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Libertarian Chiapas

Interview with Pietro Vermentini by Dino Taddei

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A good friend and comrade has been to visit us in Milan: he is Pietro Vermentini, who has been living in Chiapas for over three years, working in the field of popular education through the FOCA organization (Formación y Capacitación — Training and Education), a Mexican organization active in both the educational and the health spheres, focusing its actions on the recovery of traditional indigenous medicine. Of course, we could not miss out on this opportunity to find out more about what is happening in Mexico.

Not so long ago, not a day passed without news of what was happening in Chiapas. Is the fact that we hear less talk of it today due to a conscious choice by the media, or has the situation really changed?

I believe there have been events recently, such as the Ocalan case or the war in Kosovo, that have — obviously — attracted the attention of both the media and our comrades here, but this doesn't mean that the situation in Chiapas has 'normalized'.

From what you have been able to observe, in what situations can you detect the strongest trace of a libertarian attitude?

There are certainly very strong traces in the autonomous municipalities; we need only think that one of the most important Zapatista communities is called Flores Magon, named after the Mexican anarchist who was most representative of the libertarian side of the Mexican revolution.

The municipalities are an experience that links up with the indigenous community tradition. While in other South American guerrilla wars of a Marxist mould there are orthodox links with models used at any latitude and with any culture, with forced collectivization of the land, in the Zapatista case, each community decides for itself, creating a large variety of situations, with communities that have decided on completely communal ownership of the land and others where a mixed system is in force, with common land and individual land; in some cases a couple that has married receives a piece of land from the community. All through direct forms of democracy, without decisions from above.

There is a substantial difference between the Zapatista army, which has its own internal rules, and the bases of grass-root support, which self-organize by means of the community assembly. Contacts between the communities are maintained by the CCRI (Clandestine Indigenous Revolutionary Committee), a collective organization that can only take important decisions after consulting the communities. Through the tool of the assembly, communities with Zapatista majorities but with strong minorities supporting the government

manage to coexist, also because the Zapatistas have never seen the indigenous Priista [supporter of the governing PRI party] as an enemy, but more simply as someone who has bowed down in order to eat. A tactic widely used by the government to divide indigenous communities is to guarantee privileges to those who move away from the Zapatistas — a sack or two of corn or a tractor are very convincing arguments for those who are struggling to survive.

This campaign of delegitimization had its peak in May last year, with the psychological offensive of desertion: in all the Mexican media, great prominence was given to the supposed mass desertion from the Zapatista ranks, with the interviewing of fifteen or so ex-Zapatistas, who accused the EZLN of only fighting for power and said that because of this many like them were leaving. Filmed by the television channels, they ostentatiously took off their balaclavas, declaring that they wished to enter lawful society again, accepting the government proposal: “A machine gun for a sack of grain”.

Of course, two days later the Zapatista army provided the names of these people and their communities of origin, declaring that they had never been Zapatistas, and that they had each received a new tractor for this service: you need only go and see them at their homes. But this counter- information had no outlet in the media.

It is also true that one quality of the Zapatista army is that of allowing to return home those who, after years of guerrilla in the forest, are tired and prefer to help the movement in some other way, obviously provided they don't become informers. This is no minor difference

from other guerrilla wars, for which there is no return ticket.

What role do Mexican anarchists have?

The Mexican anarchist movement is small-scale; nevertheless, it is seeking to support the Zapatista initiative to the maximum. In the past the “Love and Rage” collective opened a libertarian school in Zapatista territory, but the experiment ended badly, because of the ambiguous attitude of certain individuals. Currently small groups or individuals operate in Chiapas, and in Mexico City there is a large group of youngsters who publish the magazine *Letra Negra*.

What kind of numbers can the Zapatista movement count on today?

It is difficult to quantify the support the movement enjoys in the cities and towns, particularly in a reality so multiform as Mexico. One indicative figure — though numbers may well be considerably larger — is that of the voters at the last consultation launched by the Zapatistas: over three million people voted. This is not an exceptional number, considering that the country has ninety million inhabitants, but you must consider that almost half the population is under fifteen years old, that the news of the consultation was by word of mouth alone and that only a million people participated in a similar initiative in 1995.

What type of relationships have the Zapatistas been able to create with Mexican civil society?

Despite the continuing desire to forge alliances involving other sectors of Mexican society, it is hard to make

is not Marcos, but a collective body, it's as simple as that; the fact that Subcomandante Marcos is an excellent communicator and an effective symbol for the Zapatista struggle is a whole other story.

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any headway. Yet something is moving; the university was occupied recently, something that hadn't happened since the harsh repression of '68. The protest started in Mexico City and spread to the other universities in the country. The reason that sparked the protest was the shocking increase in university fees, but very soon the matter began to take on political implications. A delegation from the EZLN went to establish contacts with the students.

The government is in difficulty in this protest, because they cannot identify the leaders, to buy or frighten them off, as — at the moment — the movement is based on an assembly model and those negotiating are only spokespersons on behalf of the assembly. This method was borrowed from the Zapatistas, who don't take any important decision without first consulting the communities supporting them. This is the great challenge for the Zapatistas: not to win a war militarily (one already lost at the start) but to involve the people, to decide their own destiny. This challenge meets with powerful resistance from Mexican civil society, dominated by logics of power, by micro-factions, so grass roots organizations struggle to take off.

The Zapatista Front (an organization created precisely to coordinate civil initiatives) continually seeks to stimulate the birth of new autonomous focuses and indeed that was the purpose of the latest consultation: to encourage self-organization. In fact, to administer this vote two thousand civil brigades were formed throughout the country. These did not dissolve after the consultation; quite the opposite, they created a national coordinated structure. The Zapatistas refuse to direct movements from above; their proposal is

very simple: “we will not structure you, organize yourselves”.

Unfortunately Mexican civil society is not used to this libertarian approach, and many can’t manage to free themselves from authoritarian mechanisms, those of delegation. At some meetings of the Zapatista Front, when faced with important decisions, some delegates ask to adjourn the meeting to report back to the community, while others – with the excuse that it is necessary to act quickly – go beyond the delegate powers they have received.

Unfortunately civil society finds it difficult to accept direct forms of democracy. This type of resistance is less noticeable in Chiapas, in the indigenous communities that traditionally adopt these methods. And perhaps the peculiarity of the Zapatista movement is their knowledge of how to interact with this basic cultural identity. The difficulties are our own: a lot of Mexican and foreign organizations that use the Zapatista message as a reference point in reality have an internal structure that is hierarchical and authoritarian. But the Zapatistas do not give up; they know that much time is needed for change to take place: they direct their message at society, not at power, and therefore the time needed for the transformation is long, but the important thing is to proceed along the right path. The EZLN discourse is this: “we don’t want power for ourselves, because nothing guarantees that we will not end up like our oppressors. On the contrary, we want to decentralize it, to dilute it, so there is less power and more participation”.

Currently, what is the effect of the presence of the government army?

Considerable; among the guerrilleros operating in the Lacandona Forest and the support communities, the possibilities for exchange have been weakened: the strategy of the army is to deprive the Zapatistas of their social hinterland. This initiative has borne fruit for the army, because now it is much more difficult for the Zapatistas to participate in the life of the community. Yet these community experiences are hard to liquidate, as they are so deep-rooted; they have brought about substantial changes not only to land management plans but also at a cultural level.

We need only consider the role acquired by women in community decision-making; for instance, in the Zapatista communities it is forbidden to drink alcohol, on account of the clearly devastating effects this produces on indigenous people, and this decision was made at the insistence of the women. Let’s not forget that women represent one third of the Zapatista forces, the highest presence among Latin American guerrillas. As Comandante Ana Maria recalls: “In the EZLN relationships between men and women are on a level of perfect parity”. This is no small matter, considering the ultra-macho attitudes existing in Mexico.

But don’t you think there is a contradiction here, with Marcos’ role within this experience, as a charismatic leader?

The danger of transforming Marcos into a sort of icon does exist, but he is the first to be aware of this, and does not waste a single opportunity to ironize about it. After all, the Marcos myth is more a construction that is external to the Zapatistas, where in reality a very much more collective decision-making process exists than people would think: the Command of the EZLN