

The International Order of Hope: Zapatismo and the Fourth World War

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On 1 January 1994 in the Mexican state of Chiapas, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional or EZLN) rose up in arms against the federal executive and the Mexican army. Proclaiming themselves to be the product of 500 years of resistance, the EZLN, an insurgent force made up of primarily Indigenous Mayans, declared their intention to march on Mexico City, defeat the Mexican army, depose the president, and allow for the realization of an authentic democracy for all Mexicans. Significantly, the Zapatista uprising was timed to coincide with the first day of the North American Free Trade Agreement coming into force, a point reiterated by the Zapatista spokesperson Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos. He called NAFTA a "death sentence" to the Indigenous people of Mexico because of the threat that it posed to small farmers and to communal systems of landholding. While the EZLN was not successful in its immediate attempts to generate a nationwide uprising, the Zapatistas and their uprising would provoke a national and international response that called for peaceful negotiations to resolve the conflict and that also identified strongly with the Zapatista demands for "democracy, liberty, and justice." In the years following the uprising, the Zapatistas' struggle would serve to catalyze a new kind of social movement activism not only in Mexico but all over the world.

Rejecting a politics based on the control of the state or a desire to hold power over others, the Zapatistas instead sought to participate in the creation of a new world, "a world capable of holding many worlds." Articulating their struggle as one "for humanity and against neo-liberalism" the Zapatistas worked to communicate with other people in other places fighting against the onslaught of global neo-liberal capitalism. While always remaining committed to their own struggle for autonomy, democracy, justice, and liberty on the ground in Chiapas, the Zapatistas also worked to build what they called an "International Order of Hope" as a challenge and alternative to the "new world order" constructed by neo-conservative governments and neo-liberal capitalist policies. Focusing on the importance of autonomy, inclusivity, democracy, and anti-capitalism, and forwarding a radical critique of systems of power and domination from racism to patriarchy to heterosexism, the Zapatista movement helped give birth to a new vision of social struggle and social alternative-building.

My own work has focused upon what I have called the "transnational resonance" of Zapatismo — the political philosophy and practice of the Zapatista movement and its attendant "political imagination." My research, and my contribution to the Globalization and Autonomy MCRI Project, has sought to understand the reasons for and consequences of the resonance of Zapatismo among communities of activists in Canada and the United States since 1994, particularly among those activists involved in the "alter-globalization" movement (an "alternative globalization" movement as opposed to the neo-liberal capitalist globalization that dominates today). Three core questions served as the guiding principles for my work: What is Zapatismo's political imagination? How and why has it been transmitted, translated, and found resonance transnationally? What are the consequences of this transnationally resonant political imagination of Zapatismo?

The notion of the "political imagination" was central to my work and it is a concept that I use to describe the impetus for and processes involved in envisioning and creating new political projects, which in this case have emerged directly and indirectly because of the influence of Zapatismo. The concept of "resonance" was also key to my research and analysis and I use it to describe the phenomenon by which political struggles located within their own particular context come to be meaningful for people located in other places. Issues of globalization and autonomy are also extremely significant within my work. Autonomy as a principle is key to both the struggle of the Zapatistas as well as to the struggles of many other people around the world today who seek to reclaim control over their lives in the face of a globalized capitalist order. Autonomy is also significant with respect to the consequences of Zapatismo's transnational resonance. This is so because the most innovative and durable projects emerging from this resonance are the ones which have taken the inspiration of Zapatismo and applied it in ways that make sense in their own specific contexts and according to their own needs. Globalizing processes and forces are key to this political activism in two distinct ways. First, activists engaged in this alter-globalization movement are contesting the current dominant form of neo-liberal capitalist globalization and this sense of confronting a common enemy is essential in allowing people to see their struggle as a shared one. Second, this "movement of movements" often relies upon the technological tools that have accelerated globalization in order to communicate with each other, share strategies and tactics, and build new visions of the world. Alternative visions of globalization rely upon and celebrate interconnectedness amongst people; what they reject is the violence, exploitation, and domination inherent in the contemporary contours of globalization. As such, interconnectedness and autonomy are both central principles of the alter-globalization movement.

My research lasted from September 2003 until September 2004 and involved in-depth interviews with political activists and targeted participant observation and fieldwork in Chiapas, Mexico. I also examined a broad and extensive variety of media facilitating the projection of Zapatismo transnationally and enabling networking and communication amongst a diversity of activists. The type of activism upon which I focused spanned a broad range from more traditional solidarity groups, to human rights organizations, to anti-capitalist collectives and networks, to radical alternative media-makers. All of the activists and organizations with whom I worked shared an important commitment to working outside of mainstream channels of political participation and they all spoke of the role of Zapatismo in shaping their political commitments, sensibilities, and visions. They included: Big Noise Tactical, Building Bridges, the Chiapas Media Project, Food for Chiapas, Global Exchange, "hacktivists" from the University of Toronto, Mexico Solidarity Network, the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty, Peoples' Global Action, the smartMeme Strategy and Training Project, activists involved in planning the Third Intercontinental Encuentro for Humanity and Against Neoliberalism, and a variety of activists involved in political projects ranging from Latin American solidarity to community capacity-building projects. Through encounters with my research partners, as well as my fieldwork and media analysis, I sought to understand how new and powerful political imaginations come into being, for what reasons, and with what consequences. It is my hope that this research not only illuminates the shape of contemporary radical political action but also contributes critically in helping to point the way forward to a more just, democratic, and peaceful future.

For many of the activists with whom I spoke both in Canada and in the United States, Zapatismo offered precisely what mainstream channels of political participation do not: hope, creativity, imagination, poetry, dialogue, and space. Rather than rallying people with calls for state socialism, the Zapatistas instead took up arms and then took the path of transnational dialogue under such banners as democracy, liberty, and justice, "a life lived with dignity, commanding by obeying, and walking questioning. They said they masked themselves in order to be seen, armed themselves in

order to be heard, and fought not to kill or be killed but to live a life worth living. For activists disillusioned by the defeat of state socialism and numbed by capitalism's ascendancy, the radically democratic and dignified spirit of Zapatismo was infectious and inspiring. Perhaps even more significantly, even as the Zapatistas sought support and recognition for their own struggle, they simultaneously acknowledged and supported the struggles of others both in Mexico and around the world.

As North American political channels become ever more professionalized, rationalized, and remote, alienation and disillusionment become defining characteristics of social engagement and political responsibility. As measures of political participation and confidence throughout the United States and Canada continue to fall, for many people already dissatisfied with the corporate liberal democracy of these countries, the issue becomes not how to take power but rather how to change the world without taking power. In this sense, the Zapatista struggle for autonomy and their commitment to direct democracy resonate far beyond the borders of Chiapas.

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