

NEW INTERNATIONALISM AND ZAPATISTA MOVEMENT

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In the last decade or so, many labour, environmental, human and civil rights activists belonging to different movements have increasingly turned to different forms of international action. This is understandable, especially considering the level and speed of capital's globalising processes and its consequence on wages, intensity of labour and work conditions; women's increased unwaged labour to supplant the global heavy cuts in social spending; the continuing human rights abuses often perpetrated in collusion with multinational corporations like Shell in Nigeria and BP in Columbia; the international trade in slaves, the use of child labour drawn in the production cycle of transnational corporations; the continuing destruction of the environmental conditions of people's existence, reproduction and nature; and so on.

The growth of this international activism is widely recognised. However, what is not sufficiently addressed in most of current debates, is a discussion of what meaning can be given to these international practices beyond their mere instrumentality in relation to the particular aim or purpose of a campaign. In other words, is there a pattern or trend or, better, a common thread that can be envisaged in the various practices of the so many different movements that are turning the entire world into a picket line? What is the meaning of this common thread, what is, if any, the "future in the present" represented by these developments, what kind of world, what kind of life the concrete practices of these movements point at? These questions of fundamental importance if one wants to recuperate and voice a discourse of liberation, an image of hope and a vision of a different world that not only challenges the only possible future envisaged by both neoliberal left and neoliberal right, but also which is rooted in the practice of real movements. A common thread is developing and a new internationalism is making itself. This new internationalism is not the adaptation to a preconceived idea, but it originates out of practical necessity by different movements in their reciprocal interaction within the context of the global economy.

Among the many movements at the international level, perhaps the Zapatistas are the one that most have explicitly and systematically voiced a vision of a different world developed from within the old. This movement gives important insights about the conditions of struggle in today's world and about the constitutive direction taken by new practices.

The first of January 1994, 502 years after the beginning of the invasion of illegal immigrants from Europe into the American continent, was the day in which it was declared that US commodities and capital could freely and legally enter with no restriction into Mexico. It was the day of implementation of the North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). The same day, an army of indigenous people entered in San Cristobal and other cities of Chiapas, wearing ski masks, carrying guns, and proclaiming revolutionary laws from the balcony of the city council. The world woke

up in the new year and sleepy eyes and hangovered brains knew of an indigenous army called EZLN, Zapatista's Army of National Liberation, shortly Zapa-tistas. Their aim was not a socialist state, nor a planned economy, nor to bring consciousness to alleged unconscious people, as it was the case in old socialist tradition. Their aim was living with dignity, and nothing less than the simple task of building a new world. Yet, they could not say how this new world would look like, they did not have a plan for all. In fact they wanted people to talk to them, and together bring about a new world, meeting their needs and aspirations.

The indigenous people who took arms came from the poorest region of Mexico, and one of the poorer in Latin America. But it exports coffee to the world and energy to the entire Mexico (10% of electricity and 90% of hydroelectric energy). It is one of the most important regions of strategic reservoir of biodiversity - the knowledge bank of the developing industry of biotechnology - where the Lacandona Jungle offers the greatest number of vegetable and animal species per square mile in North America and one offering the greatest variety in the world. It has huge reservoir of petroleum, making it one of the greatest potential strategic areas in the world. And it is a region in which 80% of the population suffers of malnutrition, 50% have no potable water and 66% has no sewage system. A region in which the daily livelihood of the greatest majority of the people depends on a diet of coffee, tortillas, corn and beans, acquired through petty trade such as selling crafts to tourists (one bracelet = 20 pence; it takes one day of work for a woman to produce four of them) or selling crafts to the local shops (owned by the coletos) in conditions similar or worse to the old putting out system; and day works at meagre pay for the rich Rancheros. Alternative - or complementary - way to get by has been, historically - access to collective property of land.

The land held in collective property is not only important because it is the basis of the economic survival of communities (an economic survival though which is increasingly threatened). Also, to a certain extent it gives people autonomy and it constitutes the material basis for indigenous traditional forms of collective democracy in which a community, a village, a region, takes decision affecting everybody's life collectively. Decisions may range from the sending of a child in need to a hospital, to the decision to refuse the last government offer at the negotiating table. Decisions are taken in ways so different from western democracies, based on the forced separation between the people of a community, separation that is only mystically overcome at the moment of the vote (once every 5 years). Consensus seeking, rather than voting, is their way to democracy. Consensus seeking requires time and ability to listen. But it does not produce majorities or minorities, it does not promote victory and defeats, vanity and resentment. Take away their common land, further worsen their condition of living, and you have also destroyed the conditions upon which indigenous democracy can flourish, the opportunity to practice a different life.

This comes about through three weapons associated to the implementation of NAFTA.

First, the institutional weapon. The logic of the market and competitiveness accompanying the NAFTA agreements meant that Mexico—among other things—had to prepare for the invasion of cheap corn produced by highly mechanised farm of the US.

This of course can be done by concentrating land property in the hands of big farms, mechanise, increase productivity to face US competitiveness. It is the old story. But corn is not only the staple food for the greatest majority of people in Mexico. It is also the major source of income for large sections of the campesinos and indigenous population in Chiapas, Guerrero, Tabasco, and other Mexican states. Large part of this corn is produced by campesinos in lands held in common, the result of the Mexican revolution at the beginning of the century, and with its roots down to Maya traditions. The “modernisation” of the Mexican agriculture passes by the expropriation of common land, its fragmentation and sale on the market. This is what the abrogation of article 27 of the Mexican constitution proclaims, in line with NAFTA and the global competitive race.

Second, the economic weapon. The general conditions of subsistence have been worsening for the majority of the Mexican population, while the indigenous population has been the most hit. Much of the income of the indigenous population of Chiapas comes from coffee production and coffee price is linked to the international market dominated by agri-business multinationals. Mexico is the fourth exporter of coffee, with 280,000 producers, 60 percent of which are indigenous. More than 70 percent of the coffee producers (200,000) work on small plots less than two hectares. Faced by intense global competition and pressures by the agri-business multinationals that keep price low, the income received by small producers is increasingly insufficient to meet basic needs. In addition, the cuts and restraint in all areas of social spending following neoliberal dogmas, implies that the large majority of coffee producers have only the market to rely on for the acquisition of the means for the satisfaction of basic needs.

Meanwhile, the price of the corn (the other source of income for many campesinos, although less so in the Chiapas area) have started to fall on the wholesale market. Currently a ton of corn is paid on the market about 100 pounds, 10 pence a kilo. For the poorest section of the population, it takes many hours to harvest a ton of corn, with no machinery. A reduction in the price of corn through unrestricted entrance in the market by US agri-business corporations, points in the same direction of the abrogation of article 27 of the constitution, implying the abolition of common land, the abandonment of common land, and of indigenous identity and culture.

Third, the military weapon. People have another alternative besides giving in to the dictate of the new constitutions and the market. It is to say “ya Basta!”, enough!, as the indigenous population of Chiapas, and groups and movements all around Mexico have said. When this happens, neoliberal strategies (as any other strategy of accumulation in the history of capitalism) rely on force to back up the market—markets were never a spontaneous process, they always had to be imposed. The force of military actions, murders, rapes, policing, imprisonment and torture, are all well documented.

To these three weapons embedded within the logic of global capital, the Zapatista’s struggle responded with internationalism, although of a totally new kind. This assertion is surely controversial, and may seem paradoxical when many from the left have critically pointed at their “nationalism” transpiring from their frequent use of the terms “nation” or Mexican nation.

The Zapatistas' continuous reference to the "Nation" can be understood in at least three directions.

First, in terms of the reference to the "ideal", to the "whole" that the indigenous communities ought to be part of. They can be part of the whole, only to the extent they are in condition to self-determine themselves, a condition that is negated in the very moment the "whole" is kept together by means of external things (money, the police force, etc.). Thus, the invisibility of the indigenous community (and for that matter, the invisibility of any single minority constituting the majority), is the result of their being separated from the whole, or from being connected to the whole in an inorganic way, as a "cog in the machine". Their claim to visibility, is a claim for the establishment of an organic link. The Zapatistas refer to this organic unity as "nation", Marx calls it *Res Publica*, or *True Democracy*, or *Communism*, but they all mean the same thing; people recognising each other as human beings and therefore governing themselves.

Second, what they call "nation" often is not defined by national borders or racial characteristics, but more in terms of subversive affinity. An imagery that is continuously repeated is the one that regards everybody in the world sharing their struggles and visions, as carrying a bit of Mexico in their heart.

The use of the discourse around the nation acquires also a third meaning. The government can claim legitimacy to the extent it is able to present an image of itself as the institution protecting the general interest via particular interests. The Zapatista's use of the nation's rhetoric challenges this fundamental means of legitimisation. But for them, the general interest is that of humanity, not of capital.

The current neoliberal strategy for the formation of a global factory is based on two pillars: a. the formation of atomised nodes (individuals, communities, regions, countries, continents, etc.) and their functional integration for the pursuit of capitalist accumulation; b. the correspondent promotion and imposition of an awareness of the whole (global economy) which is overwhelming and in relation to which individuals and networks of individuals are "nobody", and "invisible". In other words, beyond the realm dictated by the requirements of accumulation, what is promoted is an ideology of human powerlessness.

The writings of the Zapatistas contain both the awareness of the condition of fragmentation within the division of labour constituting the global factory and the realisation of the consequent condition of invisibility (condition posed by the syllogism of power). However, their struggle at the same time poses the question of visions alternative to that of power and that of the constitution of alternatives starting from the framework of fragmentation of today's global factory.

The strength of the message coming from Chiapas resides in the fact that this invisibility, this complete atomisation and fragmentation of an entire population within the huge global productive machine is not only a characteristic of the Maya people in Southeast of Mexico. It is increasingly a condition of existence of all kinds of people and individuals (although in different forms and contexts), once they are understood in terms of their relation to the global factory. Neoliberalism is the forced commoditisation and marketisation of every aspect of life on a planetary scale, and this

commodification essentially implies atomisation and invisibility. Starting from their experience of invisibility and fragmentation, the indigenous population of Chiapas responds with an internationalist practice and theoretical vision of extreme novelty. Yet, it is a response which, finds a parallel in the practice and visions of social movements across the globe. However, since the Zapatista's movement was able to combine a struggle against neoliberalism with the continuous production, elaboration, and diffusion of a body of theoretical work reflecting on the condition of struggles and the essential elements of an alternative vision, it is of extreme importance to read their message in the attempt to help to shed light on other current practices of emancipation.

There are two main roots of Zapatista's internationalism, one objective and the other subjective, to use an old dichotomy. First, the process of globalisation accelerated in the last 20 years by neoliberal policies. The paradoxical result of this process is the creation of increased inter-dependency among people around the world, and at the same time the acceleration of their isolation, alienation from each-other and indifference. There is nothing new in this typical process of capitalist accumulation, only its dimension now extended to the global scale. Second, the politically humble but yet incredibly important recognition that in these conditions emancipation can only occur by challenging capital's own meaning of integration by connecting in new way what has been fragmented and integrated within the global factory, by turning inter-dependency from being the product of the external market and alien power of the market, into an act of freedom. Yet this connection cannot occur on the ground of abstract unity grounds which subordinates everybody to a cause (the "unite and fight" which leaves the "what for?" to be decided after the "revolution", and in practice it implies it is decided now by an elite). On the contrary, difference, and not homogeneity, is the basis of unity. The Zapatista's appeal is for a world that contains many worlds, for a world in which "all are equals because they are different".

According to the Zapatistas, globalisation is a world war, it is a war waged against humanity, and its aim is the distribution of the world.

A New World War is waged, but now against the entire humanity. As in all world wars, what is being sought is a new distribution of the world.

The character of this distribution is something which is quite well known, and Marcos refers to as "concentrating power in power and misery in misery". In Zapatistas' hand however, this reflection on the dynamic of globalising economy very similar to what Marx called the General Law of Capitalist Accumulation (Marx 1867: chapter 25) opens the way to a reflection on who the subjects of misery are, rather than an analysis of what are the rules of globalising (accumulating) capital. It is thus an opportunity to define the directions of political activity, rather than the strategies deployed by capital. This "new distribution of the world" has the power of exclusion of what at first appears as isolated minorities, and then, with a magic twist within the argumentative line, shows themselves for what they are, the greatest majority of the world population:

The new distribution of the world excludes 'minorities'. The indigenous, youth, women, homosexuals, lesbians, people of colour, immigrants, workers, peasants; the majority who make up the world basements are presented, for power, as disposable. The new distribution of the world excludes the majorities.

What is this majority, how to call it, how to define it? The majority is made of minorities, but minorities are minorities to the extent they are isolated, atomised nodes of the global factory. Marcos, (or better his alter ego Don Durito), in another document, uses again the military analogy to elaborate on this point, although in that context he refers to the national reality of Mexico.

The fragmentation of the opposition forces allows the system of the Party-State to, not only resist the attacks, but co-opts and weakens the opposition. The system of the Party-State does not worry about the radicalism of the forces which opposes it, it only worries about their eventual unity. By parcelling out the political forces against the regime, this allows the Party-State system to negotiate or “fight” to conquer the political “islands” which form in the opposition.

Fragmentation is what defines a minority. A minority is what has been cut out of the rest. The totality appears therefore as a simple set of minorities, as isolated groups/individuals. Interestingly, in modern mainstream economics and sociology, the totality of society is defined as the set of minorities, of isolated individuals engaged in the market. Society is therefore the mirror of the market and the market the mirror of society. Economics and sociology (by reflecting against each other as to parallel mirrors in a barber shop) presuppose this understanding of human social organisation based on fragmentation and isolation. These are enforced by the people in power who apply a law of war, the “economy of forces”: to a diffused enemy in tiny nuclei which are beaten by concentrating forces against each nucleus, isolating one from the other. These opposition nuclei do not see that they confront ONE enemy but MANY enemies, in other “words they emphasise what makes them different (their political proposals) and not what makes them similar (the enemy which they confront: the system of the party-state). [Abridged]