

MEXICO - What Have the Zapatistas Accomplished?

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January 1, 2008 - On January 1, 1994, the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN), commonly called the Zapatistas, led an insurrection in San Cristobal de las Casas in the state of Chiapas in Mexico. Just under fourteen years later, the EZLN convened an international colloquium on December 13-17, 2007 in the same city on the theme "Planet Earth: Antisystemic Movements" - a sort of stock-taking, both global and local, of their objectives. I myself participated in this colloquium, as did many other activists and intellectuals. In the course of the colloquium, Subcommandant Marcos gave a series of six talks, which are available on the internet.

In a sense, what everyone was asking, including Marcos, is what have the Zapatistas accomplished and what are the future prospects of antisystemic movements - in Chiapas and in the world? The answer to this question is not simple. Let us start the story on January 1, 1994. That day was chosen for the beginning of the insurrection because it was the day on which the North American Free Trade Association (NAFTA) came into effect. The slogan that day was !Ya basta! ("Enough is enough"). The Zapatistas were saying from the outset that their five-century- long protest against injustice and humiliation and demand for autonomy was linked today organically to the worldwide struggle against neo-liberalism and imperialism of which NAFTA was both a part and a symbol.

Chiapas, let us remember, is perhaps the poorest region of Mexico and its population is composed overwhelmingly of so-called indigenous peoples. The first Catholic bishop of Chiapas was Bartolomé de Las Casas, the sixteenth-century Dominican priest who devoted his life to defending vigorously (before the Church and the Spanish monarchy) the rights of the Indians to equal treatment. From the days of Las Casas until 1994, the Indians never saw that right acknowledged. The EZLN decided to try different methods. So were they more successful? We should look at the impact of the movement in three arenas: in Mexico as a political arena; in the world-system as a whole; in the realm of theorizing about antisystemic movements.

First, Mexico: Armed insurrection as a tactic was suspended after about three months. It has never been resumed. And it is clear that it will not be unless the Mexican army or right-wing paramilitaries massively attack autonomous Zapatista communities. On the other hand, the truce agreement reached with the Mexican government - the so-called San Andrés accords providing for the recognition of autonomy for the indigenous communities - was never implemented by the government.

In 2001, the Zapatistas led a peaceful march across Mexico to the capital, hoping thereby to force the Mexican Congress to legislate the essential of the accords. The march was spectacular but the Mexican Congress failed to act. In 2005, the Zapatistas launched "the other campaign," an effort to mobilize an alliance of Zapatistas with groups in other provinces with more or less similar objectives - again spectacular but it did not change the actual politics of the Mexican government.

In 2006, the Zapatistas pointedly refused to endorse the left-of-center candidate for the presidency, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, who was running in a tight election against the proclaimed winner, the very conservative Felipe Calderón. This action was the one that caused most controversy with Zapatista sympathizers in Mexico and the rest of the world, many of whom felt that it cost López Obrador the election. The Zapatista position derived from their deep sense that electoral politics does not pay. The Zapatistas have been critical of all the left-of-center presidents in Latin America, from Lula in Brazil to

Chávez in Venezuela, on the grounds that they were all top-down movements which changed nothing fundamental at the base for the oppressed majority. The only Latin American government which the Zapatistas speak well of is that of Cuba, because it is the only government they consider to be truly anti-capitalist.

On the other hand, within Mexico, the Zapatistas have managed to establish de facto autonomous indigenous communities which operate well, albeit they are besieged and constantly menaced by the Mexican army. The political sophistication and determination of these communities is impressive. Will this however last in the absence of serious political change in Mexico, especially in the light of increasing pressure on the rights of the Indians to control their own land? This is the unresolved issue.

The picture on the world scene is somewhat different. There is no question that the Zapatista insurrection of 1994 became a major inspiration for antisystemic movements throughout the world. It is unquestionably a key turning-point in the process that led to the demonstrations in 1999 at Seattle that caused the failure of the meeting of the World Trade Organization (WTO), a failure from which the WTO has never recovered. If today the WTO finds itself semi-moribund as a result of a North-South deadlock, the Zapatistas can claim some credit.

Seattle in turn led to the creation in 2001 of the World Social Forum (WSF), which has become the principal meeting-ground of the world's antisystemic movements. And if the Zapatistas themselves have never attended any WSF meeting because technically they are an armed force, the Zapatistas have remained an iconic movement within the WSF, a sort of inspirational force.

The Zapatistas from the beginning have said that their objectives and concerns were worldwide - intergalactic in their jargon - and they offered support to movements everywhere and asked actively for support from movements everywhere. They have been very successful in this. And if some worldwide support has suffered fatigue of late, the December 2007 colloquium was clearly an attempt to resuscitate these alliances.

In many ways, however, the most important contribution of the Zapatistas - and the most contested - has been in the theoretical realm. It was striking that in the six talks that Marcos gave in December, the first devoted itself to the importance of theorizing in the social sciences. What do the Zapatistas say about how to analyze the world?

First of all, they emphasize that the basic thing that is wrong with the world today is that it is a capitalist world, and that the basic thing to change is that, something they insist will require a real struggle. Now the Zapatistas are surely not the first ones to argue this. So what do they add to this? They are part of a post-1968 view that the traditional analyses of the Old Left were too narrow, in that they seemed to emphasize only the problems and struggles of the urban industrial proletariat. Marcos devoted one whole talk to the struggles of women for their rights. He devoted another to the crucial importance of control of the land by the world's rural workers.

And quite strikingly he placed several talks under the rubric, "neither core nor periphery" - rejecting the idea of a priority for one or the other, either in terms of power or of intellectual analysis. The Zapatistas are proclaiming that the struggle for rights of every oppressed group is equally important, and the struggle must be fought on all fronts at the same time.

They also say that the movements themselves must be internally democratic. The slogan is "mandar obedeciendo," which might be translated "lead by obeying the voice and wishes of those whom one is leading." This is easy to say and hard to do, but it is a cry against the historic verticalism of left movements. This leads them to a "horizontalism" in the relations between different movements. Some of their followers say that they are opposed to taking state power ever. While they are deeply skeptical of taking state power via the "lesser evil," they are willing to make exceptions, as in the case of Cuba.

Was the Zapatista insurrection a success? The only answer is in the apocryphal story about the answer that Zhou En-lai is supposed to have given to the question: "What do you think of the French Revolution?"

Answer: "It is too early to tell."

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