

Reflections on the VI Declaration of the Lacandona Jungle and the new Latin American left

Cuban Libertarian Movement

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The Cuban Libertarian Movement (MLC) presents for collective debate its reflections on the declarations made by the EZLN (the Zapatista rebels) in July 2005 in the state of Chiapas, Mexico.

On January 1st, 1994 the Free Trade Agreement between the United States, Canada and Mexico came into effect, and along with the new year, spoiling the party of the powerful, from deep within the forgotten Lacandona jungle also came on scene “the fire and the word” of the Zapatista rebels. Back then the whole world seemed to march without too much upheaval or energetic opposition towards “the end of History” and was doing so via “globalization” and neo-liberalism; that is – lest we forget and assume erroneously that those words explain everything – via the present hegemonic model adopted by the state’s system of control and transnational capitalism; that is, the currently prevalent models of large scale domination and exploitation. In such a hopeless context, the Zapatista outbreak meant a strong breeze of fresh air and a loud confirmation – anticipated, naturally, in many but less resounding gestures of resistance all over the world – that History continued its course and that nothing had put a stop to people’s struggles. Thus it was lauded from the beginning by leftist groups of diverse colors and thus it was also received by the Cuban Libertarian Movement who then gave its initial support to community projects in the Lacandona jungle such as the anti-authoritarian school May 1st or the direct solidarity camp Chicago Martyrs. For us, then as now, the emergence and development of the Zapatista National Liberation Army and its deeds make sense and demand a new look as part of the emergence and development of a new Latin American revolutionary left. The form, the profile and the orientations of that constellation of left groups and practices are one of our basic issues; therefore we must, within that frame of reference, take our position on the road the EZLN is on and its recent VI Declaration of the Lacandona jungle, as well as on its treatment and derivations. We will do so, with the solidarity and respect the Zapatista movement has earned on its merits whose proclamation is not necessary, but also without omitting – this would be an inconceivable demonstration of demagoguery and opportunism – the criticism we deem applicable regarding contributions to the slow and laborious process of consolidating the new Latin American revolutionary left.

What Left and where do we find it?

Let's start at the beginning and answer the mother of all questions: what is that new Latin American revolutionary left we speak of? For starters, there is no doubt that left is the one that has not renounced utopia neither by word or deed, and that, in spite of everything, finds its main encouragement in an utopia that could be generally defined as a thick web of relationships among free, equal and mutually supportive beings; an utopia capable of identifying its distant and venerable beginnings and of reclaiming them for their much needed actualization. That left that feeds on not only its own full development but also on the other's emptiness and grows within the hopeless and widely open space created by the resounding failures of the "actually existing socialism" and the immediate defection of neo-liberal anti-utopia. This is the left that has learned to recognize and look askance at the narrow and dry road left on the wake of the guerrilla vanguards later become some exclusive and excluding party, civil or military populism and social-democratic reformism; this is the left that doesn't feel represented by any authority and even questions the meaning of "representation", that seeks itself among the cries of "let them all go!" and the whispering promise to "change the world without taking power"; the left that depends on the non-negotiable autonomy of grassroots social movements as the template for a new world and that in self-management and direct action finds its truest expression. A left that surely the EZLN wants to belong to and that, in open reciprocity, finds in it one of its most visible manifestations.

Now then, neither that new left nor the EZLN are finished structures that answer to a rigorous and extensive plan of construction but instead must be thought of as work in progress, characterized here and there by inevitable doubts and innovations founded on the needs of practices that are rabidly antagonistic. For example, the EZLN makes sense if interpreted as a guerrilla movement in transition. Its origins are more or less marked by the parameters typical of Latin American guerrillas of the 60's and 70's: "national liberation" as an informing concept, the pride of feeling and self-proclaiming as an "army", the mystique of the "commandants", certain symbolic reminiscences, etc., not really successful parameters and about which the EZLN doesn't seem to have yet performed an in-depth critique. Its own actions have led it to adopt a profile that no longer responds to the old model. Not only because the "war of liberation" in its classical sense lasted barely 12 days but also because already by January 1st 1996 – the Fourth Declaration – the EZLN gave us the happy surprise of calling for the formation of "a political force that is not a political party" and indicating that it didn't aspire to take power. To put it in our own terms: neither the old guerrilla vanguard nor social-democratic reformism. Neither – even less- the idols of populist salvation that would hardly find themselves at home among the anonymous every day events of the Lacandona jungle. That which, back then was beginning to acquire its highest relevance is precisely what we're most interested in highlighting as a milestone of the new Latin American left: the autonomy of grassroots social movements; an autonomy that, within the EZLN's sphere of action in Chiapas, is that of the communities of the first peoples.

Forwards and backwards of the Zapatista movement

Within the complex trajectory of the EZLN shadows and lights have, from the beginning, coexisted. Looking to legitimately widen its breadth and project its fight to the whole Mexican state, the EZLN rubbed elbows with, or glanced and winked with certain familiarity at the dominant institutions while expanding and consolidating its regional autonomy. The former only produced mediated acknowledgements, broken pacts, delays and failures, the latter, in contrast, cemented its hold on its immediate sphere of influence. And, just like the former led to the episodic formation of large political superstructures that voluntarily or not were delivered to the dynamics

of the State or its implicit environment of action and later were trapped in its steel claws (National Democratic Convention, Movement of National Liberation, Committee of Concord and Pacification, etc), the latter facilitated, from August 2003 on, the emergence of a larger participation on the part of the Zapatista communities and a possibly healthy redefinition of the EZLN; now aiming –although never totally nor with convincing energy – to perform more as accompaniment than unnecessary first violin. This alternative way of thinking about politics and this latest course of action have allowed the formation of the five autonomous regions in Chiapas and the (not very well) denominated councils of good government; a reshuffling of roles far from being resolved and that has a lot to do with the debates and problems of the new Latin American revolutionary left. Lights and shadows through which the new EZLN has made manifest, either the fusion, without a preconceived plan, of old and new elements combining – very much like a movement in transition, as we have said – some of the practices of a conventional guerrilla army with the indispensable dares claimed by grassroots organizations as they build their autonomy. This play of lights and shadows can't help but have an effect on the Sixth Declaration and “the other campaign” which we need to address immediately.

It is fitting to start by being fair and consequent: if there's anything the EZLN has made perfectly clear in its Sixth Declaration of the Lacandona jungle is that it feels cheated and that the main agents of the fiasco are the institutional political parties, with its leaders first of all. Their wording in this respect leaves little room for exegesis too complex and needlessly sinuous: “the politicians have clearly shown that they have no decency and are just a bunch of scoundrels that only think of earning lots of money as the bad governors they are. We must remember this because you will see that now they're going to say that they will recognize indigenous rights, but this is a lie they tell us so we vote for them, but they already had their chance and didn't come through.” Chances and defaults that – it all must be said with even clarity – run through every country's history of “representative” democracy and come together each with its own characteristics in a hypothetical tale of universal infamy. It being so, it is proper that the EZLN wants to leave outside its expectations once and for all the institutional system of parties, wants to trace a clear dividing line in that sense and wants to orient its message in another direction: “a new step forward in the indigenous struggle is only possible if the indigenous join the workers, peasants, students, teachers, employees ... that is, workers of town and country.” In other words, going further out and widening the spectrum of movements of resistance: “in this globalization of rebellion appear not only the rural and urban workers, but also others appear that are prosecuted and held in contempt precisely because they don't allow themselves to be dominated, such as women, young people, indigenous people, homosexuals, lesbians, transsexuals, immigrants, and many other groups that exist all over the world but that we don't see nor hear until they cry out enough already, and they rise up, and then we see them, and hear them, and we learn from them.” A web of oppression, exclusion and pain seems to be at the bottom of the longings and desires of the EZLN; and perhaps the Lacandona jungle can be felt pulsating behind and under these words, words that not because they're deliberately simple lack a deep and dear meaning.

It is possible to agree with the immediate horizon in practically everything: the more or less stable articulation of these resistance movements behind a leftist program of struggle and the collective start of a “national campaign to build another way of doing politics”. Another way of doing politics: this should be understood as totally different from that developed in a shameless contemptuous way by the electoral parties, always embarked in the rhythmic and spasmodic succession of seductive promises, amnesias without description and opportunistic justifications.

Here we have, for instance, a new Zapatista attack: “And those electoral parties not only don’t defend, but they are the first to be at the service of foreigners, mainly the United States, and are the ones who deceive us, making us look the other way while they sell off everything and keep the money”. Irrefutable judgments are these that the VI Declaration also extends with some nuances to the bureaucratic and defeatist labor movement: “And if the workers were in their union to legally demand their rights, then no, right now the union tells them they have to buck up and accept a lower salary or less hours or less benefits, or else the company closes and goes to another country”. A different way of doing politics about which not many things are specified but must surely be understood as an option for direct democracy as opposed to hierarchical and crystallized “representations”; an option for the people’s active participation with all its potential as opposed to the systematic exclusion that has always benefited technocrats and “know-it-alls”; an option for sincerity, dialog among equals and the shared elaboration of those dreams that are common to all as opposed to the insensible and absurd fair of the vanities where dissembling and lying run the house. The Declaration doesn’t say it, but such things can be implicit inasmuch they seem to be the authentic road to the formation and development of the indigenous Zapatista communities, essential signs of their existence and their consolidation.

Constitutional change: a road to nowhere

It’s a good thing there aren’t many definitions or a detailed and suffocating program to subscribe to, since the presence of such things would be more an invitation to adhesion than to dialogue; consideration of Mexican grassroots social movements more as a passive audience or an empty container than as a living and active fabric, capable of producing its own words and its own fire. Nevertheless there is a unique programmatic element the EZLN seems to take as axiomatic and tacitly agreed to, an element that can be a source of errors of vision and multiple strategic mistakes: “a new Constitution”. Will this be an elliptical way of referring to the constituent basis of a new Mexican society, and therefore including the conviction that this requires no more nor less a radical subversion of its power relations? Or perhaps it attempts to embark the autonomous social movements on a conventional constitutional reform whose transactions and game rules have been previously defined along the norms in force and as such, subjected beforehand to those very same power relations? On its face, it would seem that the EZLN holds a nostalgic idea of the Mexican Constitution that doesn’t hold up to an analysis in depth. Let’s see: “the Constitution has been fondled and changed. It is no longer that which had the rights and liberties of the working people, but now it has the rights and liberties of the neo-liberals to obtain their huge profits. The judges are there to serve those neo-liberals because they always rule in their favor, and those who aren’t rich get only injustice, prison or the cemetery.” But, did Mexico ever have a constitution that really consecrated, without ifs and buts, and in its widest expression “the liberties of the working people”? This type of reasoning might perhaps lead to the belief that the EZLN has understood very well the articulations of power that characterize the state’s political parties but has not yet grasped those that characterize the state itself. However, there’s no mystery in this and it can be stated, paraphrasing Marcos, in very simple words: the parties are like they are because the state is like it is.

Something that should be beyond any discussion is that the state is a specific structure of domination, a hierarchical and codified form of social power relations and a system designed to self-perpetuate. This being so, the correct description the EZLN makes of the state’s party system cannot be founded in the malevolence, the perverse character or the venality of its leaders but must find a substantial part of its reasoning in the fact that such parties establish their basic

orientation as an operation to capture the reins of the State. And it is precisely because of this that such parties adopt a shape that faithfully reproduces the State in their own actions: that is why they constitute themselves as instances of control and disciplining of its affiliates; that is why they assign deferential attributions to each of their own organs in their pyramidal existence; and that is why they believe that their survival, beyond any historical or social consideration, should be seen by “the voters” –their own and the other’s – as a blessing from heaven. We anarchists have been so convinced for over 130 years and the subsequent historical experience has only confirmed those old intuitions, and has done so without presenting, since then, a single exception to our anxious and expectant eyes. Furthermore: if in the past it was said “power corrupts” today we can say that even the mere aspiration to power also corrupts, beforehand and with plenty of room.

In this we must be clear and coherent. How does one reconcile the EZLN saying “we fight to be free, to not have to change master every six years” with the EZLN who speaks of “a new Constitution”? Can perhaps a Magna Carta transacted and compacted by necessity with the current state organization, according to the traditional sense of the expression, be reconciled with the struggle for freedom? It would seem not, and it would also seem that the correct orientation is exactly the contrary: the struggle for freedom starts with the autonomic formation of grassroots social movements and develops within it, while the negotiated pursuit of a new Constitution is condemned to be mired in the tortuous maze of the State and its endless machinations. Such conclusion doesn’t need any erudite study in comparative politics, it’s more than enough with the experience of the EZLN in similar matters. The fundamental and radical rejection to the state’s party system is an important conceptual step that only requires its necessary complement: the rejection of the narrow road of the state that will allow unfettered transit without chains or distractions along the fertile road of autonomy. This autonomy of the social movements, set within the frame of territorial action they decide to give themselves, is the libertarian condition par excellence: an autonomy that requires emancipation from all-knowing power, external and superior, in order for each collective to design, with the largest margin of liberty possible, its own living relationships and its own recourses to action; without conditions or extortions, thinking themselves and their becoming and trusting in their own abilities rather than predestinations, messiahs, doctrines, conspiracies or randomness that –as is well known – have never nor will ever lead anywhere.

We all could “walk by asking” and “command by obeying”

There are many more things that could be argued in solidarity with the EZLN regarding their Sixth Declaration, or better yet, do so with all the Zapatista communities and, in general, about the people’s lives and struggles.

For example, we would like to go deeper on globalization and neo-liberalism, so that among us all we can trace a map of the world that is not reproducible exclusively in black and white, to see that in this arena there are more than two gladiators and it’s necessary to identify a whole gamut of local relationships articulated for our own convenience and not out of pure obsequiousness to the world’s great centers of power. In the end capitalism also finds citizenship papers and its specific multinational facade in Mexico, without the imperative of an external agent to give it life, impulse and projection. This type of consideration will allow us to make common, with almost complete certainty, the conviction that not only sold out politicians and their corrupt followings are responsible for the situation but also there are certain social levels that also try hard maintaining the status quo. This might bring us to share definitions much more markedly

anti-capitalist, anti-state and anti-bureaucratic that perhaps the EZLN has already formulated within itself but has not yet made completely manifest.

We'd like to reflect in a brotherly way on a sentence of the Sixth Declaration to which we assign special importance and that illustrates one of the distinctive features of the EZLN all this time: "that is, on top the democratic political commanding and below the military obeying. Or perhaps even better that there be no below but everything level, with no military, and that is why the Zapatistas are soldiers so that there be no more soldiers". Really, if everything were "level" nobody would command and nobody would obey but each act out of their own convictions, their own possibilities and their own commitments with the agreements freely adopted. And we would say that it's dangerous and paradoxical this having soldiers so as not to have soldiers because then –what a mess of words! we would always need some soldiers so there would be no more soldiers. It seems much better, more direct and clearer to say that we are anti-military, and then really get to work, fully and not half-hearted, for the dissolution of all armies.

We would like to discuss in more detail with our comrades from the Lacandona jungle the motives that cause our enthusiasm with the idea of bringing together all the Mexican social movements in a wide net without exclusion. But even then, we would like to maintain a respectful discrepancy with respect to a proceeding that might not be the best. We think that this net should not have a center and, precisely because of this, the EZLN should not have self-attributed the role of initial coordinator assigning to itself the administration of a dialogue where the participants have already been previously categorized and meet according to the dispositions in regards to dates, place and agenda prescribed by the CCRI. It surely would have been better that the dates would have resulted from a broad previous consultation, that the place would be equidistant and that the initial agenda would be nothing but the free flow of the irrevocable popular voice. Perhaps there's no cause for mistrusting the intentions and believe that this gathering is nothing more than a foundational necessity and that there will be plenty of future opportunities for things to be different.

Cuba: so near Chiapas, so far from the EZLN

We'd like to expound these things and many others, but right now it only seems right to place the questions. There is, however, an issue we can't avoid at this time and that, as the Cuban Libertarian Movement, especially and directly interests us. We think it's great that the EZLN manifest its solidarity with the people struggling in Latin America and the world and we could issue our own declarations to the effect. Inasmuch as people's struggles happen everywhere, we think it's a good literary image to say that we can't very well tell where to deliver the EZLN's testimonies of solidarity. What is not clear, then, is the ideological and political mechanism whereby the peoples of the world are "not locatable" whereas the Cuban people can find their seat, their natural residence and their legitimate representation at their government's embassy in Mexico City. Seeing things this way, it's as if the EZLN interrupted almost all its concepts, praxis and learning at the very moment of landing in Cuba. What natural and coherent link can there be between a platform that seeks to exalt the fabric of Mexican society through its grassroots social movements and another that assumes that its Cuban equivalent is totally absorbed by its government. Furthermore, does the EZLN believe that the Cuban government embodies the model of a new Latin American revolutionary left or is disposed to participate in it, even as a discreet fellow traveler? Does the EZLN believe that they must do in Mexico what the Cuban "Communist" Party has done in Cuba? Does the EZLN deem contradictory and inconsequent to solidly marry the autonomy of the grassroots communities with a centralizing and excluding regime? Does the EZLN think

that the self-expression of the Cuban people could be autonomous popular organizations whose appearance the government carefully and systematically tries to forestall by means of preventive repression? What answers, finally, can the EZLN give to such grave questions?

In addition, the EZLN can't ignore or forget that during four long decades the Cuban and the Mexican government maintained fraternal relations; one of the best moments can surely be found around the complicit silence on the part of the Cuban government about the massacre of Tlatelolco in 1968 and the sending of athletes to the Olympic games immediately following; in spite of calls for the boycott of the games at the time by the Mexican left. There is a fraternal inter-states relationship that is not hard to personify in the friendship between Fidel Castro and Carlos Salinas de Gortari, part of whose fortune – amassed thanks to the exploitation of the Mexican worker – today is invested in Cuban territory. Given these antecedents, and many others of a similar character, the EZLN should have no difficulty verifying that, for the Cuban ruling elite, the axis of international relations does not consist of the people's struggles but instead these struggles are re-interpreted at will according to the type of relationship the ruling monopoly party decides to have with the rest of the governments, if and when they can breathe a little oxygen to its capacity for survival. How can you explain, if not, that Cuban diplomacy has supported the struggles against South Africa's apartheid and has also shown extreme solidarity with the Suharto regime in Indonesia, who maintained a similar situation in East Timor? What coherence can there be between subscribing to the rights of African peoples to define their own destiny while at the same time sending troops of occupation to face Eritrean independence fighters according to the needs of the Soviet's chess game, or now in a virtually ludicrous register, training Idi Amin's military escort? What justification does the Cuban government have to send a vice-president to take part in the Davos forum and later send its president of the National Assembly to protest in Porto Alegre against the same forum? How can it be that racism is so strongly condemned at the UN World Conference on the subject that took place in Durban and later refusing all invitations to analyze the reasons why there's an over-representation of Black people in Cuba's jails. And so on, as far as anybody's critical curiosity might take them.

By the way: is it necessary to remind the EZLN of the living conditions of the Cuban people and their absolute impossibility to self-organize autonomously or even to express themselves to face the situation? We think any concrete reference is unnecessary at this moment and we want to believe that the mention of the embassy of the Cuban government in Mexico City is only a mistake; a lapse that can be amended at the earliest opportunity. We want to believe it is so because what's at stake is a lot more important and we have so insinuated from the beginning. Let's repeat it and keep it present from now on: what matters is the formation, the profile and the orientation of a constellation of rebel groups and practices that today meet the conditions to nurture the new Latin American revolutionary left. In this work of creation there can be no carelessness nor levity nor polite phrases. In this work of creation the Cuban government has nothing to contribute because the only genuine messages that will permit us to advance along the road of freedom will not issue from the bureaucrat's offices in Havana but from the clashes and din that surge from deep below and that below find their unmistakable echoes. It is there with the Ecuadorian "outlaws", the Mapuche resistance, the Cochabamba peasants, the occupied factories in Argentina, the land occupations in Brasil and, of course, also in the experiences and trials that today are taking place in the Lacandona jungle.

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