Anonymous
The Sixth Declaration, the Zapatistas, nationalism and the state
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political change. Non-hierarchical decision-making is important, but only if those signing up to this approach are doing so to implement a genuinely radical movement. Are the considerable efforts of the Zapatistas and their supporters aimed in the correct direction? Unfortunately the basics of what the Zapatistas stand for (nationalism, a view that politics has been corrupted and needs reform, the call for major legislative change through the state) have more in common with many of the leftist political groups in the UK that Zapatista supporters traditionally castigate than anything positive.

Given this position there are two possible options. Either be critical of these positions but broadly supportive of the Zapatistas or stop being supportive altogether. Unfortunately, the former position can only be maintained if it is felt that questions of nationalism, support of the state and nationalization are relatively minor issues. We cannot ignore such problems purely because the Zapatistas are based in a foreign, more exotic location or because we have been personally involved in this struggle. We need to be honest with ourselves. Our task can therefore only be to find a vehicle of struggle that truly upholds the values and strategies that we feel are vital.

Understanding exactly what is meant by the Sixth Declaration is a difficult task. While the Declaration opens with a reference to it being the 'simple word'[1] of the EZLN there is a certain, perhaps deliberate, lack of theoretical clarity. This can, completely understandably, cause problems interpreting the document and the Zapatista position.

This document is intended to look at the Sixth and the Zapatistas in more detail, in particular examining its view of nationalism and the state. The Zapatistas repeatedly say that we are to take their words seriously – it is only correct that we follow this request and do not seek to explain away any difficulties.

Neo-liberalism and nationalism

The Sixth Declaration is significant in its attempt to outline the Zapatista move from a critique of neo-liberalism to a more comprehensive rejection of capitalism as a whole. Capitalism is interpreted in broadly Marxist terms as being 'based on the exploitation of the workers', with neo-liberalism being seen as the most recent incarnation of capitalism. As described elsewhere, neo-liberalism represents the 'chaotic theory of economic chaos, the stupid exaltation of social stupidity, and the catastrophic political management of catastrophe'[2]. Rather less prosaically according to the Sixth:

'the capitalism of today is not the same as before, when the rich were content with exploiting the workers in their own countries, but now they are on a path which is called Neoliberal Globalization. This globalization means that they no longer control the workers in one or several countries, but the capitalists are trying to dominate everything all over the world'.

[1] All quotes are from the 6th Declaration unless otherwise specified. As an aside, sometimes precision and clarity is only possible by using language that is not immediately 'simple'.

[2] Durito: Neoliberalism the Chaotic Theory of Economic Chaos, in 'Ya Basta: Ten Years of the Zapatista Uprising', p174

Neo-liberalism (previously called 'pure theoretical shit' by Marcos[3]) is therefore rejected outright and linked to capitalist domination. However, this ignores the extent to which capitalism has always been a global system and about 'trying to dominate everything all over the world' as shown by the race for colonies at the end of the 19th Century and the imperialist nature of the First World War. The idea that previously the rich merely exploited workers in their own countries is incorrect and enables the Zapatistas to create a false division between an earlier less regressive form of capitalism and today's neo-liberalism. As will be seen, this fits into their programmatic vision of relatively reformist change.

Neo-liberalism is criticized primarily as it has lead to the domination of foreign capital within Mexico. This theme is repeated in a number of statements in the 6th Declaration that appear critical of the role of 'foreigners':

'Mexico is being turned into a place where people are working for the wealth of foreigners, mostly rich gringos, a place you are just born into for a little while, and in another little while you die. That is why we say that Mexico is dominated by the United States.'

'they also say they are going to privatize - sell to foreigners - the companies held by the State to help the well being of the people'

'they also said that the borders must be opened so all the foreign capital can enter'

'the political parties not only do not defend it, they are the first to put themselves at the service of foreigners, especially those from the United States'

'the factories close, and they are left without work, or they open what are called maquiladoras, which are foreign and which pay a 'pittance for many hours of work' [All quotes from the 6th Declaration]

[3] Durito II [Neoliberalism seen from the Lacandon Jungle], in 'Ya Basta: Ten Years of the Zapatista Uprising', p106.

of the Zapatistas at all. The Sixth Declaration endorses the same basic programme that the Zapatistas have always endorsed – a nationalist and state-focussed view of political change. The lack of fundamental change can be seen from the fact that, despite about a decade passing since the debacle of the attempt to get a new Constitution as part of the San Andres accords, one of the major aims of the Zapatistas remains the call for a new Constitution.

The possibility of the Zapatistas changing to a radical internationalist and anti-state approach is relatively slim if not non-existent. However, even if there were the possibility of change it still begs the question of whether it makes sense to sign up to a programme that you disagree with on the basis that it may change. If there is a group or party you basically disagree with (albeit with a completely open approach to decision-making and internal democracy) would you join it in the hope that you could change their programme? Surely disagreeing with the Zapatistas yet signing up to their programme (in the hope it would change) would necessitate a very un-Zapatista loss of 'dignity'? If, as Marcos' communiqué has it, 'our word is our weapon' surely this entails not signing up to an approach with which we disagree? Even more importantly, how exactly can we expect a nationalistic, reformist approach to turn into an internationalist, radical one?

Conclusions

This essay is not intended as an outright criticism of the Zapatistas and everything they stand for. Their achievements in terms of internal democracy and grassroots decision-making are praiseworthy and should not be ignored. Moreover, as I am aware from my own experience, their efforts and those of individuals and groups across the world in solidarity with the Zapatistas are considerable. However, we have to be serious about the explicit aims of the project and whether we agree with their vision of

Finally, as suggested by Mentinis (and examined later), 'Zapatista nationalism needs the state as the main structure through which national sovereignty is exercised'[26]. This is most clear in his reference to Marcos' 2001 claim that:

'in the new relation we are proposing, the representative democracy has to be balanced, it has to be enriched with direct democracy, with the continuous participation of the citizens... in such a way that the alternation in power of the different political forces will not affect society'[27]

Entirely correctly, Mentinis makes clear that this is nothing more than the extension of liberal democracy with the addition of more direct democracy rather than any fundamental change. The suggestion that the Zapatista nationalism is not calling for the '(re)construction of the bourgeois state' is false.

The changing nature of the Zapatista programme?

One possible defence against these criticisms is that the Zapatistas are a work in progress and are constantly developing their analysis and strategy. To an extent this is true – the Zapatista programme is not entirely static and unchanging. As noted earlier, the Sixth Declaration includes a more explicit criticism of capitalism, rather than merely neo-liberalism, than has been made by the Zapatistas before. It is also significant that there is less focus on elections as a means of changing society than had been made previously.

However, as has been examined, the Sixth as a whole says almost nothing about the destruction of capitalism as a whole and nowhere calls for the abolition of the state. The increased anti-capitalist vocabulary has not changed the fundamental emphasis

[26] Zapatistas, Mentinis, p134

[27] Zapatistas, Mentinis, p134

By stating that a homogenous 'Mexico' is dominated by 'foreigners' or a homogenous 'United States' (rather than speaking of upper and working classes) the door is opened to language that neither describes reality or is immediately distinguishable from that of many right-wing, xenophobic parties[4]. Whether a worker's boss is Mexican, American or even from Indonesia is irrelevant – what is important is that the exploitation of the worker is the result of capitalist social relations. Mexico is not dominated by the United States, it, like all other countries, is dominated by capital.

Of course, this nationalistic language is nothing new from the Zapatistas. Within the first year after the oppression they were speaking about how the history of Mexico:

'is a long battle between its desire to be itself and the foreign desires to have it exist under another flag. This country is ours'

before going on to speak of Mexico as the 'Motherland' and how those involved with the Zapatistas can say they have 'struggled for Mexico'[5]. The programmatic suggestion in the Sixth that "What we are going to do is to take heed of the thoughts of the simple and humble people, and perhaps we will find there the same love which we feel for our Patria" is simply the latest formulation of this overall approach.

The statements noted above are particularly important given the occasional suggestion that the Zapatistas are not involved in a national liberation struggle[6]. True, the Zapatistas do not fit the conventional national liberation model as Mexico already formally ex-

[4] Of course, I am not arguing that the Zapatistas are either right-wing or xenophobic (they are clearly not), but pointing out the similarities in use of language and analysis of the problems with capitalism.

[5] These quotes from A Year of Zapatista Government, in 'Ya Basta: Ten Years of the Zapatista Uprising', p114-119.

[6] The booklet distributed at the recent Anarchist Bookfair in London declared that 'They [the Zapatistas] weren't anarchists, communists, socialists or national liberationists'. Please note that this is not intended as a criticism of the whole booklet, which in general is an extremely valuable work which is well worth reading.

ists as a nation-state. However, they clearly see their struggle as the ongoing fight to rejuvenate Mexico and remove foreign influence – they see Mexico as being dominated by foreigners. Even the Zapatistas themselves see this as a form of national liberation struggle – why else are the EZLN called the EZLN?

Inconsistencies in the Sixth

It is important to note, however, that the critique in the Sixth is not entirely theoretically consistent. Firstly, a clear distinction is made towards the end of the Declaration between 'North Americans who struggle in their country, and who are in solidarity with the struggles of other countries' and the 'bad governments' of 'the North American people'. Although this particular statement does not include any mention of class or any explanation of how we distinguish positive from negative struggle, at least it suggests that there is a relevant distinction between Americans and their government. However, despite this distinction, the language used in the document tends repeatedly to contradict this emphasis, with the United States as a homogenous entity being castigated on more than one opportunity (see above quotes).

This links to the second inconsistency. As already noted, there is an emphasis within the document on capitalism as being based on the exploitation of workers leading to the analysis that "capitalists [rather than any particular nation state] are trying to dominate everything all over the world". Despite this, the repeated suggestion is that the problems in Mexico can be solved through reforms in the Mexican state helping remove the influence and domination of foreigners, in particular those of the USA. The link between the exploitation of the working class and the strategy of the Zapatistas is left unstated. The idea that exploited workers can create an international struggle against exploitation without acting through the state is completely absent.

which convokes new elections'. Of course, this was all bundled with nationalistic references such as that the Convention should be 'plural in the sense that all patriotic forces will be represented'[24]. Indeed, anyone looking for denunciations of the State in any of the six declarations will look in vain – there are plenty of critical comments on the 'Party-state system' (especially in the early declarations) but this merely reflects distrust of the institutional parties and their involvement with the current form of state and not necessarily criticism of the state in general. Notably, the Fifth Declaration even states that:

'There will be no transition to democracy, no State reform, no real solutions to the principal problems of the national agenda, without the Indian peoples.'[25]

Are we not meant to be concerned with the dissolution of the state rather than its reform, whether this is via 'the Indian peoples' or some other agent?

The overall tenor of the approach to the State is clear from the reference to Venezuela and "how well you [Venezuelans] are defending your sovereignty, your nation's right to decide where it is going". Admittedly, the Sixth very carefully refers to "Venezuelans" rather than "Venezuela", "the Venezuelan State" or Chavez himself. However, it is quite clear that the statement can only refer to the struggles channeled through the state apparatus and largely controlled by Chavez. Only the most optimistic and blinkered reader could possibly interpret this passage as heaping passage on the very few who are bravely struggling outside the State and against Chavez. Furthermore, why is the "nation's right to decide" elevated to a principle and defended? If capitalists are as exploitative as the Sixth suggests why is the cross-class concept of national rights defended?

[24] 2nd Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle, 1994, http://www.ezln.org/documentos/1994/19940610.en.htm

[25] Fifth Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle, 1998, http://www.ezln.org/documentos/1998/19980700.en.htm

obeying and serving the one, and carried out its obligation to obey and serve all' with 'the expectation of converting it into a space of service to the Nation rather than to the president-in-turn'[21]. While the Zapatistas may now be demanding a new Constitution rather than asking for one it remains a call for a Constitution that is entirely compatible with capitalism and the existence of the state.

The Zapatistas and the State

From the start of their uprising the Zapatistas have denounced their current political system but not called outright and unambiguously for the dissolution of the state system. The political system may be denounced but this does not necessarily equate with the desire to destroy the state as a whole. In 1994 Marcos wished to 'destroy this State, this State system'[22] – a different thing altogether from wanting to destroy the State. This was clear from his statement that, while Mexico was the 'project of a certain class', the Zapatistas actually aimed merely to reform the state:

'to have the same Mexico with a different project, a project that recognizes not only that it is a multi-ethnic state – in fact, multinational – but also that new concepts are needed in order to reform the constitution'[23]

How can the Zapatistas be against the state if they are calling, not only for the 'same Mexico', but for the recognition that it is a 'multi-ethnic state'?

Likewise, the call in the Second Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle was not for the abolition of the state, but rather the suggestion that a Democratic National Convention should lead to a Transitional Government with both producing 'a new Magna Carta

[21] Fifth Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle, 1998, http://www.ezln.org/documentos/1998/19980700.en.htm

[22] 'Interview', 1994, in Zapatistas in their Own Words, p12

[23] 'Interview', 1994, in Zapatistas in their Own Words, p11

Nationalisation

As noted, the Sixth Declaration is relatively quiet about exploitation by Mexicans with the primary problem in Mexico being that:

'Neoliberalism has also changed the Mexican political class, the politicians, because they made them into something like employees in a store, who have to do everything possible to sell everything and to sell it very cheap.'

Changes in the form of capitalism have therefore led to important changes in the actions of the 'Mexican political class' and their need to 'sell everything', with the Declaration making it clear that these sales have been primarily to 'foreigners'[7]. The lack of control by Mexicans is one of the core elements of the strategy outlined in the Sixth Declaration – a broadly social democratic strategy that has much in common with many traditional broadly socialist groups:

'yes to a clear commitment for joint and coordinated defense of national sovereignty, with intransigent opposition to privatization attempts of electricity, oil, water and natural resources.'

Although clearly a direct comparison cannot be drawn between Mexico and the UK, the call for national sovereignty and focus on nationalization as preferable to privatisation is reminiscent of the depressing, anti-working class policies of the likes of Arthur Scargill's Socialist Labour Party (which declares the need 'to secure for the people a full return of all wealth generated by the industries and services of our nation'[8]). Why workers are any less exploited when they work for a nationalized industry than a privatized one is left unstated. It presumes that the state has something meaningful to offer the working-class when, in fact, the opposite is the case.

[7] This may very well be the case, the question is how politically relevant it is

[8] Socialist Labour Party: Basic Objectives at http://www.socialist-labour-party.org.uk/myweb7/26%20POLICY%20PAGE.htm

Internationalism

The emphasis on nationalization and repeated references to 'Mexico', 'foreigners', 'gringos' and the 'United States' suggests the clear importance of nationalism to the Zapatistas[9]. One possible counter-argument to the clear nationalism in the Sixth Declaration is to point towards the international sentiments present in the document. Although it is explicitly stated that the plan of the Sixth is for a 'national struggle' and that this will include all Mexicans (including those in the US) the Zapatistas do point towards the need for their struggle to have international links:

'We will forge new relationships of mutual respect and support with persons and organizations who are resisting and struggling against neoliberalism and for humanity.'

This includes making links with those struggling for social justice across Latin America, Europe and the World, not merely by sending embroidery, oil or coffee to those who are struggling, but by setting up international meetings by which lessons can be learned from different struggles.

However, while this willingness to look outside the borders of Mexico is welcome, simply because a movement or party sees the importance of international solidarity does not mean that its struggle is necessarily waged on an international basis. Plenty of supposedly left-wing organizations struggle for reform of their national state while making links with other, equally nation-based, groupings. Even many fascist groups see the need for international solidarity. This raises the important question of what we consider to be internationalism. Is our vision to be one where we appeal to na-

[9] The continuing importance of the Mexican nation to the Zapatista project illustrate how outdated Marcos' original claim is that it was necessary to state the Zapatistas were Mexican in order to deflect 'the first accusation against Zapatismo that is aligned with Central America' (primarily the false claim that the EZLN contained many Guatemalans). Quote from 'Interview', 1994, in Zapatistas in their Own Words, p9

always rule in favor of them, and those who are not rich get injustice, jails and cemeteries.'

If the Constitution is 'warped and changed now', the Sixth Declaration is remarkably quiet on how this became the case and when the Constitution did embody the 'rights and liberties of working people'. If capitalism is a system of exploitation (as the document claims) when was the right not to be exploited endorsed in the Mexican Constitution?!

The Sixth therefore endorses a call for a new Constitution:

'We are also going to go about raising a struggle in order to demand that we make a new Constitution, new laws which take into account the demands of the Mexican people, which are: housing, land, work, food, health, education, information, culture, independence, democracy, justice, liberty and peace. A new Constitution which recognizes the rights and liberties of the people, and which defends the weak in the face of the powerful.'

This call is similar to those made by social-democratic parties around the world. The class difference between the weak and powerful is not to be destroyed but the 'weak' are merely to be 'defended' by the Constitution. Moreover, the demands which are to be made are the demands not of the weak or the working class but those of the 'Mexican people', assuming a commonality between the demands of everyone in Mexico regardless of class. Therefore, while the Sixth speaks of needing to talk to the 'simple and humble of the Mexican people' the very same sentence goes on to declare that their programme will be for 'for justice, democracy and liberty for the Mexican people' – a very different thing altogether. It is also noticeable that, in line with the nationalism suggested earlier, 'independence' is included as one of the demands, with calls for the end to the class system or the state completely absent.

The call for a new Constitution has always been one of the Zapatista's main programmatic demands. This reached a low point in the Fifth Declaration, where the idealistic call was made that Congress 'pass into national history as a Congress which stopped

Zapatista nationalism on the ground

Unfortunately, the Zapatista vision of the Mexican nation as something to be defended is pervasive and merely adds to the denigrating effects of nationalism. The presence of the Mexican flag at public events, the singing of the national anthem at the start of the week in primary schools – what have these to do with international class struggle apart from weakening it?

If there were a similar group in Scotland draping themselves in these nationalistic symbols we would doubtless be entering into fairly serious criticisms of them. Any defence that they were merely defending the Scottish nation against the evils of 'foreign' capital (whether English, American or from anywhere else) or supporting a 'cultural' Scottish nationalism would be laughed at. Why exactly should we defend the Zapatistas on this score? Would we tolerate any other group whose spokesman speaks of how they put 'love for the patria… above everything'[20]?

The Mexican Constitution and the Nation-State

Given the emphasis on autonomous organization among the Zapatistas and the rejection of the current political system it is easy to assume that the Zapatista struggle rejects the nation-state altogether. Examination of the Zapatista view of the Mexican Constitution, however, makes clear that this is not the case.

The view of the Constitution outlined in the Sixth Declaration is that while it was previously acceptable, this is no longer the case:

'the Constitution is all warped and changed now. It's no longer the one that had the rights and liberties of working people. Now there are the rights and liberties of the neoliberals so they can have their huge profits. And the judges exist to serve those neoliberals, because they

[20] Quoted in Zapatistas, Mentinis, p125

tionalist sentiments and for struggle on the artificial and imposed basis of the nation state or one that rejects this as necessitating cross-class alliances and fostering nationalism? The decision the Zapatistas have taken is clear.

What type of nationalism do the Zapatistas adopt?

The most prominent defence of Zapatista nationalism is that it is somehow a different type of nationalism to the more regressive nationalisms many would automatically reject[10]. For example, an article on the Irish 'Struggle' website seeks to defend the Zapatistas by stating that they are 'nationalistic only in the sense of the scope of their demands. They are not nationalistic in the sense of chauvinism'[11] , as if the problem with nationalistic viewpoints is solely a matter of xenophobia and has nothing to do with the cross-class nature of such appeals. More recently, the booklet distributed at the recent UK Anarchist Bookfair[12] stated: 'it is important to distinguish the concept of the nation from that of the Nation-State' and that 'it is perhaps more accurate to view [Zapatistas] 'nationalist' talk as referring more to tradition and cultural identity than to the (re)construction of the bourgeois state'.

[10] This deliberately ignores those who defend the Zapatistas as defenders of indigenous nationality rather than the Mexican nation (a view not consistent with even the most superficial reading of Zapatista documents). See comments such as 'We call on them [the Indian peoples of Mexico] to demand to be recognized as a dignified part of our Nation' in the Fifth Declaration, 1998, http://www.ezln.org/documentos/1998/19980700.en.htm

[11] http://flag.blackened.net/revolt/mexico/comment/why.html

[12] The UK booklet is chosen as an example purely as it is the 'closest to home'. This is not intended as an overall criticism of the information contained within it – I agree with most of what is contained and welcome the strenuous efforts and dedication of those who put it together!

In one sense the booklet comments are correct in that it is possible for a nation not to be represented by a state, e.g. the Kurds, and the two terms cannot be conflated. Again, however, it is necessary to re-focus on the most important element of truth in the Sixth Declaration – if capitalism is based on the exploitation of workers, how can the concept of the nation, however qualified, be consistent with meaningful struggle? Regardless of whether the Zapatistas call for a nation-state or not basing the Sixth on national programmes and national struggle represents a programme that works on the basis of common demands across classes rather than class antagonism.

Furthermore, the suggestion that the Zapatistas nationalism can be defined simply as one of 'tradition and cultural identity' is incorrect. On the one hand, the Zapatistas are clearly in favour of the preservation of indigenous ways of life and want this to be respected in the Mexican nation – in other words their nationalism is not connected to any particular tradition or culture whatsoever, beyond a relatively broad Mexican identity that can incorporate many different ways of life, while clearly delimiting Mexican identity from others. In this sense, 'tradition and cultural identity' is important. On the other hand, this project necessitates the defence of Mexico as a political construct purely because the different identities are so disparate – otherwise there is nothing to link together, say, the indigenous Mayan traditions in Chiapas from the different traditions of many in the barrios of Mexico City or those living in the rural, desert North. The references in the Sixth to the 'patria' or Mexican nation are therefore not to any cultural identity across all Mexicans but a political project to tie different cultures together and differentiate the Mexicans from other nation states.

Rather than being traditional or cultural therefore, the Zapatista nationalism is an explicitly political one. The immediate struggle is to reform Mexico and to make it a nation of which Mexicans can be proud. This has been clear since the early days of the Zapatista struggle, as in their declaration that they are 'the inheritors of the

true builders of our nation'[13] and that they are seeking 'that the next generation of Mexicans will have a country in which it is not a disgrace to live'[14]. As Mentinis suggests, although the Zapatistas clearly use nationalism as a way of trying to prove the worth of the indigenous peoples and expropriating the current state's use of nationalism they 'fall into the trap of justifying and explaining nationalism rather than trying to do away with it'[15].

Of course, even if this analysis is incorrect and the Zapatista programme does merely represent a cultural view of nationalism and not a political one the question still remains of whether it would be worth supporting. Given the tendency of some anarchists to support the Zapatistas (albeit often critically) it is worth noting that the positions of the two major anarchist organizations in the UK[16]:

'We reject all forms of nationalism, as this only serves to redefine divisions in the international working class.'[17]

'Revolutionary unionism rejects all arbitrarily created political and national frontiers and declares that what is called nationalism is the religion of the modern state, behind which are concealed the material interests of the ruling classes.'[18]

These reflect a welcome wholesale rejection of nationalism regardless of whether it is aligned to a state or not, or whether the nationalism is primarily cultural or political.[19]

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[13] 1st Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle, 1993, http://www.ezln.org/documentos/1994/199312xx.en.htm

[14] 2nd Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle, 1994, http://www.ezln.org/documentos/1994/19940610.en.htm

[15] Zapatistas, Mentinis, p127

[16] Of course, this does not necessarily indicate support for either of these two organisations

[17] Anarchist Federation Aims and Principles, http://flag.blackened.net/af/aims.html

[18] Solidarity Federation Constitution, http://www.solfed.org.uk/pdfs/constitution.pdf

[19] Of course, this complete rejection of nationalism is also shared by other non-anarchist organizations.