

"Zapatistas Are Different"

Peter Rosset

The EZLN (Zapatista National Liberation Army) came briefly to the world's attention when they seized several towns in Chiapas on New Year's day in 1994. This image of a new armed rebel movement in the period when such movements were meant to have recognised their own redundancy was startling and demonstrated that history was not yet over.

Since then most of the continued support the Zapatistas have received is strongly based on the idea that the Zapatistas are different. Different not just from the neoliberal world order they oppose but, more fundamentally, different from the armed revolutionary groups that exist and have existed elsewhere in the world.

Those involved internationally in Zapatista solidarity work are drawn to it not because they believe Mexico is uniquely repressive. There are many countries that are far worse, Columbia being one obvious example. They hope there is something in the Zapatista method that they can take home to their own city or region. Hence the popularity of the call from the EZLN to 'be a Zapatista wherever you are'.

So although the Zapatistas remain isolated in the jungles and mountains of south eastern Mexico their ideas have influenced many activists across the globe. Not least in the round of global days of action against capitalism. One call for these protests actually arose at an international conference in La Realidad, Chiapas in 1996 and is part of the reason for the 'anti-capitalist' demonstrations of London and Seattle N30 in 1999 and those that followed in 2000 including A16 Washington and S26 Prague.

On the 1 Jan 1994 Mexicans woke from their hangovers to find that a new rebel army had emerged, seemingly from nowhere, in southern Mexico and seized a number of provincial towns. This army, the EZLN, distributed a paper called 'The Mexican Awakener' [*EID espertador Mexicano*]. It contained their declaration of war, a number of revolutionary laws and orders for their army. They said they were fighting for "work, land, shelter, food, health care, education, independence, freedom, democracy, justice and peace."

Nothing unusual about these demands. In the last couple of hundred years there have been thousands of organisations and movements, armed and otherwise that could have summarised their programme in a similar way. But the vast majority of these movements saw the implementation of their programme occurring when they took power on behalf of the people. This could be in one of two forms, an armed seizure of power like the October revolution of 1917 in Russia or a democratic election like that of 1945 which returned the British labour government.

Although these two movements, the one 'revolutionary' the other 'reformist' are often portrayed as being very different reality they share an essential feature. The change they proposed was a change of politicians and not a change in the way of doing politics. Both could talk about mobilising the working class in the course of coming to

power but once in power they made sure their party ruled alone. And indeed both shared the common source of the '2nd International' which differed from the first because it chose to exclude those who opposed the taking of state power.

The 'Mexican Awakener' rather than talking of the EZLN seizing power as a new revolutionary government outlined the military objectives of the rising as "Advance to the capital of the country, overcoming the Mexican federal army, protecting in our advance the civilian population and permitting the people in the liberated area the right to freely and democratically elect their own administrative authorities."

Unusually for any revolutionary organisation these laws then defined a right of the people to resist any unjust actions of the EZLN. They defined a right of the people to:

"demand that the revolutionary armed forces not intervene in matters of civil order or the disposition of capital relating to agriculture, commerce, finances, and industry, as these are the exclusive domain of the civil authorities, elected freely and democratically." And said (that the people should "acquire and possess arms to defend their persons, families and property, according to the laws of disposition of capital of farms, commerce, finance and industry, against the armed attacks committed by the revolutionary forces or those of the government."

These sections and other things done and said by the EZLN at the time suggested that there was something in this rebellion that broke what had become the standard model for revolutionary organisation. The traditional model was for the revolutionary organisation to mobilise whatever forces were available to overthrow the existing government and then to form a new government itself. Fundamental to this model, from the Russian revolution of 1917 to the Nicaraguan one of 1979 was the (flawed) assumption that the interests of 'the people' or 'the workers' were identical to the interests of the new government.

In all cases this led to the situation where the new government used its monopoly of armed forces against sections of the working class that disagreed with it. In Russia by 1921 this had led not only to the destruction of the factory committees and their replacement with one man management but also to the crushing of all opposition through the closure of individual Soviets, the suppression of strikes and the banning, jailing and even execution of members of other left organisations.

Once upon a time left activists could fool themselves that this suppression of democracy had at least delivered a society that was fairer in economic terms and that was some sort of (perhaps flawed) 'workers state'. The EZLN emerged in a period when such illusions could no longer be held due to the overthrow of the majority of the old 'communist' states. So they found a ready audience internationally of activists who had not given up on the project of transforming society but saw the need for a new model for doing so.

The main spokesperson for the Zapatistas, subcommandante Marcos, referred to this attraction in 1995 saying "...It is perhaps for this reason—the lack of interest in power—that the word of the Zapatistas has been well received in other countries across the globe, above all in Europe. It has not just been because it is new or novel, but rather because it is proposing this, which is to say, to separate the political problem

from the problem of taking power, and take it to another terrain. Our work is going to end, if it ends, in the construction of this space for new political relationships. What follows is going to be a product of the efforts of other people, with another way of thinking and acting. And there we are not going to work; instead, we would be a disturbance''.

The collapse of the Eastern European 'socialist states' in 1989 resulted in the rapid collapse of all the left parties that had considered these societies as 'actually existing socialism'. In general the only Leninist parties that survived were the ones who had already put a major break between their politics and these societies. But they still had a problem in the fact that they had supported the authoritarian policies of the Bolsheviks in 1918-21 that had created these regimes.

This contradiction may be the reason why there had been very little discussion of the Zapatistas by the traditional left in the so-called orthodox marxian discourse. The discussion has only started now because of the realisation that the influence of the Zapatistas was at least part of the reason anti-authoritarian politics and strategy were so popular among anti-capitalist activists.

A new armed group called the EPR (Popular Revolutionary Army) launched attacks on police stations in several Mexican states, saying specifically that unlike the Zapatistas they wished to seize state power. The EZLN was keen to distance themselves from the EPR, all the more so because the EPR sought to imply links between the two organisations.

In a EZLN communique "to the soldiers and commanders of the Popular Revolutionary Army" the EZLN wrote "What we seek, what we need and want is that all those people without a party and organisation make agreements about what they want and do not want and become organised in order to achieve it (preferably through civil and peaceful means), not to take power, but to exercise it. I know you will say this is Utopian and unorthodox, but this is the way of the Zapatistas. Too bad.

...it is useful to point out and repeat, that we are different. And the difference is not what you and others have insisted upon, that you do not dialogue with the government, that you do struggle for power and that you have not declared war, while we do dialogue (attention; we do this not only with the government but in a much larger sense with national and international civic society); we do not struggle for power and we did declare war on the Federal Army (a challenge they will never forgive us). The difference is that our political proposals are diametrically different and this is evident in the discourse-and the practice of the two organisations. Thanks to your appearance, now many people can understand that what makes us different from existing political organisations are not the weapons and the ski-masks, but the political proposals. We have carved out a new and radical path. It is so new and radical that all the political currents have criticised us and look at us with boredom, including yourselves. We are uncomfortable. Too bad, this is the way of the Zapatistas.

...You struggle for power. We struggle for democracy, liberty and justice. This is not the same thing. Though you may be successful and conquer power, we will continue

struggling for democracy, liberty and justice. It does not matter who is in power, the Zapatistas mean struggle and stand for democracy, liberty and justice.”

One recent Leninist critique that said “It is a curious ‘quality’ in a revolutionary organisation that it does not seek state power”, goes on to ask “What then is the nature of the revolution they advocate?”. People are told “In the end, the issue is power, the control of society by the producers”. This handy confusion of a party seizing power on behalf of the producers with direct democracy leads to the expected conclusion that the Zapatistas “are not in a position to provide political leadership for the movement that has celebrated their example”. This particular 9,000 word critique finds only a couple of sentences to mention the structures of direct democracy that arguably define “the nature of the revolution they advocate”.

Other left critics, pointing to the fact that the rejection of seizing power was not explicit in the first Zapatista paper, have suggested that this idea was only later developed to gain international support. However, Marcos did in fact vaguely express these ideas in an interview with the Mexican liberal paper *‘La Jornada’*:

“We hope that the people understand that the causes that have moved us to do this are just, and that the path that we have chosen is just one, not the only one. Nor do we think that it is the best of all paths. We do not want a dictatorship of another kind, nor anything out of this world, not international Communism and all that. We want justice where there is now not even minimum subsistence...We do not want to monopolize the vanguard or say that we are the light, the only alternative, or stingily claim the qualification of revolutionary for one or another current. We say, look at what happened. That is what we had to do. “

This rejection of the traditional methods of the left is not simply confined to Mexico. In 1996 the Zapatistas organised an international encounter in Chiapas attended by some 3,000 activists from over 40 countries (including the author). The Encounter ended with the second declaration of Reality which asked what next, what is it that Zapatistas were seeking to do?

“A new number in the useless enumeration of the numerous international orders?
A new scheme that calms and alleviates the anguish of a lack of recipes?
A global programme for world revolution’?”

This rhetorical rejection of the methods the left had used to organise internationally, particularly in the 2nd, 3rd and 4th international, was followed by a suggested alternative:

“That we will make a collective network of all our particular struggles and resistances. An intercontinental network of resistance against neo-liberalism, an intercontinental network of resistance for humanity.

This intercontinental network of resistance, recognising differences and acknowledging similarities, will search to find itself with other resistances around the world. This intercontinental network of resistance will be the medium in which distinct resistances may support one another. This intercontinental network of resistance is not

an organising structure; it doesn't have a central head or decision maker; it has no central command or hierarchies. We are the network, all of us who resist. “

The quotations above contain the essence of what it is that makes the Zapatistas different. The purpose of the organisation is not to seize power on behalf of the people — rather it is to create a space in which people can define their own power. This is a radically different project from what revolutionary politics have been in the twentieth century. In the aftermath of the Russian revolution, Leninism, the idea that the party must rule on behalf of the people, became the common core of almost all revolutionary movements.

On the ideological level one can see what separates the Zapatistas from most of the left. But anyone who has been a member of a left organisation will know there can be a sharp difference between the external rhetoric of workers democracy and an internal reality where real discussion is suppressed, instructions come from the top down and mechanisms exist that insure the same small clique runs the organisation for decade after decade. Do similar problems exist with the Zapatistas?

This is a more difficult problem to answer. It is no use simply quoting Marcos or any other prominent Zapatista as they may simply be saying what they reckon 'we'd like to hear'. The ongoing Low Intensity War means that it can be very difficult to ask questions (particularly in relation to the military side of the organisation). This has led some left critics to claim that visits to the rebel zone are controlled so that “On a well-signed route, people have to agree to see only what they have to see and to believe in the leader's words.”

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