

# Zapatismo Urbano

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**I am not an indigenous peasant. Probably you, dear reader, are not an indigenous peasant either. And yet this issue revolves around an indigenous peasant uprising.**

The zapatistas of Chiapas are peasants. Most of us who read and write this journal are city-dwellers. Our experiences are far removed from those of the zapatistas of Chiapas. Our living conditions are very different from those of the zapatistas of Chiapas, and our forms of struggle too. And yet the resonance of the zapatista uprising in the cities has been enormous. Why? What does zapatismo mean in the cities?

There have been two forms of reaction in the cities. The first is a reaction of solidarity: the struggle of the indigenous of Chiapas is a just struggle and we give it all the material and political support possible. Solidarity defines the struggle as being the struggle of a 'them', and 'they' are indians who live in Chiapas. I do not dismiss this reaction, but it is not what interests me here.

The second reaction goes much further. Here it is not a question of solidarity with the struggle of others, but of understanding that the zapatistas and we are part of the same struggle. The zapatistas of Chiapas do not give us a model that we can apply to our part of the struggle, but we see their forms of struggle as an inspiration for the development of our forms of struggle. In that sense we can speak of the spread of zapatismo to the cities, the development of an urban zapatismo, for which the EZLN is not a model but a constant point of reference.

There is no linear progression here. It is not the spread of an organisation that we are speaking of (though certainly the spread of the Frente Zapatista within Mexico is part of the process). Neither is it really a question of the spread of an influence from Chiapas. It is not that the decisions of the EZLN have an influence on struggles in Rome or Buenos Aires. It is rather a question of resonance and inspiration. The zapatista uprising has had an enormous impact in the cities of the world because the themes that the EZLN raise and the orientations they suggest have resonated strongly with the preoccupations and directions of people in the cities. They have been a constant source of inspiration because they have formulated with particular clarity (not just in the communiqués but in their actions) directions and themes that were already present in the struggles of the cities.

The purpose of speaking of urban zapatismo is twofold. On the one hand it is a way of focussing more closely on this process. What is this resonance? Is it an imagined or a real resonance? What are the differences between zapatismo in the cities and zapatismo in the countryside? What are the practical problems for the development of this sort of politics in the cities?

But secondly, to speak of urban zapatismo is to speak of zapatismo as a challenge. The zapatistas do not ask for our sympathy or our solidarity. To commemorate the 10 and 20 years of the EZLN should not be a celebration of them, but a challenge to us. They ask us to join in their struggle for a world of dignity<sup>1</sup>. How do we do it, we who live in the cities, we who write and read this journal?

## II

The zapatista uprising has been a fundamental point of reference for urban struggles over the last ten years. And yet there are obvious differences in the conditions and forms of struggle. We who live in the cities and look to the zapatistas are not organised as an army. We do not live within the sort of communal support structures that exist in Chiapas. We do not have land on which to grow the basic foodstuffs necessary for survival, and we are not, on the whole, accustomed to the levels of complete poverty that is the daily experience of the zapatistas of Chiapas.

There are aspects of the zapatista uprising that have not found any echo in the cities. We urban zapatistas generally do not want to be organised as an army and often reject militarism as a form of organisation and concept of struggle. In the current debates in Italy, the zapatistas are even held up as a model in arguing for a complete rejection of all violence. The other aspect of the zapatismo of Chiapas that has found little resonance in the cities is their use of national symbols – the national flag, the playing of the national anthem. The urban-zapatista movement tends not to be nationalist and in many cases it is profoundly anti-nationalist. It has been not so much an inter-national movement as a global movement, a movement of struggle for which global capitalism and not the nation state has been the principal point of reference.

What, then, are the aspects of the zapatista uprising that have found echo in the cities of the world? The most obvious is the mere fact of rebellion – the fact that the zapatistas rose up when the time for rebellion seemed to have passed, their ¡Ya Basta! to a world that is so obviously obscene.

But it is more than that. It is also that their ¡Ya basta! turns too against a Left that had grown stale and stiff and alienating. It is the rejection both of revolutionary vanguardism and of state-oriented reformism, the rejection of the party as an organisational form and of the pursuit of power as an aim.

The rejection of the old forms of left-wing politics leaves us with an enormous question mark. That itself is important. The zapatista saying “caminamos preguntando” acquires a particular resonance because we are conscious that we do not know the way forward. The world around us makes us scream, but where do we go with our scream, what do we do with our scream<sup>2</sup>? The politics of rebellion is a politics of searching – not for the correct line, but for some sort of way forward, some way of making our scream effective. There is no party to tell us which way to go, so we must find it for ourselves.

The politics of asking leads on to certain forms of organisation. The organisational forms of the zapatistas of Chiapas are characterised by a tension, as they themselves emphasise. This is the tension concentrated in their principle of “mandar obedeciendo”. On the one hand, they are organised as an army, with all that that means in terms of vertical lines of command. On the other hand, the army is subject to the control of the village councils, where discussion and consensus are the guiding principles.

The rejection of the party as an organisational form has meant (inevitably, perhaps) the revival of councilism, the revival of the council or assembly<sup>3</sup>. The council is the traditional form for expressing revolt which arises again and again in rebellions, from the Paris Commune to the Neighbourhood Councils of the recent revolt in Argentina. It is an expressive form of organisation, one that seeks to articulate the anger and worries of the participants. This can be contrasted with the party form, which is not expressive but instrumental, designed to attain the end of winning state power. As an expressive form, the council tends to be horizontal in its structures, encouraging the free participation of all and aiming to reach consensus in its decisions. Seen in this way, the council is not so much a formal structure as an organisational orientation. This organisational orientation – the emphasis on horizontality, the encouragement of the expression of people’s concerns, whether or not they are “revolutionary” or “political” – has been a characteristic feature of the current wave of urban struggle: not just of the neighbourhood councils of Argentina, but equally of some of the piquetero groups, of the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo, of the Centri Sociali of Rome, Milan or Turin, of the altermundista movement in general.

Councilism is related to the question of community. In the zapatista areas of Chiapas the community exists, not as an idyll to be romanticised, but simply because most of the people of a village have known one another all their lives and because there are established practices of common work and decision-making. In the cities, there is often very little sense of community. The people who work together do not necessarily live close together, and people who live close to one another often have no contact. The scream of protest that we feel is often experienced as an isolated and hopeless scream, a scream that we share at best with a handful of friends. The (re)construction of community bonds has, therefore, been a central concern of the movement in the cities. The construction of social centres or alternative cafés, the coming together of people in informal and changing movements create new patterns of community and mutual trust which are part and parcel of the development of councilist forms of organisation. Perhaps the central challenge of urban zapatismo is the challenge of autonomy. Autonomy is simply the other side of saying that we want to change the world without taking power. Rejecting the pursuit of state power means rejection of the party as a form of organisation (understanding the party as a state-oriented form of organisation).

But it means much more than that. It means also a change in the understanding of social conflict or class struggle.<sup>4</sup> The traditional concept sees class struggle as a struggle for power, a struggle for power which inevitably determines the agenda, the rhythms and the forms of struggle. Confrontation is then the pivot of social struggle. If, however, we say that we do not want to take power, then the whole conception of struggle shifts. What is central now is not the confrontation with the other side (capital) but the construction of our own world. We try to focus on our own doing, to push confrontation to one side. This is still class struggle, it is still confrontation with capital (inevitably, since capital is the imposition of an alien control of our activity). But in so far as possible we seize the initiative, we seize the agenda. We make capital follow our agenda, so it becomes clear that the aggression comes from them, not from us. We cannot be autonomous in a capitalist society, but we can push our autonomy as far as possible. Capital is the negation of autonomy, the ever-repeated negation of our self-determination. (As part of this, the state is the ever-repeated negation of the council.)

If we see confrontation as the axis of struggle, then we are anticipating and therefore participating in this negation. By making the development of our own creativity (our own power-to-do) the centre of the movement, capital is revealed as a parasite, forced all the time to run after us. This is illustrated by the Caracoles, the zapatista establishment of their own Juntas de Buen Gobierno<sup>5</sup>, in which the zapatistas shrug off the state, turn their back on the state, neither demanding anything of it nor openly confronting it, just doing their own thing.

But doing our own thing, developing our own creativity, is not the same in the cities as in the countryside. We do not possess land on which we can grow even the most basic food crops. It may be possible to occupy land for these purposes (as some of the piquetero groups in Argentina are beginning to do), but for most urban groups this is not an option. In order to develop our autonomy we are forced into contradictory situations, in which it is much better to recognise those contradictions rather than to gloss over them, just as the zapatistas of Chiapas have had the great merit of recognising from the beginning the contradiction of their military organisation in a movement for human dignity. Urban autonomous groups survive either on the basis of state subsidies (sometimes forced by the groups themselves as in the case of the piqueteros who use the roadblocks to force the government to give money to the unemployed) or on the basis of some mixture of occasional or regular paid employment and state subsidies.<sup>6</sup> Thus, many urban groups are composed of a mixture of people in regular employment, of people who are by choice or by necessity in irregular or occasional employment and of those who (again by choice or necessity) are unemployed, often dependent on state subsidies or some sort of market activity for their survival. These different forms of dependency on forces that we do not control (on capital) pose problems and limitations that should be recognised. At the same time, the significance of these limitations obviously depends on the collective strength of the groups: in the case of the piqueteros, for example, the payment of the state subsidies was imposed by road blocks and administered by the groups themselves.

All these different forms of dependency on capital are imposed by property, by the fact that all the wealth produced by human doing is congealed in the form of property which confronts and excludes us. The limiting of our autonomous self-determination appears in the form of property, behind which stand the forces of law and order which defend property. We seem to be forced, then, back into a logic of confrontation in which we lose the initiative, or in which we are forced to focus on winning power so that we can control the police and change the laws on property. If we exclude this course (simply because control of the state tends to become control by the state), how can we go forward?

Possibly by defetishising property, by seeing that property is not an established thing, but a constant process of appropriating, a verb and not a noun. The problem then is not to conceptualise our own action in terms of the challenge to property, but to focus on our own construction of an alternative world and think how to avoid the capitalist appropriation of the products of our own doing.

The problems indicated all point to the dangers of confusing an emphasis on autonomy with a concept of micropolitics. The notion of autonomy, as understood here, points to the centrality of our own doing and the development of our won power to do: if we see the world from this perspective, then it is clear that capital is a parasite and that the so-called 'rulers' simply run after us all the time trying to appropriate the results of our creative doing. The problem of revolution is to shake off these parasites, to prevent them appropriating our creativity and its results, to make them irrelevant. This struggle does not require any central organisation (and certainly not any orientation towards the state) but its strength does depend on its massive character. What any particular group can achieve clearly depends on the strength of an entire movement pushing in the same or similar directions. The strength of the component groups depends on the strength of the movement, just as the strength of the movement depends on the strength of the component groups.

### III

However we think of revolution, we are faced with the task of dissolving Reality. The transformation of the world means moving from a world ruled by objective reality to a world in which subjective creativity is the centre, in which humanity becomes its 'own true sun'<sup>7</sup>. The struggle for such a world means a constant process of criticism, a process of undermining the objectivity of reality and showing that it depends absolutely for its existence on subjective creation. Our struggle is a struggle against the world-that-is, with its rules of logic that tell us that there-is-no-alternative, with its language of prose that closes our horizons.

The poetry of the zapatista uprising (of their communiqués and their actions) is not peripheral to their movement, not the external decoration of a fundamentally serious movement, but central to their whole struggle. The fact that the zapatistas of Chiapas (and to some extent other Latin American indigenous movements) have made such an impact in the urban struggles of the world has much to do with the language they use. This is not just a question of pretty words or of Marcos's undoubted literary skills. It is above all that they offer a different way of seeing the world, a vision that breaks with the dominant logic of there-is-no-alternative<sup>8</sup>. Poetry (and indeed other forms of artistic expression) have come to play a central role in anti-capitalist struggle: poetry not as pretty words but as struggle against the prosaic logic of the world, poetry as the call of a world that does not yet exist.

Is this a dangerous romanticism? Are the zapatistas unwittingly leading the rebellious youth of the world into forms of action that are dangerously unrealistic? Recently, as part of the 10/20 celebrations, the zapatistas have been emphasising the centrality of organisation in their struggle: is this a way of countering the impression that their struggle is just poetry, just the power of the word? Perhaps there is an element of romanticism in the resonance of the zapatista struggle. Sometimes, for zapatista supporters who visit the zapatista communities in Chiapas, there is undoubtedly a clash between their expectations and the reality of their experience. In general, however, this is not the case. Those actively involved in struggle, whether in the cities or in the countryside, are aware of the difficulties they face and of the importance of organisation. The poetry of zapatismo does not deflect people from the question of organisation. What it does rather is to open up perspectives in a world that seems so terribly closed. More than that, it suggests forms of action that break with the logic of capital and are more difficult for capital to integrate into the texture of domination.

The accusation of romanticism really has to do with the question of power. 'Realism' is identified with a perspective that focuses on power and sees organisation and action as being *instruments* to achieve certain changes (whether minor changes or the radical change of society). What this realist perspective fails to see is that the very instrumentality of the approach leads to the adoption of forms of action and of organisation that defuse and demobilise the movement for change. It is precisely because instrumentalist realism has failed to achieve the objective of radical social change that people everywhere have turned away from this approach to forms of action that are *expressive* rather than instrumental. Part of this is the turn away from the goal of taking state power and from the party as an organisational form. The poetry of the movement is part of the same process.

Will this poetic romanticism prove more realistic than the previous socialist realism? We do not know. What we know is that the realism of power politics failed to achieve radical social change and that hope lies in breaking reality, in establishing our own reality, our own logic, our own language, our own colours, our own music, our own time, our own space. That is the core of the struggle not only against 'them' but against ourselves, that is the core of the zapatista resonance.

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## Endnotes

[1](#) On the question of dignity, see Holloway (1998).

[2](#) On the politics of the scream, see Holloway (2002).

[3](#) See for example, Ouviaña (2003) or Zibechi (2003).

[4](#) On this, see, for example, Holloway (2004), Zibechi (2003), Colectivo Situaciones/ MTD Solano (2002), Aubenas and Benasayag (2003)

[5](#) In August 2003 the Zapatistas established a number of Juntas de Buen Gobierno. This involved a reorganization of their own forms of government. One of the most important implications of this reorganisation is that, after years of unsuccessfully calling on the state to implement the Acuerdos de San Andrés on indigenous rights, the Zapatistas in effect declared that they would no longer make demands on the government but simply carry on with the implementation of the agreements themselves. In effect, they have turned their back on the state.

[6](#) For a discussion of the practice of the piqueteros and especially of the MTD Solano, see Colectivo Situaciones/ MTD Solano (2002). This is one of the most enriching discussions of the possibilities and difficulties of urban zapatismo that I know.

[7](#) See Marx (1975, p.176): "The criticism of religion disillusions man to make him think and act and shape his reality like a man who has been disillusioned and has come to reason, so that he will resolve around himself and therefore round his true sun. Religion is only the illusory sun which revolves round man as long as he does not revolve round himself."

[8](#) Mrs. Thatcher's famous phrase to explain the necessity of subordinating politics to the market.