since then, the indigenous population has experienced a double slavery: relative to its real masters and relative to its own past.

## 2. Indigenous Culture as a Commercial Product

Indigenism is a discourse that claims to valorise popular culture. But what is this culture?

Capitalism tends to turn into commodities everything that concerns human social life, and the culture of a people does not escape the rule. This economic activity guarantees the well-being of a minority. It is precisely this minority (middle and ruling classes) that now profits from indigenous culture through its economic contacts with the outside world, such as tourism, for example. The image of the 'Indian' with his romantic poverty illustrates the tourist brochures

---

<sup>1</sup> The two latter ones had a demands-oriented character impregnated with social-revolutionary elements which went well beyond a strictly 'indigenist' platform, as they have a tendency to tell it in the official version of history. We have in mind the metis origins of the Tupac Amaru II and the anarchist influence in the Tahuantinsuyo movement in particular—an influence that could be seen in their ideology of the exploited people of the whole world, of all cultures and of all races. See Flores Galindo, *Societe coloniale et soulevements populaires*, 1976 and Kapsoli, *Ayllus du soleil—anarchisme et utopie andine*, 1984.

and attracts visitors who spend their money in the hotels, stores, restaurants and other places of consumption. But do these same profits made from popular culture benefit the working classes? Those who believe that tourism is the best economic choice for Peru should consider the cases of countries like Brazil or Mexico. These countries gain a much greater revenue from tourism than Peru does. Yet they are countries where social poverty has become particularly acute.

The current process of privatisation of the tourist industry has no other purpose than the enrichment of a small group that is spending millions of dollars to purchase businesses that have been put up for sale.

As a result of its commercialisation, indigenous culture is undergoing a standardisation of its craftwork and clothing made for sale and export. This important cottage industry forms the foundation of a new dependency that is establishing itself in the country.<sup>2</sup> A dependency that does not liberate but which, on the contrary, reduces the producers to slavery. Anyone who observes the social and working conditions of the people who find themselves at the base of the pyramid of this 'indigenous industry' can see this for themselves.

In the final analysis, indigenous culture today largely obeys the laws of the market. These are the laws that define and distort it, according to the needs of the same market. Culture is part of the tourist industry, which is an industry like all the others where exploitation prevails.

Meanwhile, the social struggles associated with indigenous demands are relegated to the 'living museums' of ruins, monuments and archives. The image of the power of the Inca empire is used to render its present-day descendents powerless by maintaining a culture of submission to all forms of authority. Indigenism has become an historical burden on the shoulders of the multitudes forced to bear it. Day and night, Pachachtec on one side and the White Cross on the other, watch over the movements of the inhabitants of Cuzco like George Orwell's 'Big Brother'. These two monuments represent old legends that from now on will serve to reinforce the fear and submission of the population. The day they fall will be a happy one for the men and women who seek the path of their emancipation.

## Conclusion

We have situated the rebirth of the indigenist idea in the global context of ethnic nationalism and its search for an historical identity. Contrary to an indigenism which overthrew the political framework as in Mexico, indigenism in Peru has lost its former mask as an 'ideology of liberation', even though populist politicians continue to exploit it. In the majority of cases over the last few years at the international level, ideologies or movements that base themselves on ethnic identity have resulted, in the short term, in the diversion and disarticulation of class-based movements that opposed false divisions. What is more, as soon as it loses its class character, indigenism becomes a prisoner of the interests of political elites that are looking for an easy way of identifying themselves with the 'people'. Moreover, via its cultural manifestations, Andean indigenism

---

<sup>2</sup> Whereas dependency in the traditional sense corresponds to the presence of foreign capital in essential industries (Petropuru, the Tintaya mines, etc), this 'new dependency' is based on the service industry and cultural production that characterise tourism, as well as the acceptance of the principles imposed by the IMF and the World Bank. As a result, Peru is on its way to becoming a country of beggars: from the children that beg at doorways of the tourist restaurants and bistros to the professional who struggles to obtain aid from outside the country.

By dependency we mean a universal capital-proletariat relationship, not a fixed relationship between countries or geographical blocs.

directly serves the economic interests of those who are speculating on everything relating to indigenous culture and history by exploiting precisely those 'indigenous people' whose identity is fetishized and cynically celebrated on the tourist market. Here the irony becomes painful. Everything 'indigenous' is put at the service of the tourist industry. This industry is in turn in the service of the much-venerated national 'development' or 'progress'. Sometimes it is even seen as the principal element. But isn't this 'development' the pretext in whose name indigenous people have been brutalised and marginalised for 500 years? The sale of indigenous culture is the guarantee of its disappearance.

The Anarchist Library  
Anti-Copyright



Charles Reeve, Sylvie Deneuve, Marc Geoffroy  
Beyond the Balaclavas of South East Mexico  
1996

[https://archive.elephanteditions.net/library/  
charles-reeve-sylvie-deneuve-marc-geoffroy-beyond-the-balaclavas-of-south-east-mexico](https://archive.elephanteditions.net/library/charles-reeve-sylvie-deneuve-marc-geoffroy-beyond-the-balaclavas-of-south-east-mexico)  
Original title: *Au-dela des passe-montagnes du Sud-Est mexicain*, Collection Breve / Meteorite (3),  
Paris 1996. Elephant Editions London 2003.

**[theanarchistlibrary.org](http://theanarchistlibrary.org)**