

Notes on struggles in Mexico

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Below are notes taken from notes written while traveling in Mexico, observing, reading and talking, over a several week span. I have written them up as a contribution to thinking about the situation in Mexico and why the zapatistas are important beyond humanitarian concerns, but their struggle, and the indigenous struggle in general, is an important part of the planetary anti- capitalist struggle. They are only a fragment, and abbreviated, but I hope clear enough to be understood and to further discussion.

Parts of the discussion reference what has been called the “ab irato” piece, a critique of the EZLN which has had sizeable circulation and has favorably impressed some folks on the left. I find the piece deeply flawed on a number of levels — lack of evidence and faulty reasoning being to fundamental problems — and so have included some critique of that piece along the way.

I also reference discussions on the aut-op-sy discussion list, though I know not everyone who gets this will have seen that discussion. I have tried to make the points clear enough so that they are not dependent on knowing that discussion.

Lastly, these are rough — I simply do not have to time to prepare a more polished piece at this time. I apologize for confusions or lack of clarity that occur due to my time constraints.

“On 12 October, 1492, America discovered capitalism.”

– Eduardo Galeano

Impact of EZLN in Mexico

The indigenous movement. That movement sometimes described as “Civil rights,” (which is only partly true, is more than that), which involves also issues of dignity and pride and obtaining respect — also for autonomy and “territory” — that is, right of indigenous communities to control territory and govern themselves.

This is clearly anathema to the Mexican state, which is provoking extended civil war in Chiapas and risking ever deeper crisis to itself to prevent the indigenous from obtaining this autonomy. Why?

a) control over natural resources, esp. oil in Chiapas, also hydroelectric and agriculture for export (including forests).

b) access to labor power, to ability to produce humans as waged workers who see no other option (except the lottery or somehow becoming a capitalist), who accept capitalist economic rationality as the normal state of being [I think Marcos underestimates this aspect, views it as not relevant to capital at this time].

c) autonomy for indigenous is a dangerous model, could spread, esp. to urban barrios which contain many indigenous or folks whose social organization is similar in many ways to the indigenous and who in pushing themselves for autonomy could create increasing space against capitalist planning and organization of life. In sum, Mexican capital and state, probably US state and Wall St., see indigenous autonomy as something which must be smashed/prevented because it constitutes a potentially serious and expanding problem for them if they cannot smash it.

Certainly the zapatistas did not create the indigenous movement, which has existed now for half a millennium, continually recurring, as the indigenous both survive and change through the evolution of Mexico. More recently, there has been substantial amounts of indigenous organizing and struggling in southern Mexico, of which the EZLN is a part. But it seems clear that the EZLN has provided space and inspiration for a stronger and larger indigenous movement. EZLN insisting that indigenous from across Mexico should be part of the dialog at San Andres, shift in EZLN to expand concepts of indigenous demands in their demands, the issue of dignity for indigenous, and the creation on the ground of the autonomous municipalities have all spurred the indigenous struggle.

The relationship to other sectors in Mexico is not as directly clear. Mexico has a sizeable and complex left. One initiative of the EZLN has been to try to bring these oft-feuding sectors into a higher level of unity to combat capital and the state. This has, I think, not been successful. However, the EZLN push which has put forward ideas of autonomy and unity without one group's hegemony have I think provoked thought and action in Mexico of new kinds, for example among barrio organizations. Less directly, that the EZLN openly, even militarily, confronted the Mexican state and international capital has probably influenced, helped condition, what appears to be a now-growing industrial/unionized worker movement. Many factors have contributed to this, from the desperation of vastly declining incomes and unemployment to massive privatization to various independent union efforts to the death of Fidel Velasquez and the growing inability of the PRI to even pretend to offer a deal to the workers. Nonetheless, the Zapatista front has basically no organizational presence in the factories and little in the barrios, though the front also works in alliance with barrio groups and some left unions. Outside Chiapas and the indigenous, the zapatista front is mostly a narrower strata of the working class, such as university personnel and groups representing more "middle class" demands (most of what is labeled "middle class" are a sector of the working class, not a distinct class within capital).

So, it seems to me that the Zapatistas have been very important in the upsurge of struggle in Mexico. The Zapatista's have not claimed to lead such a struggle. Arguably, a little more leadership might at times have been helpful, as in the chaotic initiation of the Frente last fall. The Zapatista perspective has presumed the alliance of many groups, not the creation of a united party across the country.

Democracy among the indigenous and in the EZLN.

I do not presume any expertise on the nature of democracy within indigenous communities or the EZLN. I have gathered some information, which I view as tentative. One source for me has been Gustavo Esteva, who has written extensively on the EZLN and on indigenous autonomous struggles, though I am not sure how much is easily accessible. I will rely on him and an indigenous activist/leader Adelfo Redino Montes (a Mixe from Oaxaca) and more scattered pieces I got from other people — but these are my interpretations, not their's. [I will send a copy of this to Gustavo and ask him to post to me, for forwarding, relevant and accessible materials, so that interested people will have some access to those pieces.]

Deneuve and Reeve in "Behind the Balaclavas of South-East Mexico" (hereafter, D&R) open their argument against the EZLN by asserting "the totalitarian character of Mayan and Incan societies no longer needs to be demonstrated." But their only references are to the ancient civ-

ilizations, now nearly 500 years gone. The modes of governance and internal structures of the present are not addressed. D&R do not address any possibility of variety in such modes and structures. By not addressing the present, they effectively claim the existence of totalitarian communal societies which are manipulated by the urbanites, personified by “Marcos.” They do undercut this aspect of their argument by simultaneously pointing to the decomposition of indigenous communities, the immigration of many indigenous into the Lacandon, and the semi-proletarianization of many of the indigenous. [On this latter, D&R rely mostly on John Ross; the points on migration to the Lacandon and becoming wage-workers, as far as they go, appear to be substantially accurate; see Collier, George. (1994). *Basta! Land and the Zapatista Rebellion in Chiapas*. Oakland. Institute for Food and Development Policy.]

The presumptions then are that the indigenous communities are contemporaneously totalitarian and that proletarianization has shattered the communal aspects of the communities. But neither point is established with any evidence. Counter this is the perspective that the indigenous communities practice a reasonable form of democracy (no one claims perfection among those I talked with), which is through the struggle being enriched and deepened; and that despite the proletarianizing aspects, the communal aspects remain powerful. Gustavo describes some aspects of this in various of his writings, though with more reference to Oaxaca than Chiapas. But the descriptions do pose a counter to the perspective on the assemblies presented by D&R.

The assemblies are a mode of community discussion and decision-making. For major issues, the assembly process occurs mostly not within the formal meeting, but via discussions over time in which process a general consensus is developed, which is then formalized in an assembly. If true, then the visible discussion in the assembly masks the actual, really important processes. Within this form, it seems to me, there can be more of less real democratic participation — which poses questions not only about the indigenous, but about any efforts at participatory self-governance, autogestion, etc. It could be highly egalitarian, where all voices are heard and respected (if not paid equal attention, as that would be both dangerous and impossible) or merely the vehicle for a small clique to dominate and control the whole through any variety of mechanisms — family size and ties, personal wealth or control over some lever of wealth, physical intimidations, etc. What I hear more than not is that there is a good deal of real discussion, but the communities are certainly not fully egalitarian, in which individual differences in knowledge, skills, experience, wisdom would count, but structures of domination such as patriarchy would not exist. Patriarchy certainly exists — Gustavo says the nature and extent of the patriarchy varies greatly, however, across indigenous groups. And through the struggle, patriarchy is being subverted. In an out-of-sight discussion, the point that women have become a majority of the officers in the EZLN is discounted on the grounds that the EZLN is an army. But it is likely, I would think, that the demonstrated competence of the women will influence the development of the societies and it represents an important weakening of patriarchy within the communities. A final note for now on patriarchy: it seems far more likely and healthy for the indigenous communities to attack and positively supplant patriarchy on their own than to submit to the dissolving forces of the international market and the atomization and commodification of human relations.

At minimum, the question of community democracy among indigenous in Mexico is far more complex and I would say hopeful than allowed for — with no evidence — by D&R. Strengthening real participatory democracy will everywhere be a difficult and complex process of struggle. Finding non-perfection will be very easy, but not very helpful unless accompanied by real discussion about how to help strengthen it. (What I call participatory democracy might be called radical

democracy, people's power, or some other term.) I am recently wondering therefore more about the Paris Commune, which lasted a few months and which has had over a century of Marxist and anarchists pointing to it as a model. I don't know, do we have detailed analyses (ethnographic, we might say today) describing its real actual functions, and perhaps the sorts of limitations that would raise hackles of today's purists?

Lastly, I remain, as I noted in a post to auto-op-sy the other day, seriously disturbed by the claims that, in effect, the CCRI, the civilian body to whom the EZLN is responsible, is a front for Marcos. The "evidence" presented by D&R takes the form first of stating the well-known points that various student left types, including Leninists and Maoists and Guevarists, went to the countryside after 1968; and that Marcos was one such person (along with a few comrades). Since D&R don't really know who Marcos is, they assert he/they are like the other Maoists (some of whom are now important functionaries in the Zedillo regime planning the destruction of the Zapatistas and the indigenous communities). They give particular importance to the point that "The voices of the rebels of Chiapas are reduced to just one voice." They then dismiss the discussions which occur as being manipulated and/or covers for decisions made elsewhere, presumably by the single voice, Marcos. The only actual "evidence" is the supposed logic by which the people are manipulated because that is what Maoists do, and Marcos etc. must be Maoists because others who went to Chiapas were, and they all claimed to be transformed by the experience, but of course none of them ever are (because, having been Maoists, they are incapable of real change. (If you think this is a caricature of D&R's argument, re-read it carefully and see if you can find actual evidence of D&R's claims outside of this thoroughly unsupported circular closed-loop form of reasoning. Of course, it could all be true — it is like disproving a negative — but if true, let us see actual evidence of what goes on which would support the claims of D&R and similar voices.)

Alternatives to some of the points? The world views, perspectives and politics of Marcos and the urbanite left did in fact change. The CCRI really does make the decisions, not Marcos. (For example, I have not heard controverted the point that Marcos advised against the January 1994 uprising, but the community discussion processes concluded the uprising was the best course.) Marcos was selected by the CCRI to be the public voice to Spanish-speaking mestizo-Euro Mexico and the world because they thought he would be effective (as he has been in many ways). And why would the indigenous let a Marcos persuade them to bring down the wrath of the Mexican state and army (even assuming no one predicted the paramilitaries) — what kind of power would some starving basically unarmed, unable to talk with most of the indigenous, virtual foreigners be able to accrue in such circumstances. I think that scenario is only plausible if you are persuaded that either the indigenous were so desperate they would try anything, or as has been stated by the Mexican government, both in 1994 and again now, and at least "politely" implied by some left critics of the EZLN, the indigenous are really incapable of thinking and acting on their own.

As an aside, the other major bone to pick of D&R is the Zapatista's patriotism. Some of us in Midnight Notes addressed this at some length in the long version of *Toward the New Commons*, so I won't go into detail here (it is posted at www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/3843/mngcjm.html). I will only relay in brief two stories from Gustavo. One, an indigenous community in Chiapas talked at length, over months, in response to the question, given what Mexico has done to you, why do you love it so much? The response was they happened to live in what is now Mexico and were therefore responsible for the land and people, which they did love. Two, indigenous from across Mexico have in some discussions posed the issue of what would be the remaining tasks of the Mexican states after the creation of autonomous networked communities? The answer,

to name ambassadors. I argued to Gustavo, but why then bother with the national trappings? And in any event, if the indigenous of Chiapas, etc. develop autonomy and sustain it, would not those of Guatemala also do so? And then what meaning would their be to “Mexico”? The answer of course is probably none. Zedillo is correct in one way to say that the San Andres accords attacks “Mexico” if Mexico is identified as the state — but not if it is identified as a geographic entity within which now lives nearly 100 million people. Perhaps there are ways of addressing the problem of nationalism beyond the rhetorical denunciation of all nationalisms. I think the zapatistas and indigenous are proposing a Mexico that is not a defensive set of borders with a state controlling the space within the borders, but is something else that creates a transitional opportunity.

Class.

I am not happy, do not find useful, the term “civil society.” In New Commons, we argue that we face the problem of an absence of useful terms to use for analysis and for public discussion, and civil society does not in the US seem to offer much help. Gustavo argues that in Mexico, the term has no reference to its uses by neoliberals. A comrade I will call T, who works with urban workers and barrio groups in Mexico and is associated with a new coalition called M.U.L.P., thinks the term is more problematic than Gustavo says. But as I followed at least Gustavo’s use of the term (and I cannot say whether it is that of the EZLN or of Marcos) and compared it with how MT used the term “working class” (which I, and Midnight Notes prefers, and MT’s use of the term seems to be essentially the same as that of Notes — see New Commons), I think they are talking about very much the same thing.

MULP — Movimiento do Unidad y Lucha Popular — involves various barrio groups, left unionists, other urban groups, with tens of thousands of participants, in Mexico City and Hidalgo as well as other states, including Chiapas. (A short article in Spanish is in “Trabajores,” the magazine of the Workers University — check out their web site at www.spin.com.mx/uom/ — I am not sure how much of the issues are posted at the site, maybe just summaries of articles.) MT says some of these groups are Leninists (e.g., the Francisco Villa Popular Front; 10K people in it and a serious urban force), but most are trying to rethink questions of organization and power. He is critical of the zapatistas because he thinks that despite their line of exercising not seizing power, they have not really developed their thinking on this. (He does think the EZLN is democratic in the zapatista communities.)

Gustavo argues that the indigenous communities are by and large ‘undivided’ communities. This does not apply to patriarchy, but to class. While D&R emphasized the supposed demand for individual plots of land, the indigenous hold the land collectively. And tho the Mexican constitution was amended under Salinas to allow privatization of ejido land (another major spur to the Zapatista uprising), in fact the indigenous have not only not privatized, they seek to expand the communal/collective.

[Ironically, this communal aspect has played against the indigenous who have been driven out of their communities in Chiapas by the paramilitaries — when they leave, their lands are reapportioned; in the US, they would hold title and have recourse (in theory at least — there are many ways to drive people off their lands).]

Undivided means there are not exploiters of labor power within the communities. The closest to it have been “caciques” — bosses actually imposed by the state and the PRI — and commercial middlemen/moneylenders, some of whom come from the indigenous. The development of autonomous municipalities and cooperative production and marketing arrangements have been directed to end the role of the moneylenders and middlemen and replace the caciques with democratic assemblies and the assemblies’ appointed officials.

[There is an issue here of the democratic nature of this process as well. The assembly process is that assemblies nominate people to posts, people are selected, they do not run. It is a powerful obligation, and positions like ‘mayor’ carry far more responsibility than power and usually cost the officeholder or his (still, usually) family a good deal of money. Terms are short, usual a year. A person interested in public positions often will hold a series of them, of increasing responsibility, if s/her serves the community well and is thus nominated. The social democratic party, the PRD, claims that this is not really democratic, that anyone should be able to stand for elections. The San Andres accords, however, would give the indigenous the right to decide their governmental forms, and the PAD supports the accords — the ones the government signed but which Zedillo now has tried to eliminate by passing a law through congress backed by the PRI and the right wing PAN parties. Again, the form seems to be at least as reasonable as elections, and the real issues are not the forms but how the process operates in reality, what is the actual content.]

Indigenous autonomy

If in fact (again, excepting the vital issue of patriarchy) these are at least mostly undivided communities, then this supports the political argument that the fight for autonomy of these communities is a potentially powerful lever of attack on capital. That is a lengthy and complicated discussion; it provoked debate at the second encuentro (particularly the issue of economic autonomy), and has provoked some debate on the aut-op-sy list as well. It is an issue I hope we will explore in the near future in some depth in Midnight Notes. For now, I will only make a few brief points.

If the indigenous can expand self-reliance economically, can develop a cooperative and communal economics, and can maintain an autonomous participatory democracy, and can then create networks of such spaces and defend them against state, corporations and the global market — a long series of ifs — then they will be more than interesting side phenomena in the planetary class struggle (as some folks seem to perceive them) and be important factors in developing sustainable anti-capitalism and new possibilities of social life. (I think their struggles have been important, such as their effects within Mexican struggles and in at least slowing the expansion of NAFTA to Chile and other countries, as well as the zapatista’s pushing at least the opening stage of new forms of planetary support for, connections among, circulation of struggles via the encuentros — but I am here addressing possible longer-term effects of autonomous spaces.)

Gustavo makes the interesting argument that within the indigenous communities, “the economy” is relegated to the margins of peoples’ social lives. That is, rather than dominate life as it does in say the US, social relations other than those of production dominate social life. I cannot comment on the accuracy of this conclusion, which he bases on his years of work with indigenous communities in Mexico. If it is largely true, then these folks are living aspects of post-capitalism — which we might learn from and certainly should support. It poses the question of whether

everybody must be proletarianized and fully commodified via capitalism before communism can (somehow) be created. (Again, Towards the New Commons addressed some of these issues.) The indigenous struggles suggest a leap past capitalism without having to be fully socialized within capitalism.

I am not arguing they are “outside” of capitalism — they are exploited and we in Midnight Notes have argued that the sort of exploitation they are subject to is essential to capitalism, a point on which we disagree with Gustavo who thinks they are not essential to capitalist accumulation — we’d agree that small numbers are not (who cares if 60,000 coffee farmers in a coop keep the market relations outside their coop in a world of nearly 5 billion people) but that taken as a whole, the “two-thirds” world is the source of vast surplus for capitalist accumulation. The issues posed by Gustavo is first whether the internal relations are non-capitalist and whether such relations can survive and expand. (I think they will either expand or be absorbed by/ crushed by capital.)

This “model” — expanding autonomous spaces — is hardly new, in one or another form. It does parallel the emergence of capitalism which saw pockets of capitalist domination in some aspects of social existence spread in multifold ways: this proposes that social life which marginalizes the capitalist economic relations should spread and develop.

Finally, I do not know what direct relevance this approach or “model” has for the “one-third world,” that not only fully dependent on wage labor but where the social relations have been fundamentally commodified (despite real and continuing resistance to such commodification) and life subordinated to both accumulation and market relations; and where there have developed massive means of production that should be taken over, and either closed down or modified for socially reasonable relations and ends. In Oaxaca there is only one sizeable factory in a city of hundreds of thousands. But there is no need for there to be only one process of struggle against and to get out of capitalism. If the indigenous autonomy model is to have success, I do not think they can succeed on their own — capital will eventually prevail unless struggles in other social and geographic and productive spheres coalesce with the indigenous struggles to push capital back and finally to end it. But that, I think, is true of any sectoral struggle against capital.

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