

Dual Power in the Selva Lacandon

Christopher Day

May 1998

Contents

What is Dual Power?	3
From Dual Power to Dual Consciousness	6
Creating Revolutionary Consciousness	6
Direct Action	8
Building Counter-Institutions	9
Revolutionary Dual Power	10
The Capacity to Fight	11
Dual Power and the State	13
Conclusion	16

On April 10, 1998, Seventy-nine years to the day after the treacherous murder of General Emiliano Zapata, the community of Taniperlas hosted a celebration of the inauguration of the Autonomous Municipality of Ricardo Flores Magón. At 4:00 AM the next morning, roughly nine-hundred soldiers and police invaded Taniperlas, arresting six members of the community, three other Mexicans, and twelve foreigners. They also destroyed the auditorium constructed as a site for democratic assemblies and defaced a beautiful freshly-painted mural.

The raid on Ricardo Flores Magón has focused attention on a little appreciated aspect of the revolution that the Zapatistas have been carrying out in the areas in which they have a significant base of popular support: the construction of revolutionary dual power.

In December 1994, the Zapatistas broke through their military encirclement by the Mexican Army and declared the creation of thirty-two “autonomous municipalities”: democratically-chosen, independent governments based on popular assemblies that would exist parallel to the “official” municipal governments of Chiapas, which are little more than an extension of the one-party rule of the PRI. Each autonomous municipality included a number of communities and their surrounding territory, and like the “official” municipalities, corresponding roughly with the county structure that exists in the US. The autonomous municipal governments were to take on all the functions of governance, including many that had been largely neglected by the “official” PRI-dominated municipalities: public health, settling land disputes, education and so on.

The seriousness of this challenge to the authority of the Mexican state was made evident by the military offensive launched by the Mexican Army against the Zapatistas in February 1995. The attacks against Ricardo Flores Magón in April 1998 is only further evidence that the government regards these counter-structures as a dangerous example that must be crushed.

In the weeks since the attack on Ricardo Flores Magón, the National Indigenous Congress (CNI) has called for the formation of twenty, new autonomous municipalities in the states of Oaxaca, Veracruz, and Guerrero; the Organization of Purhepecha Nation (ONP) has called for the creation of autonomous regions in the state of Michoacan. The communities that constituted Ricardo Flores Magón have also declared their determination to re-establish their autonomous municipality in spite of its current occupation by military and paramilitary forces.

What is Dual Power?

The experience of the Zapatistas in constructing dual power in Chiapas is rich with lessons for revolutionaries everywhere. Before going any further in discussing the particular experiences of the Zapatistas, it is necessary to say a few things about what dual power is and isn't.

The term “dual power” has been used somewhat indiscriminately to describe anything from the Greensboro, North Carolina Woolworth's sit-in to Cop Watch programs to opening a collectively run bookstore or food cooperative to the creation of workers councils (or soviets) during the Russian Revolution. While there is a thread that can be said to run through these various experiences, the unqualified use of the term “dual power” to describe such different phenomena robs the term of any precise meaning. At the same time, it is important to see the connection between these different phenomena if we are to understand the process by which genuine revolutionary dual power can be built.

A situation of dual power can be said to characterize all genuine revolutionary social situations. The classic definition of dual power is found in Lenin's brief article on the subject written in the

wake of the February Revolution in Russia, but the phenomena itself has appeared repeatedly in different guises at least as far back as medieval European peasant revolts. In the broadest sense of the term, dual power refers to situations in which a) parallel structures of governance have been created that exist side-by-side with old official state structures and that b) these alternative structures compete with the state structures for power and for the allegiance of the people and that c) the old state is unable to crush these alternative structures, at least for a period of time.

Two qualifying comments should be made here. The first is to distinguish on the one hand between institutions of dual power that have revolutionary aims or are at least perceived as having revolutionary potential (that is to say, they might potentially replace the existing state and constitute themselves as the governing structure of a new reorganized society), and on the other hand, institutions like the Catholic Church or the Mafia that, while retaining a certain autonomy from the state, do not seek to displace it.

The second distinction that needs to be made is between genuinely democratic institutions of dual power in which the masses have real power and more artificial ones in which the formal appearances mask the effective domination of a new emerging elite. This second distinction is not as tidy as some people like to suggest, as there exists a continuum between the two, and a given expression of dual power is likely to move in one direction or another along that continuum in response to developments in the struggle for power. Existing structures that had previously shown relatively little democratic vitality can, under revolutionary conditions, sometimes be infused with more democratic content by the determined will of the people. Old communal village structures have repeatedly undergone such transformations in the course of peasant revolutions. Similarly, genuinely democratic structures of dual power, like the soviets in revolutionary Russia, can come under the domination of an anti-democratic minority like the Bolsheviks and be progressively drained of their democratic content. Generally speaking, the historical experience has been that movements away from democracy taken in the name of emergency conditions is not reversed when those conditions change (when internal and external threats to revolution subside).

Finally, there are the supposed structures of dual power that are under the domination of an aspiring elite from the very beginning and that never manifest the kind of open discussion and contention that characterize genuine democracy. Again, it should not be automatically assumed in these cases that these structures don't nonetheless represent some sort of radical break with the old order. In the absence of any previously existing democratic traditions, these sorts of manipulated ersatz popular assemblies may actually constitute a dramatic step forward in the degree of popular participation in governance. They represent a grudging acknowledgement of the power of the people as a legitimate force for the new state. Neither should it be assumed that the rank and file participation in such structures means that the people have been duped. Such a view negates their agency and flattens out what is always a more complicated situation. While consciousness in such situations is always uneven, many participants undoubtedly see these structures as a means to certain specific ends (land reform, expulsion of foreign occupying armies, an end to certain particularly onerous social practices like foot binding, etc.) and have few illusions about the more grandiose promises to storm heaven or turn the world upside down. They are engaged in a sort of realpolitik of the oppressed: knowing their own strength and weaknesses, they throw their lot in with a new gang of bosses to throw out the old in the hopes of extracting certain concessions in the process.

Keeping all these qualifying considerations in mind, it is still possible to talk about a genuinely democratic and revolutionary dual power and to find many examples of it, albeit generally short lived, throughout history. These instances share a number of important features. The first is the primacy of popular and democratic assemblies in which people have the real freedom to speak their minds as the ultimate source of governing authority. Particular responsibilities may be delegated to committees subordinated to the popular assemblies. Others may be delegated upwards through confederal regional and/or national delegate bodies. But the foundation of power is the people themselves meeting in popular assembly. The assemblies might be based in the workplace, the neighborhood or the village. Elected delegates, officials, and leaders are generally immediately recallable and often subject to rotation to prevent their ossification into a new ruling elite.

It must be said that none of the historical experiences of revolutionary dual power have resulted in the establishment of long-term democratic or socialist societies in which the historically oppressed classes genuinely wield power. All have either been crushed by a resurgent old order or ultimately drained of any democratic content by a new revolutionary elite. At the same time, these fleeting experiences still represent the closest humanity has come to realizing the revolutionary vision of a truly free society. Even when these institutions have finally gone down to defeat, many of their gains have been sustained: land reform, legal sexual equality, certain guaranteed social services, etc. are the concessions granted in the process of crushing genuine people's power. The historical experiences of dual power are important to study, not just because they represent a glimpse of the new society, but also because the story of their rise and fall reveals some of the serious obstacles that will confront any attempt at the revolutionary transformation of society.

The autonomous municipalities established by the Zapatistas represent in many respects only the latest chapter in a long history of revolutionary dual power. In this respect they offer a contemporary example from which certain general lessons can be extracted, much as lessons might be taken from the experiences of the workers councils that sprung up across Europe in the wake of the First World War, or during the Spanish Revolution, or the Shanghai Commune during the Chinese Cultural Revolution. At the same time, the Zapatistas represent in important ways a departure from some of the dominant features of revolutionary movements in the 20th century, and as such offer a starting point for discussions of how to avoid the fate of previous dual power experiences. The verdict is not yet in on the Zapatistas. The autonomous municipalities may very well be crushed by the Mexican state. If they succeed and become the germ of socially reorganized Mexico, that does not mean they will not repeat the experiences of becoming hollowed out vehicles for the rule of a new elite. But there are important elements in the politics of the Zapatistas that would seem to guard against this latter fate.

Speculation on the future is a dangerous game, however, so I will confine myself to a discussion of the development of dual power in Chiapas so far. My intention is to describe in fairly general terms how the EZLN was able to move from being a tiny organization of a half-dozen people isolated in the Lacandon Jungle to a mass movement and revolutionary army able to establish an effective dual power, for at least several years, in a fairly large geographical area and directly encompassing as many as 200,000 people.

From Dual Power to Dual Consciousness

Often dual power is discussed in a way that disconnects it from the long years of thankless mass organizing work that precedes it. It is treated as if it springs spontaneously from the people in the revolutionary moment, without respect for the patient nurturance of the forces that make it possible. To avoid this error, I am going to describe the creation of dual power in Chiapas in terms of four distinct phases of development: the development of revolutionary consciousness; direct action; the creation of counter-institutions; and finally, the construction of organs of genuine dual power. These developments do not proceed in a strictly linear fashion. They are often happening simultaneously. But there is a certain logic to ordering them in a chronological fashion. Each phase created important conditions for the success of subsequent phases even if we can see aspects of different phases unfolding simultaneously. There is a dialectical interplay between the subjective and objective conditions that makes the creation of dual power possible. By conceptually breaking-up the process into distinct stages, we can crudely understand how the subjective determination of revolutionaries to carry out certain work becomes an objective condition of the struggle with success of that work: the creation of a coffee-selling cooperative, for example, gives the movement resources it can then direct into taking the struggle to a new level by buying guns. The creation of the cooperative is a subjective undertaking. It transforms the objective conditions under which new subjective tasks are undertaken and in this manner creates new possibilities. All politics, even revolutionary politics, is the art of the possible. What distinguishes revolutionary politics is the commitment to expanding the realm of the possible to include genuine power to the people.

Creating Revolutionary Consciousness

When a half-dozen people moved in the Lacandon Jungle and founded the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) on November 17, 1983, they brought with them a certain consciousness of their own revolutionary mission. They also stepped into an existing world with its own history of social struggles and previous attempts to build a revolutionary movement in Chiapas. The consciousness of the founding nucleus underwent profound changes over the following decade, and the development of the struggles around them and their own growth had an equally profound impact on the consciousness of the indigenous communities that were to be the EZLN's base of support. While the processes of transformation were crucial in the development of what was distinct about Zapatismo, it is also important to understand that the specific revolutionary consciousness of tens of thousands of indigenous people in Chiapas that exploded into our world on January 1, 1994 did not spring into existence spontaneously. It was the determined efforts of a handful of conscious revolutionaries to build a revolutionary organization that crystallized the scattered and contradictory ideas of people about their own resistance into a coherent revolutionary consciousness.

Within the consciousness of oppressed people there is a constant battle between two kinds of consciousness. On the one hand, we have all been socialized by the very institutions that maintain our oppression: family, school, religion, the media, and the economic structures that exploit our labor. These institutions fill us up with their ideology, with the ideas that justify their power over us. At the same time, there is the actual fact of our oppression, our basic human desire

to be free and to exercise control over our own lives, and our periodic experiences of individual and collective resistance that give rise to counter-consciousness. This is a constant battle that one can never escape so long as there are oppressive social relationships. In every individual these two kinds of consciousness exist side by side. The balance differs, the degree to which the counter-consciousness is articulated or coherent varies, but the fundamental fact of this dual consciousness is constant.

Counter-consciousness is not necessarily revolutionary in the sense of taking the form of a coherent grasp of the totality of oppression and what must be done to destroy the oppressive order and replace it with a new just and free society. Generally, the counter-consciousness is alloyed with elements of the dominant oppressive ideology. This “contamination” on the level of ideas corresponds with the actual character of peoples’ struggles to be free in the real world. Social struggles are rarely pure expressions of the fight between the oppressed and their oppressors. Aspiring elites and middle forces offer their organizational skills and resources to the oppressed in the conscious or unconscious hope of riding the struggle to power. The oppressed accept this alliance, perhaps grudgingly, in the hopes of improving their lot but usually swallow some of the ideology of their allies in the process.

To speak of revolutionary consciousness then, involves an understanding that is not necessarily something pure. Revolutionary consciousness refers to the point at which the counter-consciousness of the oppressed becomes articulated as a coherent critique of the existing society and a plan to transform it through the revolutionary actions of the oppressed.

The Zapatismo of the EZLN is, in Subcommandante Marco’s words, “a provocative cocktail” of Guevarism, Maoism, longstanding traditions of indigenous resistance, and the legacy of the Mexican Revolution (with the decidedly libertarian tinge of Zapata and Magón). The founding nucleus of the EZLN were members of an older guerilla organization, the Forces of National Liberation (FLN), that was heavily influenced by the example of the Cuban Revolution. The indigenous cadre that they were able to attract had received their political training in the Maoist-led campesino organizations like the Rural Association of Collective Interests (ARIC) established in Chiapas in the 1970s by the brigadistas of the Peoples Power/Proletarian Line (PP/LP)-veterans of Mexico’s New Left student movement. The Maoists had been invited down to Chiapas by Bishop Samuel Ruiz and worked side-by-side with the Liberation Theology catechists of the Diocese of San Cristóbal.

All of these “outside” forces operated within the context of the consciousness of the Mayan Indians in their own long history of resistance to conquest and colonization. It was their capacity to seriously integrate that consciousness rooted in the historical experiences of the people that enabled the cadres of the FLN to succeed in completely integrating themselves into the lives of the indigenous communities in a way that the Maoists, and even to a certain extent the Church, couldn’t. The Maoists sought to subordinate the indigenous component of the land struggle between the campesinos and the landlords. The Church, while accepting certain indigenous innovations, remained committed to the triumph of an essentially European worldview over the persistent pre-Christian beliefs of the Maya. While these weaknesses help explain why the EZLN was able to sink deep roots and grow, it is important to understand the important ways in which the Church and the Maoists prepared the revolutionary consciousness of the people.

Another important point here is that revolutionary consciousness is collective. Individuals can come to revolutionary conclusions, but it is only when they start to talk to each other about those conclusions and attempt to draw out larger more general truths by looking at all of their

experiences and drawing on all of their knowledge that we can talk meaningfully of revolutionary consciousness.

Direct Action

The creation of a nucleus of people with a revolutionary consciousness was the first stage in the development of dual power in Chiapas. The process of bringing people to that consciousness was, of course, a continuous one. But once a certain critical mass existed, they were able to move to a new level—to begin to put their ideas into practice.

Everybody dreams of punching out their boss, their landlord or a cop. And every so often people actually do it. These largely spontaneous acts of individual resistance are self-limiting because they can never succeed in really striking effectively at the root of the frustration that gives rise to them. But as soon as a group of people begins to come together on the basis of revolutionary consciousness, the question of collective direct action immediately comes to the fore: how do we strike our enemies?

The EZLN did not introduce direct action to the indigenous communities of Chiapas. Those communities had been engaged in ongoing practices of resistance for 500 years. Land occupations had been going on for decades before the FLN appeared in Chiapas. What the EZLN did was couple the practice of direct action with a revolutionary consciousness and develop a revolutionary strategy.

The historical experiences of the indigenous communities with direct action undoubtedly contributed to their receptivity to explicitly revolutionary ideas, but again we should emphasize that the leap to revolutionary consciousness was not a spontaneous one. Direct action of one sort or another had been going on for centuries and there is no reason to believe that it wouldn't have continued if the EZLN hadn't appeared. But as an explicitly revolutionary organization, the EZLN was able to put that historical practice into a strategic context and to fight for an approach that took a longer view of the struggle than just securing this or that piece of land or extracting this or that concession from the power structure.

The relationship between the EZLN and the indigenous communities began as an almost purely practical one. The communities in the Selva (where the Zapatistas first established themselves) were facing a rising tide of state repression and violence on the part of the "Guardias Blancas" organized by the landlords who were seeking to push them off their lands. The EZLN offered to train the communities in the use of firearms and in organization of village defenses. The communities accepted this arrangement and sent their sons and daughters to the EZLN's camps to train with the guerillas. But of course the training they received went beyond the immediate practical considerations of community defense. It also involved political training that enabled the sons and daughters of the community to see their struggle for land in a larger global context. With this new understanding they came to see that a purely defensive approach to their problems was a losing proposition. Behind the white guards were the police and behind the police were the army. If they wanted to win, they needed to be prepared to fight the army and not just the Guardias Blancas. The revolutionary implications of deciding to fight back were always there, but it took a revolutionary organization to draw them out and articulate them in a coherent way that could convince people at the moment they were ready to be convinced.

While the existence of the EZLN was a closely guarded secret under the principle of the “slow accumulation of forces” that the EZLN probably picked up from the Guatemalan guerillas, their cadres were active in the ongoing political struggles of the 1980s. They participated in demonstrations and land occupations. When the Maoist-initiated campesino organization, ARIC, split over whether to focus on building a cooperative bank or carrying out more land occupations, the EZLN cadres went with the more militant faction and participated in the armed defense of occupied lands through this period. They also participated in mass mobilizations, including a March on Mexico City and the famous October 12, 1992 March on San Cristóbal (where the statue of the city founder-conquistador Diego de Mazariegos was toppled while armed Zapatista units waited to defend the march if it was attacked.)

All these forms of direct action gave thousands of people direct experience in political struggle, a sense of their own capacity for independent action, and knowledge that the enemy was not invulnerable. These things are all crucial building blocks in the construction of dual power. Without the experience of their own power in more limited contests, it is impossible for large numbers of people to acquire the confidence necessary to set about building institutions parallel to the exiting power structure.

Building Counter-Institutions

In the process of moving from revolutionary consciousness to revolutionary dual power, direct action is only part of the equation. Of equal importance is the construction of counter-institutions. Revolutionary consciousness means an understanding of the collective power of the oppressed not only to strike back against their oppressors but also to create a new, non-oppressive social order. Just as direct action prefigures insurrection, the creation of counter-institutions prefigures social reorganization.

When the EZLN established itself in the Selva there was already a broad array of what could be called counter-institutions in Chiapas, in particular, various producer-cooperatives for the transport, processing and sale of agricultural products. Such structures play two distinct but very important roles.

The first is to train their participants in self-organization, organizational process, and putting democratic ideals into practice on the ground. In this sense, the counter-institutions represent pre-figurative forms of the new society. There is nothing automatic or easy about building democratic structure. It is a long, hard fight to overcome the many obstacles, starting with our own socialization that this society puts in the way of such projects. Building such structures in the context of the sort of societal collapse in which revolutions actually take place is even more difficult. Every bit of previous experience becomes extremely valuable in such situations. To the degree that large numbers of people are not prepared for such tasks, these tasks will tend to fall to the minority who have organizational expertise, and in this moment we see the beginning of the new elite. The creation of counter-institutions is one of the most important things we can do to prepare for the construction of genuine revolutionary dual power.

A second function of counter-institutions is to provide a more or less independent economic base for the revolutionary movement. The money that indigenous communities earned by cooperatively selling their produce rather than handing them over to a middle-man, became money that could buy radios, uniforms, guns, trucks, medicines, and whatever else the communities and

the EZLN would need to take the struggle to new levels. Of course, not all counter-institutions are profit-making concerns. Many, such as alternative media projects or community centers, consume the movement's resources but broaden the base of support for the movement and thereby give it more access to resources. No revolutionary movement can succeed without establishing some sort of economic basis to support its activities.

Just as there is nothing inherently revolutionary in taking militant direct action, there is nothing inherently revolutionary about building counter-institutions. It should never be imagined that by establishing a collective or a cooperative one is actually breaking out of capitalism. On the contrary, one is in a sense becoming an effective capitalist. Successful counter-institutions that really meet the needs of a community can often be easily integrated into the existing social order, and thereby even become an example of the viability of the system. This reformist potential exists in all "Serve the People" projects. Direct action often seems more revolutionary than building counter-institutions precisely because the latter often attracts people who are still holding on to hopes for reformist solutions or who have careerists aspirations for their own integration into the existing power structure.

The only thing that makes a counter-institution revolutionary is the determination of its organizers to use it to build the revolutionary movement by training new cadres and channeling resources into the struggle. This is what existed with the EZLN. Nonetheless, throughout the entire history of the EZLN there has been a struggle against the reformist logic that arises from such projects, against the thinking of those who confuse the financial success of the coffee cooperative with the financial success of the struggle. This was the character of the struggle that took place in ARIC over what sort of priority to give to building a credit union. Obviously, a coffee cooperative is more likely to succeed if it is channeling all of its profits into modernizing production and processing instead of buying guns for the focos in the jungle.

With all of these cautions in mind, it can not overemphasized how important counter-institutions created by the Zapatistas and the indigenous communities were in preparing them organizationally, ideologically, and materially for the creation of autonomous municipalities.

Revolutionary Dual Power

The creation of the autonomous municipalities was thus the culmination of a prolonged process that involved the development of revolutionary consciousness, first among a small group of people and then more broadly, a consistent practice of direct action, and the construction of counter-institutions. These were necessary preparatory steps for launching the autonomous municipalities, the organs of genuine revolutionary dual power in Chiapas.

A situation of revolutionary dual power is inherently unstable. It can not last forever. Dual power is not an end in itself. Rather, it is a necessary stage in the revolutionary process. The question that is confronted as soon as dual power structures are brought into being is whether or not they will be able to survive. There are two threats to such survival. The first is external: the repressive power of the still-existing state. The second is internal: the process by which the democratic content of such structures are hollowed out by various "emergency measures" advanced consciously or unconsciously by aspiring new elites.

An orientation towards the creation of dual power therefore does not go far enough. Any serious strategy must be able to answer how it intends to stave off both the internal and external

threats to the revolutionary gains dual power represents, and then how it proposes to reorganize society once these threats have been effectively defeated.

The Capacity to Fight

The question of how to defeat both the internal and external threats to the organs of revolutionary dual power is intimately tied up with the question of revolutionary military strategy. On the one hand, the necessity of defending the gains of the revolution against external enemies demands the repression of counter-revolutionaries and some degree of military centralization. On the other hand, it is precisely those repressive measures and that military centralization that constitute the internal threat to the democratic character of the revolutionary institutions.

There is no easy way out of this dilemma. The anarchist faith that decentralized military structures like militias are sufficient for defeating the centralized military capacity of the state is naïve. So too is the Leninist faith that establishing a highly centralized party-state is in any way consistent with the genuine democracy that is a precondition for any socialism worthy of the name.

The creation of thirty-eight autonomous municipalities in Chiapas would simply not have been possible without the capacity for highly coordinated military action represented by the EZLN. And if those municipalities are crushed it will in part be a consequence of the military weakness of the EZLN. The attention of the EZLN to the military aspect of the struggle is crucial for understanding their success so far.

The formation of the EZLN was driven by certain lessons drawn from the experiences of the 1960s and 1970s. There were about two-dozen such organizations in those years, and despite different degrees of initial success, they were all effectively crushed or defeated by the end of the 1970s. One of the few groups to even survive, the FLN grasped the fundamental weaknesses of the guerilla groups: their separation from the struggles of people, their excessive faith in power of exemplary action by a small group of people, and their adventurist propensity to strike before they had accumulated the strength to really fight. In this sense they broke with the Guevarist conception of the foco as a small group that through exemplary military action, exposes the vulnerability of the state. The EZLN began as a foco in so far as it was a small and isolated group of people. But the strategy of the EZLN was the opposite of the traditional foco. For ten years they built up an army in secret. They trained with weapons and established an effective military command structure but they acquired no military combat experience. Instead, they sent their cadres into the communities and the campesino organizations to participate in their struggles and recruit new members to their army. They also built up a militia structure based in the villages themselves and composed of those who couldn't or wouldn't go into the mountains to join the army but who were willing to fight in the defense of their villages.

The creation of militias is an important counterbalance against the military centralism of a revolutionary army. It creates a sort of counter-power within the counter-power that can potentially stand up to abuses by any new elite based in the army. At the same time, it is important not to make too much of the autonomy of these militias. Many authoritarian revolutions have militias as one component in an overall military strategy. This was the case in the Chinese and Vietnamese revolutions, but there is little indication in those cases that the militias did anything at all to check the centralizing tendencies of the parties they helped bring to power and to which they were ultimately subordinate. There is no reason to assume that the FLN's conception of the

relationship between the militias and the EZLN was all that different from either the Chinese or Vietnamese communists. But the results were clearly different.

The EZLN militias are composed of members of the same communities that also choose the political leadership of the EZLN, the Revolutionary Indigenous Clandestine Committee (CCRI), that commands the army. This reversal of traditional relationship of the community with the revolutionary army short circuits one of the most powerful anti-democratic tendencies that exists in any revolutionary situation: the tendency of the revolutionary armed forces to become a power over and separate from the people.

I would suggest that there were several factors that contributed to the creation of a very different relationship between the communities, the army, and the militias in Chiapas. The first is the legacies of 500 years of community based indigenous resistance and the experience of the Mexican Revolution in which local irregular forces played a very significant role. The second factor was the FLN's modest conception of the EZLN. They argued that the conditions for revolution in Mexico would ripen sooner or later and that their project was to build an effective military capacity that would come to the assistance of such an upsurge. They did not conceive of themselves as leading the upsurge. This could be called their first break with the vanguardism of the Marxist-Leninist tradition from which they came. Another factor was the largely defensive view initially taken by the villages. All of these factors came together in the final months of 1992 and the beginning of 1993, when the communities voted in the popular assemblies to launch the war and when the command of the EZLN was transferred from the FLN to the CCRI, composed of the delegates elected by the communities.

Maoist military strategy has always argued for "putting politics in command," which has meant the subordination of the military structure (in China the People's Liberation Army) to the political structure (the Communist Party). This conception is arguably preferable to the Guevarist conception of the politico-military structure in which the party and the army are effectively fused and the military and political leadership are the same people. But the consequences in practice have been very similar—the creation of the militarized party-state. The FLN's practice stood somewhere between the Guevarist and Maoist model. The decision to build the EZLN as a distinct armed organization under the command of the political organization was a step toward the Maoist model. But the separation between the two structures was in many senses academic. The FLN retained a few skeletal structures in a few cities in Mexico, but what made the organization an on-going concern was that the EZLN and the urban structure were largely devoted to supporting the army in the jungle. The decision to transfer command of the EZLN from the leadership of the FLN to the CCRI broke with all existing models. The revolutionary army was placed under the command not of a political party claiming (by virtue of its program) to represent the interests of the people but of the directly and democratically elected representatives of the communities themselves.

The ability of the EZLN to transfer command to a representative body elected in popular assemblies under clandestine conditions is a reflection of the particular cohesion of the indigenous communities among which the Zapatistas had based themselves. It is questionable whether such a transition could be engineered in a socially atomized, advanced-capitalist society or even in most non-indigenous peasant societies. It is even more doubtful that a military structure as large as the EZLN could be built up in the first place if it attempted to establish that kind of popular accountability from the start. The transfer of command was made possible not only by the capacity of the indigenous communities to keep a secret but also by the fact that they had already

been largely won over to the revolutionary struggle. The secret was imperfectly kept as it was, and it seems clear that by early 1993, if not several years earlier, the Mexican government was aware that a guerilla threat existed in Chiapas even if it didn't grasp its scale.

Dual Power and the State

No serious discussion of dual power can avoid the question of the state. One of the things that attracts many anti-authoritarians, including myself, to the Zapatistas is their declared refusal to take state power. Unfortunately, many anti-authoritarians are willing to leave any further discussion of the state alone and just take the Zapatistas at their word, as if good intentions were all that mattered.

The state is traditionally defined as the monopoly on legitimate violence—as the collection of institutions which are recognized as the final arbiters of social conflict: the police, the army, the courts, the prisons, the legislative bodies, and administrative bureaucracies. But this definition misses the most crucial feature of the state: that it exists as a body over and alienated from the people. What distinguishes the existing society from our vision of a stateless society is not whether the institutions of governance have a monopoly on violence but whether those institutions are genuinely controlled by the people. In fact, if we are able to establish political structures that are genuinely beholden to the will of the people, such structures should have a monopoly of violence. This is not to argue against the importance of creating checks and balances within governing structures or of popular militias as the final expression of the power of the people, but rather to clarify that our vision of the new society is not one of competing armed gangs.

The Zapatistas' declared intention not to seize state power is a recognition that they do not represent the Mexican people as a whole. This is not modesty on their part but rather a reflection of their genuine democratic commitments. They have described their objectives as creating an "antechamber" to the new democratic society, of creating a political space in which different political visions can contend and in which the Mexican people can begin to express their genuine will. Whether the Mexican people will rise to this task remains to be seen.

If the Zapatistas have renounced the pursuit of state power on a national level, the question is a little more complicated in the areas where they have real political power. Zapatista communities have jails. They have responsables charged with enforcing Zapatista laws. They have legislative and administrative bodies. They have militias and they have an army. Does this collection of institutions constitute an embryonic state?

The answer to this question is not a simple one. The Zapatistas have struggled to create genuine organs of popular power on the village and municipal level. But it would be a lie to say that there is no separation between the structures they have created and the people. Looking at the particular expressions of this separation can help us appreciate the difficulties in establishing a genuinely stateless society.

In the first place, support for the establishment of the autonomous municipalities is hardly unanimous. There are many purely Zapatista communities and there are many more in which the Zapatistas constitute a clear majority of the people. But there are also many communities with significant minorities that are politically aligned with the PRI or with some other organization that is hostile to the Zapatistas and to the autonomous municipalities. The boundaries of the autonomous municipalities do not correspond with the boundaries of the official municipalities.

This redistricting is in part a response to the profound inequalities built into the official structure. But it is also a sort of revolutionary gerrymandering in response to the political geography of Chiapas. The autonomous municipalities are defined precisely by those areas in which the Zapatistas and their sympathizers can claim to have a majority. There isn't anything necessarily wrong with this, but as the Zapatistas attempt to spread this model further and further, problems necessarily arise. It is one thing to establish an autonomous municipality in areas where 90% of the people support such a move and another thing where only 60% do. And how precisely are the Zapatistas able to determine the degree of support that exists for their project?

Then there is the problem of the army. The EZLN is organized, like any army, in a top-down fashion. This hierarchical organization cannot help but influence decisions made at the community or municipal level. There are undoubtedly questions of security that cannot be discussed fully or in open assemblies on which the communities and municipalities must simply defer to the army. At the very least, the demand of military secrecy means that any detailed information about the EZLN's plans, or even general information like whether the EZLN plans to shoot back or retreat, cannot be shared with the community at large. Based on longstanding relations of trust, the communities have so far chosen to defer to the EZLN on these questions. But in the deference we can find the germ of new oppressive relationships and see the process by which revolutionary leadership becomes a new elite. There is an inherent inequality of power between the army and the rest of the members of the communities and the inequality reproduces itself as an inequality of knowledge and organizational expertise.

If the situation in Mexico turns into one of more direct contestation with the state, that is to say revolutionary war this tendency will only be sharpened. The PRI's minorities in the communities will have to be suppressed in one way or another. Matters like transportation and the distribution of food and medicines, that are currently under the control of civilian structures like autonomous municipalities, will come increasingly under the control of the military structure. These repressive and centralizing actions can only sharpen the separation that exists, at least to a small extent, between the organs of dual power and the people themselves.

So far I've only looked at how the particular logic of the political situation in Chiapas contributes to the instruments of popular power becoming alienated from the people and more state-like. I haven't even touched on the more general problem of declining popular participation in decision making. One of the most consistent features of all historical experiences of dual power is the process of declining participation. In the heat of the revolutionary moment, huge sections of the people are willing to participate in the discussions and decision-making processes of a workers council or an autonomous municipality. But people have different degrees of tolerance for marathon meetings and different degrees of patience with the constant political battles that seem to characterize the life of such bodies. Over time, there is a tendency for people to withdraw from participation, to stop going to meetings, and to get on with other things in their lives that matter to them. This process does not necessarily constitute a conscious withdrawal of support for the structures or processes. And if there is another crisis, many people who dropped out reappear and throw themselves into the discussions and the work with gusto. But this process reveals the existence of a certain inequality and establishes the existence of a more permanently politicized layer of people from which new elites have historically emerged. The minority that keeps the meetings going when nobody else is willing to becomes the repository of experience and expression of continuity. When the new crisis arrives and people flock back to meetings, the minority has a kind of power that it didn't have when people were drifting away.

The Bolsheviks obtained a political majority in the St. Petersburg soviet as participation in the mass meetings that were the foundation of the soviets was declining. By October 1917, participation was at an all-time low. At the same time, however, the revolution was just taking off in the countryside. The Bolsheviks saw in this situation an opportunity to overthrow the Provisional Government and replace it with a government based on the soviets. But the government that resulted was one in which the soviets became little more than a vehicle for the Bolsheviks. This is not to suggest that the anti-democratic aspects of the Bolsheviks' politics didn't determine their ultimate course but to note how the actual dilemmas of dual power favored their triumph.

A related problem is the more permanent alienation of people from the structures of dual power through the accumulation of repressive acts, injustices, and stupid mistakes. To say that an instrument of popular power is not alienated from the people is not to claim that it has the support of every individual in the community. The town drunk or bully may rightly view the organs of popular power as alienated from himself. The conditions for his full participation, namely the suppression of the obnoxious aspects of his personality, are unacceptable to him. Over time, even a perfectly functioning and all-wise democratic assembly will antagonize, one by one, various members of their community through just acts and decisions that are perceived as unjust by the losing parties. And not all problems have "just" solutions. Where a bridge or a road or a water main gets built will benefit some members of a community to the disadvantage of others. In actual practice, no assembly is completely democratic, perfectly-functioning, or all-wise. The need to make the decisions quickly and with incomplete information will mean that mistakes will sometimes be made, and sometimes those mistakes will alienate people. The more people that are alienated the more likely that mistakes will be made. At what point does one say that the structures have become alienated from the people as a whole and have become in effect a new oppressive state apparatus?

The need for a certain degree of repression and centralization under conditions of war, the ups and downs in popular participation, and the process of incremental alienation inherent in the workings of any decision making body: all of these things add up to a powerful tendency of organs of revolutionary dual power to become the basis for a new state.

So what does this mean? Do we just resign ourselves to the seemingly inevitable and abandon the commitment to a stateless society? I would argue no. The vision of a stateless society is neither an idle dream nor a historical inevitability awaiting the accomplishments of the revolutionary state. It is the only vision consistent with real power to the people. There are no ready-made answers for how to overcome the various obstacles I've touched on above. But we still know that the state is the enemy of human liberation, and the struggle to smash it and replace it with genuine democratic structures of self-governance must remain at the heart of our politics.

Neither can we pretend that the dynamics described here are not real and that with pure hearts or the correct program we can avoid these dilemmas. That position is just as irresponsible and ultimately just as defeatist, for by failing to anticipate the real difficulties, imperfect choices and contradictory tendencies involved in real revolutionary situations, this position ensures that those most committed to anti-statist politics will also be the least prepared to put it into practice. We need to systematically study the experiences of all revolutionary struggles, particularly those of this century, examine the problems they encountered and answer for ourselves how we would have handled those problems, not by trying to stuff them into some pre-existing formula but by really understanding the general and particular conditions they faced. And we must figure out how the lessons of those experiences can be applied here and now.

Nor can some sort of anti-authoritarian purism be allowed to become a justification for not getting our hands dirty in the messy world of real-life struggles. The Zapatistas are fighting in the real world to carve out real liberated space in which the project of a new society can be advanced. They have created genuine organs of dual power and must now fight for their survival. Their experiences so far have much to teach us. Will the Zapatistas in victory be able to create a stateless, classless society in Mexico? I doubt it, and that is why I will not condemn them if they settle for some thing less. They appear to have absorbed some of the right lessons from the failures of all revolutionary tendencies over the course of the 20th century and for this I have some faith that they may be able to take things a few steps closer, which is better than anything else I see around.

Conclusion

An orientation towards dual power must be at the heart of any strategy for revolution. But dual power is not something that springs up spontaneously in a revolutionary situation. It is something that requires years or decades of patient preparation. And dual power is not an end in itself. It is a means to an end, a phase in the revolutionary process that precedes the total reorganization of society. An orientation towards dual power cannot negate the powerful stratifying tendencies that will exist in any real revolutionary situation. These tendencies are not simply expressions of authoritarian ideologies (though they are that as well) but of deeply rooted social relations that cannot be smashed overnight and that have their own logic. We have immense powers to remake society, but we are limited by the materials we have at hand. The Zapatistas are currently engaged in the most vital experiment in revolutionary dual power in at least a generation, and will hopefully give us a fuller appreciation of what it will mean to make revolution in the next century.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Christopher Day
Dual Power in the Selva Lacandon
May 1998

*From A New World in Our Hearts: Eight Years of Writings from the Love and Rage Revolutionary
Anarchist Federation* edited by Roy San Filippo.

Originally published in *San Cristobal Love and Rage Federation Bulletin*, May 1998.

theanarchistlibrary.org