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Everything I expected
a reply to Behind the Balaclavas
29th March 1998

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Compáneros/as,

Well I've finally read "Behind the Balaclavas" and it was everything I expected: which is to say predictable, formulaic and short on empirical observations. But as broken clock is right twice a day, it also makes a couple points that should be taken seriously by Zapatista solidarity folks. I think there is an uncritical attitude among many of us about the actual shortcomings of the Zapatistas. More seriously I think there is some self-censorship that folks engage in because they don't want to weaken the Zapatistas by putting out anything negative about them. "Behind the Balaclavas" probably won't do anything to reduce that tendency since it is quite clearly NOT what could be called constructive criticism. The problem is that by failing to acknowledge the real problems with the Zapatistas we undermine our own ability to learn from them and to understand their positive innovations in context.

A few weeks ago a Zapatista responsable in the community of Roberto Barrios was macheted to death. He was a personal friend of many people here and I'm a little reluctant to accept the description of him as a bureaucrat by people living in the relative comfort of

the Parisian autonomoist scene. None the less I feel compelled to at least sketch out my problems with "behind the Balaclavas" if only because other people might take it more seriously than it deserves to be taken.

I'm convinced that any serious social struggle against capital that is geographically limited in the ways that all such struggles have been, will of necessity reproduce to one degree or another capitalist relations within it. The exigencies of the world market, inherent inequalities (of knowledge, charisma, judgement…) within organizations, and the need to ultimately negotiate with the representatives of capital once you've played your best cards all contribute to these processes. The detection of such a process in the EZLN is therefore not very interesting to me. Deneuve and Reeve's criticism all seems directed at the fact that "People make themselves the advocates of realism — they give into the essential and side with new oppressive projects." Thats just too tidy. Reality makes people advocates of realism. The indigenous communities of the North, Los Altos and the Selva in Chiapas are facing the threat of extermination and can't wait for some genius to discover the perfect way out that doesn't reproduce in one way or another capitalist relations. To describe this sort of practical compromise in order to survive as "siding with new oppressive projects" is puerile.

Deneuve and Reeve's description of the "totalitarian character" of indigenous societies flattens out enormous differences: between Mayans and Aztecs, between the pre-conquest, colonial, post-independance and post-revolutionary periods, as well as the considerable differences that exist between the different contemporary Mayan communities here in Chiapas, including among different Zapatista communities. They seem to disregard differences in degree of stratification between post and pre-conquest communities as well as the enormous changes that accompanied the colonization of the Selva over the past 40 or so years in which the old cargo system was largely left behind.

One gets the impression that Deneuve and Reeve read a handfull of books on the EZLN and Mexican history so that they could plug the Zapatistas into their one-size-fits-all critique of any organization in the world. The glib write-off of Zapata as "a response to the aspirations of a communal Indian past" again flattens out a considerably more complex situation and sides with the most reactionary historical interpretations. The original Zapatistas were, like the EZLN today, the product of multiple influences — some decidedly anti-capitalist and others holding onto pre-capitalist traditions, and still others significantly compromised by capitalist ideology. They stand in my mind still as one of the most significant revolts against capitalist rule in human history.

D&R also seem to misunderstand both the general character of the ejido sytem and the variation in land-use practices among the indigenous communities. Ejidos exist both as legal entities recognized by the Mexican state and as the actual communities whose practices may or may not conform with the legal norms. Ejidal lands are generally worked individually but owned communally. Some Ejidos, particularly in the North, are, as I understand it completely integrated into capitalist relations and function as virtual corporations. In Chiapas this is less the case. And in some communities, mainly the smaller and most remote ones, most or all of the land is worked as well as owned communally. In fact, since many of these communities have not had their land titles recognized, they are not "legally" Ejidos. The place of private property in these communities is again highly variant. A friend of mine described seeing half a dozen people wearing the same t-shirt over the course of as many days in one community. (Do D&R share their clothing with their neighbors?) The Ejido system was a concession wrested by the campesinos from the state in the course of the Mexican Revolution. It has undoubtedly been compromised in many ways and in D&R's terminology that seems to make it part of the "new oppressive project." The real heart of D&R's critique of the EZLN is their supposed roots in Maoism. Their shoddy account of the origins of

the EZLN can only find an audience because the supporters of the EZLN have been so reluctant to repeat the story we all know is probably true about their origins. The EZLN was founded by a tiny Guevarist (not Maoist) armed organization call the Forces of National Liberatin (FLN) in 1983. They were able to recruit a layer of veteran indigenous organizers who had undoubtedly been steeped in both the Maoism of Linea Proletaria and the liberation theology of Dominican catechists. From this base they were able to build mass support in many indigenous communities to the degree that they were willing to vote for war in popular assemblies in 1992.

D&R have nothing but contempt for the assemblies in Zapatista communities and view it all as a front for Maoist politicians pulling the strings from behind. This crude caricature however is mirrored by the glowing representation of the assemblies as ideal democratic decision-making bodies. The truth is undoubtedly somewhere in between. The indigenous communities of Chiapas have traditions of making decisons in assemblies that long preceded the arrival of any Maoists. But those assemblies were assemblies of older male members of the communities. The EZLN insited in 1992 that there also be assemblies of women and youth so that the whole community could participate in making these decisions. We can look on this as a cynical move as the women and youth represented the strength of the EZLN in many communities, but the effect was to broaden participatory democracy in the communities.

The problem with D&R's critique of the EZs use of popular assemblies is that it presumes that there is such a thing as a non-manipulated assembly that is being corrupted. Like any decision-making process or structure assemblies are called and organized because people have agendas: they want the support of the community/factory/school/etc.. for something. Who gets invited (based on who is defined as trustworthy), where and when it happens, and the range of questions that are actually open to discussion — these are all political decisions. Every single example of popular assemblies that we might invoke from New England Town Meetings to the So-

we might find embarassing. In other words what are the parts of their Guevarism, Maoism, etc.. that were right?

to critique their practice we need to be able to offer a coherent alternative and our own practice in this regard becomes relevant to how seriously we should take the critique. Without the EZ the "sub-proletarian youth" of Chiapas are going to need allies who can deliver and pronto because this is a life and death situation. What do D&R have to offer them?

For solidarity without illusions

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P.S I just read Monty's piece and have to say that he said much of what I wanted to say but more clearly. I have one provocative point to add though. Monty and others, while acknowledging the Maoist/Guevarist/Leninist origins of the EZLNs first nucleii, emphasize how much they have changed and rightly criticize the view of such forces as being impervious to change. One thing few of us pro-Zapatista folks have addressed however is the question of those elements of their original politics that they have RETAINED and how important are they to the Zapatista's success so far. For instance, could the space for indigenous autonomy opened up by the EZLN actually have been maintained for so long without the hierarchical military structure of the EZLN that is clearly an inheritance from their Leninist past? Marcos and the EZLN in general are purposefully vague about certain aspects of their politics in order to attract the broadest possible international support. Autonomists are allowed to see the Zapatistas as libertarian communists, while Refundacion is allowed to see them in terms of their continuity with the old school. Again I suspect the truth is somewhere in between. I'm less interested in claiming the Zapatistas for any particular trend than in understanding the lessons of their actual practice. It seems to me that its not simply an accident that it was Leninists and not libertarians who were able to build the most serious autonomy project in the Western Hemisphere and that we need to look at the ALL the aspects of the Zapatista's theory, practice and structure that made that possible and not just write off the parts

viets to the Zapatista communities came into existence because of the initiative and leadership of particular groups and individuals in those contexts.

The assertions D&R make about the EZs bureaucratic control of discussion are uninformed. Yes Marcos is the primary spokesperson for the EZ, but he has not been the only one. Other members of the commandancia have written and spoken publicly on many occasions. There is also already an extensive literature in Spanish in which one can find the thinking of many members of the Zapatistas communities who are not part of their military hierarchy. Does Marcos' prominence indicate the existence of a contradiction within the Zapatistas? Of course it does, but it is a contradiction that is not so easily resolved as D&R seem to think. The communities turned to the Zapatistas because they were facing a mounting campaign of repression in the late 80s that made the need for a military capacity clear to many of them. It seems dubious that they could have constructed one on their own without the (admittedly limited) expertise of the folks in the Zapatistas who had already spent years on precisely that project. What is astounding about the Zapatista is that they made the transition from being a project of the FLN to being a genuinely popular army under the civilian control of the CCRI. I know that the CCRI is not the perfectly democratic body that it is sometimes portrayed as, but what I think is important here is that an advance was made on the practice of earlier guerrilla movements and that the commitment to developing genuine democratic accountability to the people is sincere.

D&R attack both the Zapatista's invocation of the symbols of Mexican nationalism and indigenous identity. Frankly this doesn't bother me much at all. Like many nationalisms in imperialized countries, Mexican nationalism is two-sided: it is both anti-imperialist and national capitalist. The Zapatistas have consistently fought for a redefinition of Mexican identity as pluriethnic (as opposed to simply mestizo) and opposed its repressive functioning. They are right to attack the PRI for selling Mexico's

sovereignty to US capital and if that involves invoking national identity it is because that national identity has been a site of resistance to capital.

D&R also attack the EZLN's prohibitions of alcoholism and prostitution by asking "since when can we get rid of alcoholism or prostitution by forbidding them?" I don't think the Zapatistas has gotten rid of either of these evils but to imagine that their prohibition functions in the same way as similar prohibitions by nation-states like the US is to lose sight of the relative cohesion of the indigenous communities and to project our own atomized existences onto them. The primary enforcement mechanism in these communities is social disapproval. Drunks get tossed in the community jails as well. But in a context in which alcohol has been deliberately used to disrupt the functioning and capacity of resistance of indigenous communities I uphold the right of those communities to establish those kinds of sanctions as part of a larger strategy of resistance.

What seems to bother D&R the most is that the EZLN do not identify the struggle of the indigenous communities primarily or exclusively in terms of the prcesses of proletarianization that are taking place here and that are significantly driving those struggles. This point of view completely denies the importance of the cultural survival of the indigenous peoples as both legitimate in its own right and as a crucial source of the cohesion of the struggle. They even suggest that the EZLN is a "brake on the development of the autonomous capacity for struggle" imagining that the "sub-proletarian youth" who make up the EZLNs base would otherwise be developing that capacity if only the Zapatistas weren't in the way. This is absurd. Far more likey is that the "sub-proletarian youth" would be experiencing the same fate as so many of their contemporaries: being sucked into the atomized consumerist existance of full blown proletraians, drinking aguardiente or playing video games in Ocosingo, or most likely of all just watching their sisters, brothers and children die of treatable illnesses as they get progressively pushed off the land.

Finally I want to address the question of the negotiations and the EZLNs "failure" to militarily defend the communities against army incursions and paramilitary violence. The fact of the matter is that the EZLN has not defended the communities except in so far as they have organized the heroic resistance of women and children armed with sticks, stones, and occasionaly machetes. Marcos has asserted from the start that the EZLN has little faith in the negotiations and it is clear that they seem them as an opportunity to buy time and build broader political support in Mexico and the rest of the world. This is a tactical decisin that one might disagree with but I think its clear that it has succeeded in broadening the Zapatistas support outside of Chiapas. The government here is looking for any provocation they can to justify a military assault on the EZLN and with almost 70,000 troops already in Chiapas there is little doubt that a bloodbath would result. Whether or not it would destroy the Zapatistas is again a mattter for debate, but the human costs to the indigenous communities would be immense. I believe that sooner or later the Zapatistas will have to start shooting back and one might argue that their failure to do so so far has only undercut their bases of support in the communities. It is certainly clear that there are some in the communities who want to relaunch the war. I don't really feel qualified to say who is right on this question. I do know that the commandancia of the EZLN are undoubtedly far more in touch with the actual wishes of the communities and the military realities of their situation than I am and certainly than D&R are. I don't say this in order to suggest that they have no right to make their criticisms, but rather that those criticisms should be taken seriously only to the degree that they reflect an actual familiarity with the conditions as they exist her in Chiapas. Bob Brown asks what D&R's own practice is. Again this might be percieved as an attempt to just silence their criticisms. But I believe it actually matters. There are hundreds of thousands of people here living on the edge of survival and the EZLN is, as of now, and with all of its limitations, their most serious line of defense. If we are going