

## SEVEN

# Dignity's Revolt

### I. Dignity Arose on the First Day of January 1994

The “Enough!” (“¡Ya basta!”) proclaimed by the Zapatistas on the first day of 1994 was the cry of dignity. When they occupied San Cristóbal de las Casas and six other towns of Chiapas on that day, the wind they blew into the world, “this wind from below, the wind of rebellion, the wind of dignity,” carried “a hope, the hope of the conversion of dignity and rebellion into freedom and dignity.”<sup>1</sup> When the wind dies down, “when the storm abates, when the rain and the fire leave the earth in peace once again, the world will no longer be the world, but something better.”<sup>2</sup>

A letter from the ruling body of the Zapatistas, the Comité Clandestino Revolucionario Indígena (CCRI),<sup>3</sup> addressed just a month later to another indigenous organisation, the Consejo 500 Años de Resistencia Indígena,<sup>4</sup> emphasises the central importance of dignity:

Then that suffering that united us made us speak, and we recognised that in our words there was truth, we knew that not only pain and suffering lived in our tongue, we recognised that there is hope still in our hearts. We spoke with ourselves, we looked inside ourselves

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1 EZLN, *La Palabra de los Armados de Verdad y Fuego*, vol. 1 (Mexico City: Editorial Fuenteovejuna, 1994), 31–32. The three volumes of this series are an invaluable source of EZLN interviews, letters, and communiqués from 1994. All translations of Spanish quotations are by the author.

2 EZLN, *La Palabra*, vol. 1, 35.

3 Clandestine Revolutionary Indigenous Committee.

4 The Council 500 Years of Indigenous Resistance.

and we looked at our history: we saw our most ancient fathers suffering and struggling, we saw our grandfathers struggling, we saw our fathers with fury in their hands, we saw that not everything had been taken away from us, that we had the most valuable, that which made us live, that which made our step rise above plants and animals, that which made the stone be beneath our feet, and we saw, brothers, that all that we had was *dignity*, and we saw that great was the shame of having forgotten it, and we saw that *dignity* was good for men to be men again, and dignity returned to live in our hearts, and we were new again, and the dead, our dead, saw that we were new again and they called us again to dignity, to struggle.<sup>5</sup>

Dignity, the refusal to accept humiliation and dehumanisation, the refusal to conform: dignity is the core of the Zapatista revolution of revolution. The idea of dignity was not invented by the Zapatistas, but they have given it a prominence that it has never before possessed in revolutionary thought. When the Zapatistas rose, they planted the flag of dignity not just in the centre of the uprising in Chiapas but in the centre of oppositional thought. Dignity is not peculiar to the indigenous peoples of the southeast of Mexico: the struggle to convert “dignity and rebellion into freedom and dignity” (an odd but important formulation) is the struggle of (and for) human existence in an oppressive society, as relevant to life in Edinburgh, Athens, Tokyo, Los Angeles, or Johannesburg as it is to the struggles of the peoples of the Lacandon Jungle.

The aim of this essay is to explore what it means to put dignity at the centre of oppositional thought. I should become clear why “Zapatismo” is not a movement restricted to Mexico but is central to the struggle of thousands of millions of people all over the world to live a human life against-and-in an increasingly inhuman society.

The essay aims not so much to give a historical account of the Zapatista movement as to provide a distillation of the most important themes, without at the same time concealing the ambiguities and contradictions of the movement. In order to distil a fragrant essence from roses, it is not necessary to conceal the existence of the thorns, but thorns do not

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5 EZLN, *La Palabra*, vol. 1, 122; emphasis in the original. The continuing importance of this passage was underlined when it was quoted by Comandante Ramona in her speech to a meeting held in Mexico City on February 16, 1997, to protest against the government's failure to fulfil the Agreements of San Andrés.

enter into what one wants to extract. The purpose of trying to distil the theoretical themes of Zapatismo is similar to the purpose behind any distillation process: to separate those themes from the immediate historical development of the Zapatista movement, to extend the fragrance beyond the immediacy of the particular experience.

## II. Dignity Was Wreaked in the Jungle

The uprising of January 1, 1994, was more than ten years in the preparation. The EZLN celebrates November 17, 1983, as the date of its foundation.<sup>6</sup> On that date a small group of revolutionaries established themselves in the mountains of the Lacandon Jungle—“a small group of men and women, three indigenous and three mestizos.”<sup>7</sup>

According to the police version, the revolutionaries were members of the Fuerzas de Liberación Nacional (FLN),<sup>8</sup> a guerrilla organisation founded in 1969 in the city of Monterrey, one of a number of such organisations that flourished in Mexico in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Many of the members of the FLN had been killed or arrested, but the organisation had survived. Its statutes of 1980 describe the organisation as “a political-military organisation whose aim is the taking of political power by the workers of the countryside and of the cities of the Mexican Republic, in order to install a popular republic with a socialist system.” The organisation was guided, according to its statutes, by “the science of history and society, Marxism-Leninism, which has demonstrated its validity in all the triumphant revolutions of this century.”<sup>9</sup>

The supposed origins of the EZLN are used by the authorities to suggest the manipulation of the indigenous people by a group of hardcore professional revolutionaries from the city.<sup>10</sup> However, leaving aside

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6 Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional: Zapatista Army of National Liberation.

7 Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos, November 17, 1994: EZLN, *La Palabra*, vol. 3, 224. Marcos is the spokesperson and military leader of the EZLN. He is, however, subordinate to the CCRI, a popularly elected body. “Mestizos” are people of mixed indigenous and European origin—the vast majority of the Mexican population.

8 Forces of National Liberation.

9 Quoted in C. Tello Díaz, *La Rebelión de las Cañadas* (Mexico City: Cal y Arena, 1995), 97, 99.

10 The EZLN’s reply to the government’s claim is contained in a February 9, 1995, communiqué: “In relation to the connections of the EZLN with the organisation

the racist assumptions of such an argument, the supposed origin of the revolutionaries merely serves to underline the most important question: If, as is claimed, the small group of revolutionaries who set up the EZLN came from an orthodox Marxist-Leninist guerrilla group, how were they transformed into what eventually emerged from the jungle in the early hours of 1994? What was the path that led from the first encampment of November 17, 1983, to the proclamation of dignity in the town hall of San Cristóbal? For it is precisely the fact that they are not an orthodox guerrilla group that has confounded the state time and time again in its dealings with them. It is precisely the fact that they are not an orthodox group of revolutionaries that makes them theoretically and practically the most exciting development in oppositional politics in the world for many a long year.

What, then, was it that the original founders of the EZLN learned in the jungle? A letter written by Marcos speaks of the change in these terms: "We did not propose it. The only thing that we proposed to do was to change the world; everything else has been improvisation. Our square conception of the world and of revolution was badly dented in the confrontation with the indigenous realities of Chiapas. Out of those blows, something new (which does not necessarily mean 'good') emerged, that which today is known as 'neo-Zapatismo.'" <sup>11</sup>

The confrontation with the indigenous realities took place as the Zapatistas became immersed in the communities of the Lacandon Jungle. At first the group of revolutionaries kept to themselves, training in the mountains, slowly expanding in numbers. Then gradually they made

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called 'Forces of National Liberation,' the EZLN has declared in interviews, letters, and communiqués that members of different armed organisations of the country came together in its origin, that the EZLN was born from that and, gradually, was appropriated by the indigenous communities to the point where they took over the political and military leadership of the EZLN. To the name of the 'Forces of National Liberation,' the government should add as the antecedents of the EZLN those of all the guerrilla organisations of the '70s and '80s, Arturo Gámiz, Lucio Cabañas, Genaro Vázquez Rojas, Emiliano Zapata, Francisco Villa, Vicente Guerrero, José María Morelos y Pavón, Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla, Benito Juárez, and many others whom they have already erased from the history books, because a people with memory is a rebel people" (*La Jornada*, February 13, 1995).

- 11 Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos, "Carta a Adolfo Gilly," *Viento del Sur*, no.4 (Summer 1995), 21–25, at 25.

contact with the local communities, initially through family contacts, then, from about 1985 onward, on a more open and organised basis.<sup>12</sup> Gradually, more and more of the communities sought out the Zapatistas to help them defend themselves from the police or the farmers' armed "white guards,"<sup>13</sup> more and more became Zapatista communities, some of their members joining the EZLN on a full-time basis, some forming part of the part-time militia, the rest of the community giving material support to the insurgents. Gradually, the EZLN was transformed from being a guerrilla group to being a community in arms.

The community in question is in some respects a special community. The communities of the Lacandon Jungle are of recent formation, most of them dating from the 1950s and 1960s, when the government encouraged colonisation of the jungle by landless peasants, most of whom moved from other areas of Chiapas, in many cases simply transplanting whole villages. There is a long tradition of struggle, both preceding the formation of the communities in the jungle, and then, very intensely, throughout the 1970s and 1980s, as the people fought to get enough land to ensure their own survival, as they tried to secure the legal basis of their landholdings, as they fought to maintain their existence against the expansion of the cattle ranches, as they resisted the threat to their survival posed by two government measures in particular, the Decree of the Lacandon Community,<sup>14</sup> which threatened to expropriate a large part of the Lacandon Jungle, and the 1992 reform of Article 27 of the Constitution, which, by opening the countryside up to private investment, threatened to undermine the system of collective landholding. The communities of the Lacandon Jungle are special in many respects, but arguably the rethinking of revolutionary theory and practice could have resulted from immersion in any community: what was important was probably not the specific characteristics of the Lacandon Jungle, so much as the transformation from being a group of dedicated young men and women into being an armed community of

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12 See the account given by Tello (*La Rebelión*, 105) of the meeting between some of the insurgent leaders and the community of the *ejido* of San Francisco on September 23, 1985.

13 See the account given by Marcos in an interview with Radio UNAM, March 18, 1994 (*EZLN, La Palabra*, vol. 2, 69). The "white guards" are paid paramilitary groups who, often in collusion with the authorities, violently suppress protest and dissent.

14 Decree of the Lacandon Community, see Tello, *La Rebelión*, 59ff.

women, men, children, young, old, ill—all with their everyday struggles not just for survival but for humanity.

The Zapatistas learned the pain of the community: the poverty, the hunger, the constant threat of harassment by the authorities or the “white guards,” the unnecessary deaths from curable diseases. When asked in an interview which death had affected him most, Marcos told how a girl of three or four years old, Paticha (her way of saying Patricia), had died in his arms in a village. She had started a fever at six o'clock in the evening, and by ten o'clock she was dead: there was no medicine in the village that could help to lower her fever. “And that happened many times, it was so everyday, so everyday that those births are not even taken into account. For example, Paticha never had a birth certificate, which means that for the country she never existed, for the statistical office (INEGI), therefore her death never existed either. And like her, there were thousands, thousands and thousands, and as we grew in the communities, as we had more villages, more comrades died. Just because death was natural, now it started to be ours.”<sup>15</sup> From such experiences arose the conviction that revolution was something that the Zapatistas owed to their children: “We, their fathers, their mothers, their brothers and sisters, did not want to bear anymore the guilt of doing nothing for our children.”<sup>16</sup>

They learned the struggles of the people, both the struggles of the present and the struggles of the past, the continuing struggle of past and present. The culture of the people is a culture of struggle. Marcos tells of the storytelling by the campfire at night in the mountains—“stories of apparitions, of the dead, of earlier struggles, of things that have happened, all mixed together. It seems that they are talking of the revolution (of the Mexican Revolution, the past one not the one that is happening now) and at moments of now. It seems that is mixed up with the colonial period, and sometimes it seems that it is the pre-Hispanic period.”<sup>17</sup> The culture of struggle permeates the Zapatista *comunicados*, often in the form of stories and myths: Marcos's stories of Old Antonio (*el viejo Antonio*) are a favourite way of passing on a culture impregnated with the wisdom of struggle.

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15 Radio UNAM interview with Marcos, March 18, 1994, see EZLN, *La Palabra*, vol. 2, 69–70.

16 Marcos, Letter to children of a boarding school in Guadalajara, February 8, 1994, see EZLN, *La Palabra*, vol. 1, 179.

17 Radio UNAM interview with Marcos, March 18, 1994, EZLN, see *La Palabra*, vol. 2, 62.

And they learned to listen. “That is the great lesson that the indigenous communities teach to the original EZLN. The original EZLN, the one that is formed in 1983, is a political organisation in the sense that it speaks and what it says has to be done. The indigenous communities teach it to listen, and that is what we learn. The principal lesson that we learn from the indigenous people is that we have to learn to hear, to listen.”<sup>18</sup> Learning to listen meant incorporating new perspectives and new concepts into their theory. Learning to listen meant learning to talk as well, not just explaining things in a different way but thinking them in a different way.

Above all, learning to listen meant turning everything upside down. The revolutionary tradition of talking is not just a bad habit. It has a long-established theoretical basis in the concepts of Marxism-Leninism. The tradition of talking derives, on the one hand, from the idea that theory (class consciousness) must be brought to the masses by the party and, on the other, from the idea that capitalism must be analysed from above, from the movement of capital rather than from the movement of anti-capitalist struggle. When the emphasis shifts to listening, both of these theoretical suppositions are undermined. The whole relation between theory and practice is thrown into question: theory can no longer be seen as being brought from outside but is obviously the product of everyday practice. And dignity takes the place of imperialism as the starting point of theoretical reflection.

Dignity was presumably not part of the conceptual baggage of the revolutionaries who went into the jungle. It is not a word that appears very much in the literature of the Marxist tradition.<sup>19</sup> It could only emerge as a revolutionary concept in the course of a revolution by a people steeped in the dignity of struggle.<sup>20</sup> But once it appears (consciously or uncon-

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18 Marcos interview with Cristián Calónico Lucio, November 11, 1995, ms. 47. The interview is unpublished in written form but formed the basis of a video.

19 Ernst Bloch's *Naturrecht und Menschliche Würde* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1961) is a notable exception. Although theoretically very relevant, it probably did not exercise any influence on the Zapatistas.

20 In a recent interview, Marcos confirms that it was as a result of the integration of the revolutionaries with the indigenous communities that they started using the concept of dignity. “More than the redistribution of wealth or the expropriation of the means of production, revolution starts to be the possibility that human beings can have a space of dignity. Dignity begins to be a very

sciously) as a central concept, then it implies a rethinking of the whole revolutionary project, both theoretically and in terms of organisation. The whole conception of revolution becomes turned outward: revolution becomes a question rather than an answer. “*Preguntando caminamos*—asking we walk” becomes a central principle of the revolutionary movement, the radically democratic concept at the centre of the Zapatista call for “freedom, democracy, and justice.” The revolution advances by asking not by telling; or perhaps even revolution is asking instead of telling, the dissolution of power relations.

Here too the Zapatistas learned from (and developed) the tradition of the indigenous communities. The idea and practice of their central organisational principle, “*mandar obedeciendo*” (“to command obeying”), derives from the practice of all important decisions being discussed by the whole community until consensus is reached, with all holders of positions of authority assumed to be immediately recallable if they do not satisfy the community, if they do not command obeying the community. Thus the decision to go to war was not taken by some central committee and then handed down but was discussed by all the communities in village assemblies.<sup>21</sup> The whole organisation is structured along the same principle: the ruling body, the CCRI is composed of recallable delegates chosen by the different ethnic groups (Tzotzil, Tzeltal, Tojolabal, and Chol), and each ethnic group and each region has its own committees chosen in assemblies on the same principle.

The changes wreaked in those ten years of confrontation between the received ideas of revolution and the reality of the indigenous peoples of Chiapas were very deep. Marcos is quoted in one book as saying, “I think that our only virtue as theorists was to have the humility to recognise that our theoretical scheme did not work, that it was very limited, that we had to adapt ourselves to the reality that was being imposed on us.”<sup>22</sup>

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strong word. It is not our contribution, it is not a contribution of the urban element, it is the communities who contribute it. Such that revolution should be the assurance that dignity be realised, be respected.” Yvon Le Bot, *El Sueño Zapatista* [The Zapatista Dream] (Mexico City: Plaza & Janés, 1997), 146.

21 See, for example, the Marcos's interview with correspondents from the *Proceso*, *El Financiero* and the *New York Times*, February 1994, see EZLN, *La Palabra*, vol. 1, 204, at 216.

22 Guido Camú Urzúa and Dauno Tótoro Taulis, *EZLN: el ejército que salió de la selva* (Mexico City: Editorial Planeta, 1994), 83.



However, the result was not that reality imposed itself on theory, as some argue,<sup>23</sup> but that the confrontation with reality gave rise to a whole new and immensely rich theorisation of revolutionary practice.

### III. The Revolt of Dignity Is an Undefined Revolt

A revolution that listens, a revolution that takes as its starting point the dignity of those in revolt, is inevitably an undefined revolution, a revolution in which the distinction between rebellion and revolution loses meaning. The revolution is a moving outward rather than a moving toward.

There is no transitional programme, no definite goal. There is, of course, an aim: the achievement of a society based on dignity, or, in the words of the Zapatista slogan, “democracy, freedom, justice.” But just what this means and what concrete steps need to be taken to achieve it is never spelled out. This has at times been criticised by those educated in the classical revolutionary traditions as a sign of the political immaturity of the Zapatistas or of their reformism, but it is the logical complement of putting dignity at the centre of the revolutionary project. If the revolution is built on the dignity of those in struggle, if a central principle is the idea of “*preguntando caminamos*—asking we walk,” then it follows that it must be self-creative, a revolution created in the process of struggle. If the revolution is not only to achieve democracy as an end but is democratic in its struggle, then it is impossible to predefine its path, or indeed to think of a defined point of arrival. Whereas the concept of revolution that has predominated in this century has been overwhelmingly instrumentalist,<sup>24</sup> a conception of a means designed to achieve an end, this conception breaks down as soon as the starting point becomes the dignity of those in struggle. The revolt of dignity forces us to think of revolution in a new way, as a rebellion that cannot be defined or confined, a rebellion that overflows, a revolution that is by its very nature ambiguous and contradictory.

The Zapatista uprising is in the first place a revolt of the indigenous peoples of the Lacandon Jungle, of the Tzeltals, Tzotzils, Chols, and Tojolabals who live in that part of the state of Chiapas. For them, the conditions of living were (and are) such that the only choice, as they see it, is

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23 Camú and Tótoro, *EZLN*.

24 The supreme example of the instrumentalist theory of revolution is, of course, Lenin’s *What Is to Be Done?*

between dying an undignified death, the slow unsung death of misery suffered, and dying with dignity, the death of those fighting for their own dignity and the dignity of those around them. The government has consistently tried to define and confine the uprising in those terms, as a matter limited to the state of Chiapas, but the Zapatistas have always refused to accept this. This was, indeed, the main point over which the first dialogue, the dialogue of San Cristóbal, broke down.<sup>25</sup>

The Zapatista uprising is the assertion of indigenous dignity. The opening words of the Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle, read from the balcony of the town hall of San Cristóbal on the morning of January 1, 1994, were: "We are the product of 500 years of struggles."<sup>26</sup> The uprising came just over a year after the demonstrations throughout America that marked the 500th anniversary of Columbus's "discovery." On that occasion, October 12, 1992, the Zapatistas had already marched through San Cristóbal, when about ten thousand indigenous people, most of them Zapatistas under another guise, had taken the streets of the city.<sup>27</sup> January 1, 1994, made the Zapatistas the focus of the increasingly active indigenous movement in Mexico. When the EZLN began its dialogue with the government in April 1995, the dialogue of San Andrés Larrainzar, the first theme for discussion was indigenous rights and culture. The Zapatistas used the dialogue to give cohesion to the indigenous struggle, asking representatives of all the main indigenous organisations of the country to join them as consultants or guests in the workshops that were part of concluding that phase of the Indigenous Forum held in San Cristóbal in January 1996. The Indigenous Forum led in turn to the setting up of the Congreso Nacional Indígena,<sup>28</sup> which gives a national focus to previously dispersed indigenous struggles. The first phase of the dialogue of San Andrés also led to the signing of an agreement with the government designed to lead to changes in the constitution that would radically improve the legal position of indigenous peoples within the country, granting them important areas of autonomy.<sup>29</sup>

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25 See the CCRI communiqué of June 10, 1994; and EZLN, *La Palabra*, vol. 2, 201.

26 EZLN, *La Palabra*, vol. 1, 5.

27 See the account given by Tello (*La Rebelión*, 151); see also Le Bot (*El Sueño*, 191).

28 National Indigenous Congress.

29 At the time of writing, the agreement still has not been implemented by the government.

The Zapatista movement, however, has never claimed to be just an indigenous movement.<sup>30</sup> Overwhelmingly indigenous in composition, the EZLN has always made clear that it is fighting for a broader cause. Its struggle is for all those “without voice, without face, without tomorrow,” a category that stretches far beyond the indigenous peoples. The demands they make (work, land, housing, food, health, education, independence, freedom, democracy, justice, and peace . . .) are not demands limited to the indigenous: they are demands for all. The Zapatista movement is a movement for *national* liberation, a movement not just for the liberation of the indigenous but of all.

The fact that the EZLN is an Army of National Liberation seems to give a clear definition to the movement. There have been many other movements (and wars) of national liberation in different parts of the world (Vietnam, Angola, Mozambique, Cambodia, Nicaragua, etc). Here we have what appears to be a clearly defined and well-established framework: national liberation movements typically aim to liberate a national territory from foreign influence (the control of a colonial or neo-colonial power) and to establish a government of national liberation designed to introduce radical social changes and establish national economic autonomy. If the Zapatista movement were a national liberation movement in that sense, if the history of such movements is anything to go by, there would be little to get excited about: it might be worthy of support and solidarity, but there would be nothing radically new about it. This indeed has been the position of some critics on the Left.<sup>31</sup>

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30 On the refusal of the Zapatistas to define their movement as an indigenous movement, see Le Bot, *El Sueño*, 206, where Marcos says in interview: “The principal preoccupation of the Committee [CCRI] and of the delegates was that the movement should not be reduced to the indigenous question. On the contrary, if it had been up to them, at least to that part of the committee [those who come from the areas with the strongest traditions] our discourse would have abandoned completely any reference to the indigenous.”

31 The Zapatista use of national symbols, such as the Mexican flag and the national anthem, disconcerted some, especially among the European participants in the recent Intercontinental Gathering in Chiapas. For a critique of the alleged “nationalism” of the EZLN, see, for example, Sylvie Deneuve, Charles Reeve, and Marc Geoffroy, *Au-delà des passe-montagnes du Sud-Est mexicain* (Paris: Ab irato, 1996); and Katerina, “Mexico is not only Chiapas nor is the rebellion in Chiapas merely a Mexican affair,” *Common Sense*, no. 22 (Winter 1997).

Looked at more closely, however, the apparent definition of "Army of National Liberation" begins to dissolve. In the context of the uprising, the term "national liberation" has more a sense of moving outward than of moving inward: "national" in the sense of "not just Chiapanecan" or "not just indigenous," rather than "national" in the sense of "not foreign."<sup>32</sup> "Nation" is also used in the Zapatista communiqués in the less clearly defined sense of "homeland" (*patria*): the place where we happen to live, a space to be defended not just against imperialists but also (and more directly) against the state. "Nation" is counterposed to the state, so that national liberation can even be understood as the liberation of Mexico from the Mexican state or the defence of Mexico (or indeed whatever territory) against the state. "Nation" in this sense refers to the idea of struggling wherever one happens to live, fighting against oppression, fighting for dignity. That the Zapatista movement is a movement of national liberation does not confine or restrict the movement to Mexico: it can be understood rather as meaning a movement of liberation, wherever you happen to be (and whatever you happen to do). The fight for dignity cannot be restricted to national frontiers: "dignity," in the wonderful expression used by Marcos in the invitation to the Intercontinental Gathering held in the Lacandon Jungle in July 1996, "is that homeland without nationality, that rainbow that is also a bridge, that murmur of the heart no matter what blood lives in it, that rebel irreverence that mocks frontiers, customs officials, and wars."<sup>33</sup> It is consistent with this interpretation of "national liberation" that one of the principal slogans of the Zapatistas recently has been the theme chosen for the Intercontinental Gathering, "for humanity and against neoliberalism."<sup>34</sup>

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32 In this sense, for example, see the Third Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle (January 1, 1995): "The indigenous question will not be solved unless there is a *radical* transformation of the national pact. The only way to incorporate, with justice and dignity, the indigenous peoples into the nation is by recognising the peculiar characteristics of their social, cultural, and political organisation. The autonomies are not a separation but rather the integration of the most humiliated and forgotten minorities into contemporary Mexico. That is how the EZLN has understood it since its formation and that is how the indigenous bases that form the leadership of our organisation have directed. Today we repeat it: *our struggle is national*," see *La Jornada*, January 2, 1995, 5.

33 *La Jornada*, January 30, 1996, 12.

34 This is, of course, not the only interpretation possible. See, for example, Deneuve, Geoffroy, and Reeve, *Au-delà des passe-montagne*. Although it seems

The open-ended nature of the Zapatista movement is summed up in the idea that it is a revolution not a Revolution (“with small letters, to avoid polemics with the many vanguards and safeguards of *the revolution*”).<sup>35</sup> It is a revolution, because the claim to dignity in a society built upon the negation of dignity can only be met through a radical transformation of society. But it is not a Revolution in the sense of having some grand plan, in the sense of a movement designed to bring about the Great Event that will change the world. Its revolutionary claim lies not in the preparation for the future Event but in the present inversion of perspective, in the consistent insistence on seeing the world in terms that are incompatible with the world as it is: human dignity. Revolution refers to present existence not to future instrumentality.

#### **IV. The Revolt of Dignity Is a Revolt against Definition**

The undefined, open-ended character of the Zapatista movement sometimes rouses the frustrations of those schooled in a harder-edged revolutionary tradition. Behind the lack of definition there is, however, a much sharper point. The lack of definition does not result from theoretical slackness: on the contrary, revolution is essentially anti-definitional.

The traditional Leninist concept of revolution is crucially definitional. At its centre is the idea that the struggles of the working class are inevitably limited in character, that they cannot rise above reformist demands, unless there is the intervention of a revolutionary party. The working class is a “they” who cannot go beyond certain limits without outside intervention. The self-emancipation of the proletariat is impossible.<sup>36</sup>

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incorrect to interpret the Zapatista use of national liberation in the narrow, statist sense, there is no doubt that the term “national liberation” opens up an enormous and dangerous area of ambiguity, simply because the notion of “nation” and “state” have been so interwoven that it is difficult to disentangle them completely. It is argued below that the undoubted contradictions and tensions in the discourse of the Zapatistas are not the result of eclecticism but are the outcome of the consistent pursuit of the principle of dignity. They are not necessarily less serious for that. For a further discussion of Zapatista nationalism, see REDaktion, ed., *Chiapas und die Internationale der Hoffnung* (Cologne: Neuer ISP-Verlag, 1997), 178–84.

35 Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos, “México: La Luna entre los espejos de la noche y el cristal del día,” *La Jornada*, June 11, 1995, 17.

36 This is most clearly elaborated in Lenin’s *What Is to Be Done?* For example: “We said that there could not yet be Social-Democratic consciousness among

The emphasis on dignity puts the unlimited at the centre of picture, not just the undefined but the anti-definitional. Dignity, understood as a category of struggle, is a tension that points beyond itself. The assertion of dignity implies the present negation of dignity. Dignity, then, is the struggle against the denial of dignity, the struggle for the realisation of dignity. Dignity is and is not: it is the struggle against its own negation. If dignity were simply the assertion of something that already is, then it would be an absolutely flabby concept, an empty complacency. To simply assert human dignity as a principle (as in “all humans have dignity,” or “all humans have a right to dignity”) would be either so general as to be meaningless or, worse, so general as to obscure the fact that existing society is based on the negation of dignity.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, if dignity were simply the assertion of something that is not, then it would be an empty daydream or a religious wish. The concept of dignity only gains force if it is understood in its double dimension, as the struggle against its own denial. One is dignified, or true, only by struggling against present indignity, or untruth. Dignity implies a constant moving against the barriers of that which exists, a constant subversion and transcendence of definitions. Dignity, understood as a category of struggle, is a fundamentally anti-identitarian concept: not “my dignity as a Mexican . . .” but “our dignity is our struggle against the negation of that dignity.”

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the workers. This consciousness could only be brought to them from without. The history of all countries shows that the working class, exclusively by its own effort, is able to develop only trade union consciousness. . . . The theory of socialism, however, grew out of the philosophical, historical and economic theories that were elaborated by the educated representatives of the propertied classes, the intellectuals”: V.I. Lenin, “What Is to Be Done,” in *Essential Works of Lenin* (New York: Bantam Books, 1966), 74.

- 37 The notion of dignity is little used by mainstream political theory. Where it is used, it is often connected with notions of self-ownership (for example, Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State and Utopia* [New York: Basic Books, 1981], 334) or self-possession (for example, Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice* [Oxford: Blackwell, 1983, 279]). The use of the term in mainstream political theory and philosophy differs crucially from the Zapatista concept in two respects: first, its primary point of reference is the individual; and, second, it refers to an abstract, indeterminate and idealised present in which it is assumed that people already have the “right” to dignity. At best, this is a sort of flabby wishful thinking that has little to do with the Zapatista concept of dignity as struggle against the denial of dignity, and is far removed indeed from seeing “our fathers with fury in their hands.”

Dignity is neither characteristic of the indigenous of the southeast of Mexico nor to those overtly involved in revolutionary struggle. It is simply a characteristic of life in an oppressive society. It is the cry of "Enough!" (*¡Ya basta!*) that is inseparable from the experience of oppression. Oppression cannot be total; whatever its form, it is always a pressure that is confronted by a counter-pressure, dehumanisation confronted by humanity. Domination implies resistance and dignity.<sup>38</sup> Dignity is the other side, too often forgotten, too often stifled, of what Marx called alienation: it is the struggle of dis-alienation, of defetishisation.<sup>39</sup> It is the struggle for recognition but for the recognition of a self currently negated.

Dignity is the lived experience that the world is *not* so, that that is *not* the way things are. It is the lived rejection of positivism, of those forms of thought that start from the assumption that "that's the way things are." It is the cry of existence of that which has been silenced by "the world that is," the refusal to be shut out by Is-ness, the scream against being forgotten in the fragmentation of the world into the disciplines of social science that break reality and, in breaking, exclude, suppressing the suppressed. Dignity is the cry of "here we are!," the "here we are!" of the indigenous peoples forgotten by neoliberal modernisation, the "here we are!" of the growing numbers of poor who somehow do not show in the statistics of economic growth and the financial reports, the "here we are!" of the gay whose sexuality was for so long not recognised, the "here we are!" of the elderly shut away to die in the retirement homes of the richer countries, the "here we are!" of the women closed into the houses whose wives they are, the "here we are!" of the millions of illegal migrants<sup>40</sup> who are not where, officially, they should be, the "here we are!" of all those pleasures of human life excluded by the growing subjection of humanity to the market. Dignity is the cry of those who are not heard, the voice of those without voice. Dignity is the truth of truth denied.<sup>41</sup>

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38 See, for example, James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

39 This argument is developed in section V.

40 It is not surprising that the *¡Ya basta!* of the Zapatistas has been strongly echoed by the *"sans papiers,"* the movement of illegal immigrants in France.

41 The Zapatistas use truth and dignity as basically interchangeable concepts. The Zapatistas speak of what they say as the "word of those who are armed with truth and fire" (*"la palabra de los armados de verdad y fuego"*). The fire is there, but the truth comes first, not just as a moral attribute but as a weapon: they are

Us they forgot more and more, and history was no longer big enough for us to die just like that, forgotten and humiliated. Because dying does not hurt, what hurts is being forgotten. Then we discovered that we no longer existed, that those who govern had forgotten us in the euphoria of statistics and growth rates. A country which forgets itself is a sad country, a country which forgets its past cannot have a future. And then we seized our arms and went into the cities where we were animals. And we went and said to the powerful "here we are!" and to all the country we shouted "here we are!" and to all the world we shouted "here we are!" And see how odd things are because, for them to see us, we covered our faces; for them to name us, we gave up our name; we gambled the present to have a future; and to live . . . we died.<sup>42</sup>

This "here we are!" is not the "here we are!" of mere identity. It is a "here we are!" that derives its meaning from the denial of that presence. It is not a static "here we are!" but a movement, an assault on the barriers of exclusion. It is the breaking of barriers, the moving against separations, classifications, definitions, the assertion of unities that have been defined out of existence.

Dignity is an assault on the separation of morality and politics, and of the private and the public. Dignity cuts across those boundaries, asserts the unity of what has been sundered. The assertion of dignity is neither a moral nor a political claim: it is rather an attack on the separation of politics and morality that allows formally democratic regimes all over the world to co-exist with growing levels of poverty and social marginalisation. It is the "here we are!" not just of the marginalised but of the horror felt by all of us in the face of mass impoverishment and starvation. It is the "here we are!" not just of the growing numbers shut away in prisons, hospitals, and homes but also of the shame and disgust of all of us who, by living, participate in the bricking up of people in those prisons, hospitals, and homes. Dignity is an assault on the conventional definition of politics

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*armed* with truth, and this is a more important weapon than the firepower of their guns. Although they are organised as an army, they aim to win by truth not by fire. Their truth is not just that they speak the truth about their situation or about the country, but that they are true to themselves, that they speak the truth of truth denied.

42 Communiqué of March 17, 1995, see *La Jornada*, March 22, 1995.



but equally on the acceptance of that definition in the instrumental conception of revolutionary politics that has for so long subordinated the personal to the political, with such disastrous results. Probably nothing has done more to undermine the “Left” in this century than this separation of the political and the personal, of the public and the private, and the dehumanisation that it entails.

Dignity encapsulates in one word the rejection of the separation of the personal and the political.<sup>43</sup> To a remarkable extent, this group of rebels in the jungle of the southeast of Mexico have crystallised and advanced the themes of oppositional thought and action that have been discussed throughout the world in recent years: the issues of gender, age, childhood, death, and the dead. All flow from understanding politics as a politics of dignity, a politics that recognises the particular oppression and respects the struggles of women, children, and the old. Respect for the struggles of the old is a constant theme of Marcos’s stories, particularly through the figure of Old Antonio, but it was also forcefully underlined by the emergence of Comandante Trinidad as one of the leading figures in the dialogue of San Andrés. The way in which women have imposed recognition of their struggles on the Zapatista men is well known and can be seen, for example, in the Revolutionary Law for Women, issued on the first day of the uprising, or in the fact that it was a woman, Ana María, who led the most important military action undertaken by the Zapatistas, the occupation of the town hall in San Cristóbal on January 1, 1994. The question of childhood and the freedom to play is a constant theme in Marcos’s letters. The stories, jokes, and poetry of the communiqués and the dances that punctuate all that the Zapatistas do are not embellishments of a revolutionary process but central to it.

The struggle of dignity is the “here we are!” of jokes, poetry, dancing, old age, childhood, games, death, love—of all those things excluded by serious bourgeois politics and serious revolutionary politics alike. As such, the struggle of dignity is opposed to the state. The Zapatista

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43 The separation of personal and political, of private and public, is at the same time their mutual constitution. The point is not to conflate the personal and the political, the public and the private, but to abolish them (to abolish the separation that constitutes both). On this, see Karl Marx, “On the Jewish Question,” Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 3 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975). To that extent, the phrase “the personal is political” is misleading.

movement is an anti-state movement, not just in the obvious sense that the EZLN took up arms against the Mexican state but in the much more profound sense that their forms of organisation, action, and discourse are non-state, or, more precisely, anti-state forms.

The state defines and classifies and by so doing excludes. This is not by chance. The state, any state, embedded as it is in the global web of capitalist social relations, functions in such a way as to reproduce the capitalist status quo.<sup>44</sup> In its relation to us, and in our relation to it, there is a filtering out of anything that is not compatible with the reproduction of capitalist social relations. This may be a violent filtering, as in the repression of revolutionary or subversive activity, but it is also and above all a less perceptible filtering, a sidelining or suppression of passions, loves, hates, anger, laughter, dancing. Discontent is redefined as demands and demands are classified and defined, excluding all that is not reconcilable with the reproduction of capitalist social relations. The discontented are classified in the same way and the indigestible excluded with a greater or lesser degree of violence. The cry of dignity, the "here we are!" of the unpalatable and indigestible, can only be a revolt against classification, against definition as such.

The state is pure Is-ness, pure Identity. Power says, "I am who am, the eternal repetition."<sup>45</sup> The state is the great Classifier. Power says to the rebels: "Be ye not awkward, refuse not to be classified. All that cannot be classified counts not, exists not, is not."<sup>46</sup> The struggle of the state against the Zapatistas since the declaration of the ceasefire has been a struggle to define, to classify, to limit; the struggle of the Zapatistas against the state has been the struggle to break out, to break the barriers, to overflow, to refuse definition or to accept-and-transcend definition.

The dialogue between the government and the EZLN, first in San Cristóbal in March 1994, and then in San Andrés Larrainzar since April 1995, has been a constant double movement. The government has constantly

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44 It is as a form of the capital relation that the state defines and classifies. The defining action of the state is one moment of the definition inherent in the alienation of labour, the containment of human creativity. For a development of the general argument, see John Holloway, "Global Capital and the National State," in *Global Capital, National State and the Politics of Money*, eds. Werner Bonefeld and John Holloway (London: Macmillan, 1995), 116–40.

45 Communiqué of May 1996, see *La Jornada*, June 10, 1996.

46 Ibid.

sought to define and limit the Zapatista movement, to “make it small,” as one of the government representatives put it. It has constantly sought to define Zapatismo as a movement limited to Chiapas, with no right to discuss matters of wider importance. It did sign agreements on the question of indigenous rights and autonomy but apparently without having at the time any intention of implementing them.<sup>47</sup> In the section of the dialogue devoted to democracy and justice, however, the government representatives made no serious contribution and have apparently no intention of signing agreements. The Zapatistas, on the other hand, have constantly used the dialogue to break out, to overcome their geographical isolation in the Lacandon Jungle. They have done this partly through their daily press conferences during the sessions of the dialogue but also by negotiating the procedural right to invite advisers and guests, and then inviting hundreds of them to participate in the sessions on indigenous rights and culture and on democracy and justice: advisers from a very wide range of indigenous and community organisations, complemented by a wide range of academics. Each of the two topics also provided the basis for organising a Forum in San Cristóbal, first on Indigenous Rights and Culture in January 1996, and then on the Reform of the State in July of the same year, both attended by a very large number of activists from all over the country.

On the one hand, the government’s drive to limit, define, make small, on the other, the (generally very successful) Zapatista push to break the cordon. On the one hand, a politics of definition, on the other, a politics of overflowing. This does not mean that the Zapatistas have not sought to define: on the contrary, defining constitutional reforms on indigenous autonomy is seen by them as an important achievement. But it has been a definition that overflows, thematically and politically. The definition of indigenous rights is seen not as an endpoint but as a start, as a basis for moving on to other areas of change but also as a basis for taking the movement forward, a basis for breaking out.

The difference in approach between the two sides of the dialogue has at times resulted in incidents that reflect not only the arrogance of the government negotiators but also the lack of understanding derived from their perspective as representatives of the state. This has even been expressed in how time is understood. Given the bad conditions of communication

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47 At the time of writing (February 1997), the agreement still has not been implemented by the government.

in the Lacandon Jungle and the need to discuss everything thoroughly, the Zapatista principle of “*mandar obedeciendo*” (“to command obeying”) means that decisions take time. When the government representatives insisted on rapid replies, the Zapatistas replied that they did not understand the indigenous clock. As recounted by Comandante David afterwards, the Zapatistas explained: “We, as Indians, have rhythms, forms of understanding, of deciding, of reaching agreements. And when we told them that, they replied by making fun of us. ‘Well then,’ they said, ‘we don’t understand why you say that, because we see that you have Japanese watches, so how do you say that you use the indigenous clock, that’s from Japan.’”<sup>48</sup> And Comandante Tacho commented: “They haven’t learned. They understand us backwards. We use time, not the clock.”<sup>49</sup>

Even more fundamentally, the state representatives have been unable to understand the concept of dignity. In one of the press conferences held during the dialogue of San Andrés, Comandante Tacho recounts that the government negotiators “told us that they are studying what dignity means, that they are consulting and making studies on dignity. That what they understood was that dignity is service to others. And they asked us to tell them what we understand by dignity. We told them to continue with their research. It makes us laugh, and we laughed in front of them. They asked us why, and we told them that they have big research centres and big studies in schools of a high standard and that it would be a shame if they do not accept that. We told them that if we sign the peace, then we will tell them at the end what dignity means for us.”<sup>50</sup>

The Zapatista sense of satire and their refusal to be defined is turned not only against the state but also against the more traditional “definitional” Left. In a letter dated February 20, 1995, when the Zapatistas were retreating from the army after the military intervention of February 9, Marcos imagines an interrogation by the state prosecutor consisting of the accusations and his responses:

The whites accuse you of being black: Guilty.

The blacks accuse you of being white: Guilty.

The machos accuse you of being feminist: Guilty.

The feminists accuse you of being macho: Guilty.

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48 *La Jornada*, May 17, 1995.

49 *La Jornada*, May 18, 1995.

50 *La Jornada*, June 10, 1995.

The communists accuse you of being an anarchist: Guilty.  
The anarchists accuse you of being orthodox: Guilty.  
The reformists accuse you of being an extremist: Guilty.  
The “historical vanguard” accuses you of appealing to civil society  
and not to the proletariat: Guilty.  
Civil society accuses you of disturbing its tranquillity: Guilty.  
The stock market accuses you of spoiling their lunch: Guilty.  
The serious people accuse you of being a joker: Guilty.  
The jokers accuse you of being serious: Guilty.  
The adults accuse you of being a child: Guilty.  
The children accuse you of being an adult: Guilty.  
The orthodox leftists accuse you for not condemning homosexuals  
and lesbians: Guilty.  
The theorists accuse you for being practical: Guilty.  
The practitioners accuse you for being theoretical: Guilty.  
Everybody accuses you for everything bad that happens to them:  
Guilty.<sup>51</sup>

Dignity’s revolt mocks classification. As it must, because dignity makes sense only if understood as being-and-not-being, and therefore defying definition or classification. Dignity is that which pushes from itself toward itself, and cannot be reduced to a simple “is.” The state, any state, on the other hand, is. The state, as its name suggests, imposes a state, an Is-ness, upon that which pushes beyond existing social relations. Dignity is a moving outward, an overflowing, a fountain; the state is a moving inward, a containment, a cistern.<sup>52</sup> The failure to understand dignity is not peculiar to the Mexican state: it is simply that statehood and dignity are incompatible. There is no fit between them.

Dignity’s revolt, therefore, cannot aim at winning state power. From the beginning, the Zapatistas made it clear that they did not want to win power, and they have repeated it ever since. Many on the more traditional “definitional” Left were scandalised with the more concrete repudiation of winning power in the Fourth Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle at

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51 *La Jornada*, March 5, 1995.

52 “The cistern contains; the fountain overflows.” William Blake, “Proverbs of Heaven and Hell,” in, for example, Jacob Bronowski, ed., *William Blake: A Selection of Poems and Letters* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1958), 97.

the beginning of 1996, when the Zapatistas launched the formation of the Zapatista Front of National Liberation (FZLN) and made rejection of all ambition to hold state office a condition of membership.<sup>53</sup> The repudiation of state power is, however, simply an extension of the idea of dignity. The state, any state, is so bound into the web of global capitalist social relations that it has no option, whatever the composition of the government, but to promote the reproduction of those relations, and that means defining and degrading. To assume state power would inevitably be to abandon dignity. The revolt of dignity can only aim at abolishing the state or, more immediately, at developing alternative forms of social organisation and strengthening anti-state power. "It is not necessary to conquer the world. It is enough to make it anew."<sup>54</sup>

The central principles on which the Zapatistas have insisted in developing alternative forms of social organisation are those of "*mandar obedeciendo*" ("to command obeying") and "*preguntando caminamos*" ("asking we walk"). They have emphasised time and again the importance of making all important decisions through a collective process of discussion, and that the way forward cannot be a question of their imposing their line but of opening up spaces for discussion and democratic decision where their view would only be one among many. In relation to the state (and assuming that the state still exists), they have said many times that they do not want to hold state office, that it does not matter which party holds state office as long as those in authority "command obeying." The problem of revolutionary politics is not to win power but to develop forms of political articulation that would force those in office to obey the people (so that, fully developed, the separation between state and society would be overcome and the state effectively abolished). Just what this would mean has not been spelled out by the EZLN,<sup>55</sup> apart from the obvious principle that

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53 "A political force whose members do not hold or aspire to hold popularly elected offices nor governmental posts at any level. A political force that does not aspire to take power. A force that is not a political party," see *La Jornada*, January 2, 1996.

54 First Declaration of La Realidad, January 1996, see *La Jornada*, January 30, 1996.

55 They have often mentioned the idea of plebiscites or referendums as a necessary part of a new political system. It is clear, however, from the experience of other states that plebiscites and referendums are quite inadequate as a form of articulating popular decision-making and are in no sense comparable to the communal discussions that are central to the Zapatistas' own practice.

the president or any other office-holder should be instantly recallable if they fail to obey the people's wishes, as is the case with all members of the EZLN's ruling body, the CCRI.<sup>56</sup>

Although the details are not clear and cannot be, since they could only be developed in struggle, the central point is that the focus of revolutionary struggle is shifted from the *what* to the *how* of politics. All the initiatives of the Zapatistas (the Convención Nacional Democrática, the "consultation" on the future of the EZLN, the invitation of advisers to the dialogue with the government, the organisation of the forum on indigenous rights and culture and on the reform of the state, the intercontinental meeting for humanity and against neoliberalism, among others) have been directed at promoting a different way of thinking about political activity. Similarly, all the contacts with the state and even the proposals for the "reform" of the state have in fact been anti-state initiatives in the sense of trying to develop new political forms, forms of action that articulate dignity, forms that do not fit with the state. The principal problem for a revolutionary movement is not to elaborate a programme to say *what* the revolutionary government will do (although the EZLN has its sixteen demands as the basis for such a programme); the principal problem is rather *how* to articulate dignities, how to develop a form of struggle and a form of social organisation based upon the recognition of dignity. Only the articulation of dignities can provide the answer to what should be done: a self-determining society must determine itself.

## V. Dignities Unite

The Zapatistas rose up on January 1, 1994, to change Mexico and to make the world anew. Their base was in the Lacandon Jungle, far from any important urban centre. They were not part of an effective international or even national organisation.<sup>57</sup> Since the declaration of the ceasefire

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56 "And we demand that the authorities should be able to be removed just as soon as the communities decide it and come to an agreement. It could be through a referendum or some other similar mechanism. And we want to transmit this experience to every level: when the president of the Republic is no use any more he should be automatically removed. As simple as that." Press Conference given by Subcomandante Marcos, February 26, 1994, see EZLN, *La Palabra*, vol. 1, 244.

57 If indeed they are part of the FLN, as the state maintains, it has remained remarkably ineffective.

on January 12, 1994, they have remained physically cordoned within the Lacandon Jungle.

Cut off in the jungle, how could the EZLN transform Mexico or, indeed, change the world? Alone there was little that they could do to change the world, or even to defend themselves. "Do not leave us alone" ("*no nos dejen solos*") was an oft-repeated call during the first months of the ceasefire. The effectiveness of the EZLN depended (and depends) inevitably on their ability to break the cordon and overcome their isolation. The revolt of dignity derives its strength from the uniting of dignities.

But how could this uniting of dignities come about when the EZLN itself was cornered in the jungle and there was no institutional structure to support them? Marcos suggests a powerful image in a radio interview in the early months of the uprising:

Marcos, whoever Marcos is, who is in the mountains, had his twins, or his comrades, or his accomplices (not in the organic sense but in terms of how to see the world, the necessity of changing it or seeing it in a different way) in the media, for example, in the newspapers, in the radio, in the television, in the journals, but also in the trade unions, in the schools, among the teachers, among the students, in groups of workers, in peasant organisations and all that. There were many accomplices or, to use a radio term, there were many people tuned in to the same frequency, but nobody turned the radio on. . . . Suddenly they [the comrades of the EZLN] turn it on, and we discover that there are others on the same radio frequency—I'm talking of radio *communication* not *listening* to the radio—and we begin to talk and to communicate and to realise that there are things in common, that it seems there are more things in common than differences.<sup>58</sup>

The idea suggested by Marcos for thinking about the unity of struggles is one of frequencies, of being tuned in, of wavelengths, vibrations, echoes. Dignity resonates. As it vibrates, it sets off vibrations in other dignities, an unstructured, possibly discordant resonance.

There is no doubt of the extraordinary resonance of the Zapatista uprising throughout the world, as evidenced by the participation of over

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<sup>58</sup> Radio UNAM interview with Marcos, March 18, 1994, EZLN, see *La Palabra*, vol. 2, 97.



three thousand people from forty-three countries in the Intercontinental Meeting organised by the EZLN in July 1996. "What is happening in the mountains of the Mexican southeast that finds an echo and a mirror in the streets of Europe, the suburbs of Asia, the countryside of America, the towns of Africa, and the houses of Oceania?"<sup>59</sup> And equally, of course, what is happening in the streets of Europe, the suburbs of Asia, the countryside of America, the towns of Africa, and the houses of Oceania that resonates so strongly with the Zapatista uprising?

The notion of resonance or echo or radio frequency may seem a very vague one. It is not so. The EZLN have engaged in a constant struggle over the past few years to break through the cordon, to overcome their isolation, to forge the unity of dignities on which their future depends. They have fought in many different ways. They have fought with enormous success by letters and communiqués, by jokes and stories, by the use of symbolism, and by the theatre of their events. They have fought by the construction of their "Aguascalientes," the meeting place constructed for the National Democratic Convention (Convención Nacional Democrática) in July 1994, and by the construction of a series of new Aguascalientes in the jungle after the first one was destroyed by the army in February 1995. They have fought too by the creative organisation of a whole series of events that have been important catalysts for the opposition in Mexico and (increasingly) beyond. The first important event was the National Democratic Convention, organised immediately after the EZLN had rejected the proposals made by the government in the Dialogue of San Cristóbal and held just weeks before the presidential elections of August 1994: an event that brought more than six thousand activists into the heart of the jungle only months after the fighting had finished. The following year, the EZLN built on the popular reaction to the February 1995 military intervention to organise a consultation throughout the country on what the future of the EZLN should be, an event attended by over a million people. As previously mentioned, the new dialogue with the government, which began in April 1995, provided the basis for inviting hundreds of activists and specialists to take part as advisers and for organising the forums on Indigenous rights and culture (January 1996) and on the reform of the state (July 1996). The same year also saw the organisation of the

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59 Closing speech by Marcos to the Intercontinental Meeting in La Realidad, see *Chiapas*, no. 3, 106–16, at 107.

Intercontinental Meeting for Humanity and against Neoliberalism, held within the Zapatista territory at the end of July. In each case, these were events that seemed impossible at the time of their announcement and that stirred up enormous enthusiasm in their realisation.

The communiqués and events have also been accompanied by more orthodox attempts to establish lasting organisational structures. The National Democratic Convention (CND) established a standing organisation of the same name, with the aim of coordinating the (non-military) Zapatista struggle for democracy, freedom, and justice throughout the country. After internal conflicts had rendered the CND ineffective, the Third Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle, in January 1995, proposed the creation of a Movement for National Liberation, an organisation that was stillborn. The Fourth Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle, a year later, launched the Frente Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (the Zapatista National Liberation Front—FZLN) to organise the civilian struggle. Although it has provided an important point of organisational support for the Zapatistas, it has stirred up none of the enthusiasm aroused by the EZLN itself.

The relative failure of the institutional attempts to extend the Zapatista struggle lends weight to the argument that the real force of the Zapatista uniting of dignities has to be understood in terms of the much less structured notion of resonance, which is indeed the counterpart of the idea of “*preguntando caminamos*” (“asking we walk”). We advance by asking not by telling: by suggesting, arguing, proposing, inviting, looking for links with the other struggles that are the same struggle, looking for responses, listening for echoes. If those echoes are not there, we can only propose again, argue again, probe again, ask again: we cannot create echoes where they do not exist.

This does not mean that organisation is not important, that it is all just a matter of vibrations and spontaneous combustion. On the contrary, the whole Zapatista uprising shows the importance of profound and careful organisation. It does suggest, however, a different, less structured and more experimental way of thinking about organisation. The concept of organisation must be experimental in a double sense: experimental because there is no pre-given model of revolutionary organisation but also experimental in the sense that the notion of dignity and its corollary, “asking we walk,” mean that revolutionary organisation must be seen as a constant experiment, a constant asking. The notion of dignity does not imply an appeal to spontaneity, the idea that revolt will simply

explode without prior organisation; but it does imply thinking in terms of a multitude of different forms of organisation and, above all, thinking of organisation as a constant experiment, a constant probing, a constant asking, a constant searching: not just to see if together we can find some way out of here, but because the asking is in itself the antithesis of Power.<sup>60</sup>

Yet there is obviously a tension here implied in the very notion of the “uniting of dignities.” The Zapatistas speak not just of “dignity” but of “dignities.” Clearly, then, it is not a question of imposing one dignity or of finding what “true dignity” really means. It is a question rather of recognising the validity of different forms of struggle and different opinions of what realizing dignity means. This does not mean a complete relativism in which all opinions, even fascist ones, are granted equal validity. Conflicts between different dignities are inevitable: it is clear, for example, that the Zapatista women’s understanding of the dignity of their struggle sometimes conflicts with the men’s understanding of their dignity. What the concept of dignity points to is not the correctness of any particular solution to such conflicts, but rather a way of resolving such conflicts in which the particular dignities are recognised and articulated. Even here, the Zapatistas argue that

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60 The question of what sort of organisation should develop out of the Intercontinental Meeting of the summer of 1996 was addressed by Marcos in his closing speech: “What follows? A new number in the useless enumeration of numerous internationals? A new scheme that will give tranquillity and relief to those anguished by the lack of recipes? A world programme for world revolution? A theorisation of utopia that will allow us to maintain a prudent distance from the reality that torments us? An organigram that will secure us all a post, a responsibility, a name and no work? What follows is the echo, the reflected image of the possible and the forgotten: the possibility and necessity of talking and listening. . . . The echo of this rebel voice transforming itself and renewing itself in other voices. An echo that converts itself into many voices, into a network of voices that, in the face of the deafness of Power, chooses to speak to itself, knowing itself to be one and many, knowing itself to be equal in its aspiration to listen and make itself heard, recognising itself to be different in the tonalities and levels of the voices that form it. . . . A network that covers the five continents and helps to resist the death promised to us by Power. There follows a great bag of voices, sounds that seek their place fitting with others. . . . There follows the reproduction of resistances, the I do not conform, the I rebel. There follows the world with many worlds that the world needs. There follows humanity recognising itself to be plural, different, inclusive, tolerant of itself, with hope. There follows the human and rebel voice consulted in the five continents to make itself a network of voices and resistances” (closing speech by Marcos to the Intercontinental Meeting in La Realidad, see *Chiapas*, no. 3, 106–16, at 112).

there is not just one correct way of articulating dignities: while they themselves organise their discussions on the basis of village assemblies, they recognise that this may not be the best form of articulating dignities in all cases. What form the articulation of dignities might take in a big city, for example, is very much an open question, although there are obviously precedents<sup>61</sup> and, in some cases, deep-rooted traditions of forms of direct democracy. The struggle to unite dignities in a world that is based on the denial and fragmentation of dignities is not an easy one.

## **VI. Dignity Is the Revolutionary Subject**

Dignity is a class concept not a humanistic one.

The EZLN do not use the concept of “class” or “class struggle” in their discourse, in spite of the fact that Marxist theory has clearly played an important part in their formation. They have preferred instead to develop a new language, to speak of the struggle of truth and dignity. “We saw that the old words had become so worn out that they had become harmful for those that used them.”<sup>62</sup> In looking for support, or in forming links with other struggles, they have appealed not to the working class or the proletariat but to “civil society.” By “civil society” they seem to mean “society in struggle” in the broadest sense: all those groups and initiatives engaged in latent or overt struggles to assert some sort of control over their future, without aspiring to hold governmental office.<sup>63</sup> In Mexico, the initial reference point is often the forms of autonomous social organisation that arose in Mexico City in response to the earthquake of 1985 and the state’s incapacity to deal with the emergency.

It is not difficult to see why the Zapatistas chose to turn their back on the old words. That does not mean, however, that all the problems connected with these words are thereby erased. The Zapatistas have been criticised by some adherents of the traditional orthodox Marxist Left for not using the concept of class. It is argued that because they do not use the traditional

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61 Obvious precedents are, for example, Marx’s discussion of the Paris Commune in the *Civil War in France* or Pannekoek’s discussion of workers’ councils in the early years of this century.

62 *La Jornada*, August 27, 1995.

63 “Civil society, those people without party who do not aspire to be in a political party in the sense that they do not aspire to be the government, what they want is that the government should keep its word, should do its work”: Marcos interview with Cristián Calónico Lucio, November 11, 1995, MS, 39.

triad of class struggle, revolution, and socialism, preferring instead to speak of dignity, truth, freedom, democracy, and justice, their struggle is a liberal one, an armed reformism that has little possibility of leading to radical change. An extreme form of this sort of application of a class analysis is the argument that the Zapatista uprising is just a peasant movement and, while it should be supported, the proletariat can have little confidence in it.

The orthodox Marxist tradition works with a definitional concept of class. The working class may be defined in various ways: most commonly as those who sell their labour power in order to survive; or as those who produce surplus value and are directly exploited. The important point here is that the working class is defined.

In this approach, any definition of the working class is based on its subordination to capital: it is because it is subordinated to capital (as wage workers or as producers of surplus value) that it is defined as working class. Capitalism, in this approach, is understood as a world of predefined social relations that are firmly fixed or fetishised.<sup>64</sup> The fixity of social relations is taken as the starting point for the discussion of class. Thus, working-class struggle is understood as starting from the pre-constituted subordination of labour to capital. Any sort of struggle that does not fall within this definition is then seen as nonclass struggle (raising problems about how it should be defined).

The definitional approach to class raises two problems. First, it inevitably raises the question of who is and who is not part of the working class. Are intellectuals like Marx and Lenin part of the working class? Are those of us who work in the universities part of the working class? Are the rebels of Chiapas part of the working class? Are feminists part of the working class? Are those active in the gay movement part of the working class? In each case, there is a concept of a predefined working class to which these people do or do not belong.<sup>65</sup>

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64 On the dialectic of constituting and constituted, see the article by Werner Bonefeld, "Capital as Subject and the Existence of Labour," in *Open Marxism* vol. 3, eds. Werner Bonefeld, Richard Gunn, John Holloway, and Kosmas Psychopedis (London: Pluto, 1995), 182–212; see also John Holloway, "The State and Everyday Struggle," in *The State Debate*, ed. Simon Clarke (London: Macmillan, 1991).

65 The understanding of the working class as a defined group has been extended ad infinitum to discussions about the class definition of those who do not fall within this group as new petty bourgeoisie, salariat, etc.

The second and more serious consequence of defining class is the definition of struggles that follows. The classification of the people involved leads to certain conclusions about the struggles in which they are involved. Those who define the Zapatista rebels as not working-class draw certain conclusions about the nature and limitations of the uprising. From the definition of the class position of the participants there follows a definition of their struggles: class defines the antagonism that the definer accepts as valid. This leads to a blinkering of the perception of social antagonism. In some cases, for example, the definition of the working class as the urban proletariat directly exploited in factories combined with evidence of the decreasing proportion of the population who fall within this definition has led people to the conclusion that class struggle is no longer relevant for understanding social change. In other cases, the definition of the working class and working-class struggle in a certain way has led to an incapacity to relate to the development of new forms of struggle (the student movement, feminism, environmentalism, and so on). The definitional understanding of class has done much in recent years to create the situation in which "the old words had become so worn out that they had become harmful for those that used them."

The notion of dignity detonates the *definition* of class but does not thereby cease to be a class concept. It does so because the starting point is no longer a relation of subordination but a relation of struggle, a relation of insubordination/subordination. The starting point of dignity is the negation of humiliation, the struggle against subordination. From this perspective there does not exist a settled, fixed world of subordination upon which definitions can be constructed. Just the contrary: the notion of dignity points to the fact that we are not just subordinated or exploited, that our existence within capitalist society cannot be understood simply in terms of subordination. Dignity points to the fact that subordination cannot be conceived without its opposite, the struggle against subordination, or insubordination. A world of subordination is a world in which subordination is constantly at issue. The forms of social relations in capitalist society cannot be understood simply as fetishised, constituted forms but only as forms that are always in question and that are imposed only through the unceasing struggle of capital to reproduce itself. Once the starting point is dignity, once the starting point is the struggle to convert "dignity and rebellion into freedom and dignity," then all that was fixed becomes shaky, all that appeared to be defined becomes blurred.

From the perspective of dignity, class cannot be understood as a defined group of people. This is quite consistent with Marx's approach. His understanding of capitalism was based not on the antagonism between two groups of people but on the antagonism in the way in which human social practice is organised. Existence in capitalist society is conflictual and antagonistic. Although this antagonism appears as a vast multiplicity of conflicts, it can be argued (and was argued by Marx) that the key to understanding this antagonism and its development is the fact that present society is built upon an antagonism in the way that the distinctive character of humanity, namely creative activity (work in its broadest sense) is organised. In capitalist society, work is turned against itself, alienated from itself; we lose control over our creative activity. This negation of human creativity takes place through the subjection of human activity to the market. This subjection to the market takes place fully when the capacity to work creatively (labour power) becomes a commodity to be sold on the market to those with the capital to buy it. The antagonism between human creativity and its negation thus becomes focused in the antagonism between those who have to sell their creativity and those who appropriate that creativity and exploit it, and in so doing transform that creativity into labour. In shorthand, the antagonism between creativity and its negation can be referred to as the conflict between labour and capital, but this conflict (as Marx makes clear) is not a conflict between two external forces but between work (human creativity) and work alienated.

Social antagonism is not in the first place a conflict between two groups of people: it is a conflict between creative social practice and its negation, in other words, between humanity and its negation, between the transcending of limits (creation) and the imposition of limits (definition). In this interpretation, the conflict does not take place after subordination has been established, after the fetishised forms of social relations have been constituted: rather it is a conflict *about* the subordination of social practice, *about* the fetishisation of social relations.<sup>66</sup> The conflict is between subordination and insubordination, and it is this that allows us to speak of insubordination (or dignity) as a central feature of capitalism.

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66 What Marx calls primitive accumulation is thus a permanent and central feature of capitalism not a historical phase. On this, see Werner Bonefeld, "Class Struggle and the Permanence of Primitive Accumulation," *Common Sense*, no. 6 (1988).

Class struggle does not take place within the constituted forms of capitalist social relations: rather the constitution of those forms is itself class struggle. This leads to a much richer concept of class struggle in which the whole of social practice is at issue. All social practice is an unceasing antagonism between the subjection of practice to the fetishised and perverted defining forms of capitalism and the attempt to live against-and-beyond those forms. There can thus be no question of the existence of nonclass forms of struggle.

Class struggle, in this view, is a conflict that permeates the whole of human existence. We all exist within that conflict, just as the conflict exists within all of us. It is a polar antagonism that we cannot escape. We do not “belong” to one class or another: rather, the class antagonism exists in us, tearing us apart. The antagonism (the class divide) traverses all of us.<sup>67</sup> Nevertheless, it clearly does so in very different ways. Some, the very small minority, participate directly in and/or benefit directly from the appropriation and exploitation of the work of others. Others, the vast majority, are, directly or indirectly the objects of that appropriation and exploitation. The polar nature of the antagonism is thus reflected in a polarisation of the two classes,<sup>68</sup> but the antagonism is prior to not subsequent to the classes: classes are constituted through the antagonism.

Since classes are constituted through the antagonism between work and its alienation, and since this antagonism is constantly changing, it follows that classes cannot be defined. The concept of class is essentially non-definitional. More than that, since definition imposes limits, closes openness, and negates creativity, it is possible to say that the capitalist class, even if it cannot be defined, is the class that defines, identifies, and classifies. Labour (the working class that exists in antagonism to capital) is not only incapable of definition but essentially anti-definitional. It is

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67 For a development of this point, see Richard Gunn’s article, “Notes on Class,” *Common Sense*, no. 2 (1987); Werner Bonefeld, “Capital, Labour and Primitive Accumulation: Notes on Class and Constitution,” unpublished MS (1997).

68 Thus, for Marx, capitalists are the personification of capital, as he repeatedly points out in *Capital*. The proletariat too first makes its appearance in his work not as a definable group but as the pole of an antagonistic relation: “a class . . . which . . . is the *complete loss* of man and hence can win itself only through the *complete rewinning of man*”: Karl Marx, “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law: Introduction,” in Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 3 (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1975), 186.



constituted by its repressed creativity: that is to say, by its resistance to the (ultimately impossible) attempt to define it. Not only is it mistaken to try to identify the working class (are the Zapatistas working class?), but class struggle itself is the struggle between definition and anti-definition. Capital says, “I am, you are”; labour says, “We are not, but we are becoming; you are, but you will not be,” or, “We are/are not, we struggle to create ourselves.”

Class struggle is the unceasing daily antagonism (perceived or not) between alienation and dis-alienation, between definition and anti-definition, between fetishisation and de-fetishisation. The trouble with all these terms is that *our* side of the struggle is presented negatively: as dis-alienation, anti-definition, de-fetishisation. The Zapatistas are right when they say that we need a new language not just because the “old words” are “worn out,” but because the Marxist tradition has been so focused on domination that it has not developed adequate words to talk about resistance.<sup>69</sup> Dignity is the term that turns this around, that expresses positively that which is suppressed, that for which we are fighting. Dignity is that which knows no Is-ness, no objective structures. Dignity is that which rises against humiliation, dehumanisation, marginalisation. Dignity is that which says, “We are here, we are human, and we struggle for the humanity that is denied to us.” Dignity is the struggle against capital.

Dignity is the revolutionary subject. Where it is repressed most fiercely, where the antagonism is most intense, and where there is a tradition of communal organisation, it will fight most strongly, as in the factory, as in the jungle. But class struggle, the struggle of dignity, the struggle for humanity against its destruction, is not the privilege of any defined group: we exist in it, just as it exists in us, inescapably. Dignity does not exist in a pure form any more than the working class exists in a pure form. It is that in us that resists, that rebels, that does not conform. Constantly undermined, constantly smothered and suffocated by the myriad forms of alienation and fetishisation, constantly overlaid and distorted, constantly

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69 The autonomist concept of self-valorisation is perhaps the closest that the Marxist tradition comes to a concept that expresses positively the struggle against-and-beyond capital, but the term is clumsy and obscure. On self-valorisation, see, for example, Harry Cleaver, “The Inversion of Class Perspective in Marxian Theory: From Valorisation to Self-Valorisation,” in *Open Marxism*, vol. 2, eds. Werner Bonefeld, Richard Gunn, and Kosmas Psychopedis (London: Pluto, 1992), 106–45.

repressed, fragmented, and corrupted by money and the state, constantly in danger of being extinguished, snuffed out, it is the indestructible (or maybe just the not yet destroyed) NO that makes us human. That is why the resonance of the Zapatistas goes so deep: “as more and more rebel communiqués were issued, we realised that in reality the revolt came from the depths of ourselves.”<sup>70</sup> The power of the Zapatistas is the power of the *¡Ya basta!*, the negation of oppression that exists in the depths of all of us, the only hope for humanity.

### **VII. Dignity's Revolution Is Uncertain, Ambiguous, and Contradictory**

Uncertainty permeates the whole Zapatista undertaking. There is none of the sense of the historical inevitability that has so often been a feature of past revolutionary movements. There is no certainty about the arrival at the Promised Land, nor any certainty about what this Promised Land might look like. It is a revolution that walks asking—not answering.

Revolution in the Zapatista sense is a moving outward rather than a moving toward. But how can such a movement be revolutionary? How can such a movement bring about a radical social transformation? The very idea of social revolution is already greatly discredited at the end of the twentieth century: How does the Zapatista uprising help us to find a way forward?

There is a problem at the heart of any concept of revolution. How could it be possible for those who are currently alienated (or humiliated) to create a world of non-alienation (or dignity)? If we are all permeated by the conditions of social oppression in which we live, and if our perceptions are constrained by those conditions, shall we not always reproduce those conditions in everything we do? If our existence is traversed by relations of power, how can we possibly create a society that is not characterised by power relations?

The simplest way out of this problem is to bring in a saviour, a *deus ex machina*. If there is some figure who has broken free of alienation and come to a true understanding, then that figure can perhaps lead the masses out of the present alienated society. This is essentially the idea of

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70 Antonio García de León in his prologue to an edition of the Zapatista communiqués: EZLN, *Documentos y Comunicados: 1º de enero/8 de agosto de 1994* (Mexico City: Ediciones Era, 1994), 14.

the vanguard party proposed by Lenin:<sup>71</sup> a group of people who by virtue of their theoretical and practical experience can see beyond the confines of existing society, and who for that reason can lead the masses in a revolutionary break. There are, however, two basic problems. How is it possible for anyone, no matter what their training, to so lift themselves above existing society that they do not reproduce in their own action the concepts and faults of that society? Even more fundamental: How is it possible to create a self-creative society other than through the self-emancipation of society? The experience of revolution in the twentieth century suggests that these are very grave problems indeed.

However, if the notion of a vanguard is discarded, and with it the notion of a revolutionary programme that depends on the existence of such a vanguard, then what are we left with? The Leninist solution may have been wrong, but it was an attempt to solve a perceived problem: the problem of how you bring about a radical transformation of society when the mass of people are so imbued with contemporary values that self-emancipation seems impossible. For many, the failure of the Leninist solution proves the impossibility of social revolution and the inevitability of conforming.

The Zapatista answer is focused on the notion of dignity, which points to the contradictory nature of existence. We are humiliated but have the dignity to struggle against the humiliation to realise our dignity. We are imbued with capitalist values but also live a daily antagonism toward those values. We are alienated but still have sufficient humanity to struggle against alienation and for a non-alienated world. Alienation is but is not, because dis-alienation is not but also is. Oppression exists, but it exists as struggle. It is the present existence of dignity (as struggle) that makes it possible to conceive of revolution without a vanguard party. The society based on dignity already exists in the form of the struggle against the negation of dignity.<sup>72</sup> Dignity implies self-emancipation.

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71 The *deus ex machina* idea stretches far beyond Leninism, of course. It can be seen also in those theories that privilege the revolutionary role of the intellectuals. On a quite different plane, the same notions are reflected in the state's understanding of the Zapatista movement and its racist assumption that the real protagonists of the movement are urban white or mestizo intellectuals, such as Marcos.

72 "Alienation could not even be seen and condemned of robbing people of their freedom and depriving the world of its soul if there did not exist some measure

The consistent pursuit of dignity in a society based on the denial of dignity is in itself revolutionary. But it implies a different concept of revolution from the “storming the Winter Palace” concept that we have grown up with. There is no building the revolutionary party, no strategy for world revolution, no transitional programme. Revolution is simply the constant, uncompromising struggle for what cannot be achieved under capitalism: dignity and control over our own lives.

Revolution can only be thought of in this scheme as the cumulative uniting of dignities, the snowballing of struggles, the refusal of more and more people to subordinate their humanity to the degradations of capitalism. This implies a more open concept of revolution: the snowballing of struggles cannot be programmed or predicted. Revolution is not just a future event but the complete inversion of the relation between dignity and degradation in the present, the cumulative assertion of power over our own lives, the progressive construction of autonomy. As long as capitalism exists (and as long as money exists), the degradation of dignity, the exploitation of work, the dehumanisation and immiseration of existence will continue: the assertion of dignity clearly comes into immediate conflict with the reproduction of capitalism. This conflict could only be resolved by the complete destruction of capitalism. What form this might take and how the cumulative uniting of dignities could lead to the abolition of capitalism is not clear. It cannot be clear if it is to be a self-creative process. What is clear is that the experience of the last hundred years suggests that social transformation cannot be brought about by the conquest (be it “democratic” or “undemocratic”) of state power.

This notion is not reformist, if reformism means that social transformation can be achieved through the accretion of state-sponsored reforms. Anti-reformism is not a question of the clarity of future goals but of the strength with which those forms (especially the state) that reproduce capitalist social relations are rejected in the present. It is a question not of a future programme but of present organisation.

An uncertain revolution is, however, an ambiguous and contradictory revolution. Openness and uncertainty are built in to the Zapatista concept of revolution. And that openness also means contradictions and

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of its opposite, of that possible coming-to-oneself, being-with-oneself, against which alienation can be measured”: Ernst Bloch, *Tübinger Einleitung in die Philosophie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1963), vol. 2, 113. Dignity, in other words.

ambiguities. At times it looks as if the EZLN might accept a settlement that falls far short of their dreams, at times the presentation of their aims is more limited, apparently more containable. Certainly, both the direction and the appeal of the uprising would be strengthened if it were made explicit that exploitation is central to the systematic negation of dignity, and that dignity's struggle is a struggle against exploitation in all its forms. The very nature of the Zapatista concept of revolution means that the movement is particularly open to the charge of ambiguity. Yet historical experience suggests that ambiguities and contradictions are deep-rooted in any revolutionary process, no matter how clearly defined the line of the leadership. Rather than deny the contradictions, it seems better to focus on the forms of articulation and political experiment that might resolve those contradictions. It is better to recognise, as Tacho does, that in undertaking revolution, the Zapatistas are "going to classes in a school that does not exist."<sup>73</sup>

But what does the EZLN want? What is their dream of the future? Clearly, there are many dreams of the future: "For one it can be that there should be land for everybody to work, which for the peasant is the central problem, no? In reality they are very clear that all the other problems turn on the question of land: housing, health, schools, services. Everything that makes them leave the land is bad and everything that lets them stay on it is good. To stay with dignity."<sup>74</sup> That is a dream of the future, a simple dream perhaps, but its realisation would require enormous changes in the organisation of society.

Or again, in another interview, Marcos explains the Zapatista dream in these terms:

In our dream the children are children and their work is to be children. Here no, in reality, in the reality of Chiapas, the work of the children is to be adults from the time they are born, and that is not right; we say that that is not right. . . . My dream is not of agricultural redistribution, the great mobilisations, the fall of the government and elections and a party of the left wins, whatever. In my dream, I dream of the children, and I see them being children. If we achieve that, that the children in any part of Mexico are children and nothing

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<sup>73</sup> Le Bot, *El Sueño*, 191.

<sup>74</sup> Radio UNAM interview with Marcos, March 18, 1994, EZLN, see *La Palabra*, vol. 2, 89.

else, we've won. Whatever it costs, that is worth it. It doesn't matter what social regime is in power, or what political party is in government, or what the exchange rate between the peso and the dollar is, or how the stock market is doing, or whatever. If a child of five years can be a child, as children of five years should be, with that we are on the other side. . . . We, the Zapatista children, think that our work as children is to play and learn. And the children here do not play, they work.<sup>75</sup>

Again, a simple dream, possibly to some a reformist dream, but one that is totally incompatible with the current direction of the world, in which the exploitation of children (child labour, child prostitution, child pornography, for example) is growing at an alarming rate. This dream of children being children is a good example of the power of the notion of dignity: the consistent pursuit of the dream would require a complete transformation of society.

A society based on dignity would be one based on mutual recognition, in which people "do not have to use a mask . . . in order to relate with other people."<sup>76</sup> It would also be an absolutely self-creative society. In an interview for the Venice Film Festival, in response to the standard question, "What is it that the EZLN wants?" Marcos answered, "We want life to be like a cinema poster from which we can choose a different film each day. Now we have risen in arms, because for more than 500 years they have forced us to watch the same film every day."<sup>77</sup>

There are no five-year plans here, no blueprint for the new society, no predefined utopia. There are no guarantees.

There are no guarantees, no certainties. Openness and uncertainty are built in to the Zapatista concept of revolution. And that openness also means contradictions and ambiguities. These contradictions and ambiguities are part and parcel of the Zapatista concept of revolution, of the idea of a revolution that walks asking. Inevitably, the contradictions and ambiguities are part of the development of the movement, and undoubtedly it is possible to sustain interpretations of Zapatismo that are more

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75 Ibid.

76 Marcos interview with Cristián Calónico Lucio, November 11, 1995, MS, 61. This would of course mean a society without power relations.

77 *La Jornada*, August 25, 1996.

restricted than the one offered here. The argument here is an attempt to distil rather than to analyse. Our question is not “What will happen to the EZLN?” but “What will happen to us?” Or rather not “happen to,” since the whole point is that we are not “happened to”: How will *we* (not “*they*”) change the world? How can we change a world in which capitalism starves thousands of people to death each day, in which the systematic killing of street children in certain cities is organised as the only way of upholding the concept of private property, in which the unleashed horrors of neoliberalism are hurtling humanity toward self-destruction?

And what if they fail? There is no guarantee that the EZLN will still exist when this is published. It may be that the Mexican government will have launched an open military assault (already tried on February 9, 1995, and an always present threat): the army could be more successful than the last time they tried it. It is also possible that the EZLN will become exhausted: that they will be drawn by tiredness, by their own ambiguities, or by the simple lack of response from civil society into limiting their demands and settling for definitions. These are all possibilities. The important point, though, is that the Zapatistas are not “they”: they are “we”—we are “we.” When the huge crowds who demonstrated in Mexico City and elsewhere after the army intervention of February 9 chanted, “We are all Marcos,” they were not announcing an intention to join the EZLN. They were saying that the struggle of the Zapatistas is the life-struggle of all of us, that we are all part of their struggle and their struggle is part of us, wherever we are. As Major Ana-María put it in the opening speech of the Intercontinental Meeting:

Behind us are the we that are you.<sup>78</sup> Behind our balaclavas is the face of all the excluded women. Of all the forgotten indigenous people. Of all the persecuted homosexuals. Of all the despised youth. Of all the beaten migrants. Of all those imprisoned for their word and thought. Of all the humiliated workers. Of all those who have died from being forgotten. Of all the simple and ordinary men and women who do not count, who are not seen, who are not named, who have no tomorrow.<sup>79</sup>

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78 This is clumsy but is the best translation I could find for the more elegant “*Detrás de nosotros estamos ustedes.*”

79 “Discurso inaugural de la mayor Ana María,” *Chiapas* no. 3, 101–5, at 103.

We are all Zapatistas. The Zapatistas of Chiapas have lit a flame, but the struggle to convert “dignity and rebellion into freedom and dignity” is ours.