

PEASANT STRUGGLES AND INTERNATIONAL SOLIDARITY: THE CASE OF CHIAPAS

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When the Zapatista National Liberation Army burst on to the global stage in 1994, the initial reaction was one of surprise, coming so soon after the much-touted End of History and the world-wide triumph of the market. The assumption of anachronism soon faded, however, into a kind of condescending sympathy for the Indians' plight. Liberal common sense today has the insurgency pegged as the inevitable, reactionary response of an ignorant but justifiably angry indigenous peasantry to the new global economy. The Zapatistas, in this view, simply do not realize that they have no choice but to tie on what Thomas Friedman calls the 'golden straightjacket' of neoliberalism and change with the rest of the world, come what may.¹ But while neoliberals may see the 'backlash' as something of a residual side-effect of structural adjustment predestined to be swept away, many peasant and campesino movements in this situation have demonstrated an increasingly effective ability to frame the terms of the debate such that they, too, are in favour of moving forward into a 'globalized' world—albeit of a different kind. The Zapatista struggle in particular advances the very notions of autonomy, collective action, and dignity that are denied under neoliberalism, and in doing so it demonstrates that its movement 'against the tide' is in fact progressive rather than merely one of putting on the brakes. It also conceives the scope of its movement to reach well outside Chiapas, understanding that it is fighting against the momentum of global capital as well as the national state, and fighting alongside other movements similarly disaffected or with similar goals. Thus, while—as Henry Bernstein points out elsewhere in this volume—globalization does not lead to the

inevitable end of the peasantry or of peasant-based struggles, it does lead to a 'globalized' solidarity between these and other struggles against neoliberalism.

Precisely because of the enormous stakes involved, it is crucial that socialists soberly examine these struggles—and the solidarity networks built around them. Judith Adler Hellman's critique of the Zapatista solidarity movement ('Real and Virtual Chiapas: Magic Realism and the Left', *Socialist Register* 2000) was an important and insightful intervention in what will probably be a growing debate on the merits of 'cyberactivism', and of solidarity more generally, over the next several years. I agree with several of Hellman's basic points concerning technology and activism: that vicarious participation in an Internet 'community' does not substitute for real community (or real activism); that oversimplifications of the struggle will in the end hinder rather than help the movement; that there is unequal access to the Internet; and that fetishism of 'new' technology is simply the wrong way to approach the possibilities offered to us by that medium (a position I've never hesitated to express since I first brought the *¡Ya Basta!* Web-page online in 1994).

Yet, despite these points of agreement, I feel that many of Hellman's specific criticisms miss their mark. In insisting on the complexity of what is too often taken to be a simplistic struggle between good and evil, Hellman aims to show that foreign activists have, in general, been subjected to a 'flattened' version of events in Chiapas; that the appeal of Zapatismo in fact has more to do with the 'appeal of the events as seen from a great distance' than with Zapatista proposals *per se*; and that Zapatista rhetoric, particularly concerning the issues of land tenure and autonomy, is too simplistic and reductionist to match the realities of life in Chiapas. In what is intended as a friendly response to Hellman's essay, I shall attempt to show that this judgement is too harsh. An appreciation of Zapatismo, and of solidarity activists' relationship to it requires a fuller contextual setting than Hellman's essay provides. Apart from specific disagreements to be raised below, my first concern is to show that the strategies of the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN) need to be understood in terms of the centrality to the movement of neoliberalism. Such an understanding is needed if we are to appreciate that the international support for the EZLN has actually resulted from a *real* resonance of the Zapatista struggle rather than from knee-jerk solidarity.

DIGNITY, CLASS AND NEOLIBERALISM

'Durito', the small beetle serving as the economically-astute alter-ego of Subcomandante Marcos, has made something of a name for himself by coining concise sound-bites about neoliberalism: for example, 'neoliberalism isn't in crisis—neoliberalism *is* the crisis itself'; and 'the trouble with globalization is that all the *globos* end up popped.'² The idea that neoliberalism is inherently unstable and ultimately self-destructive underlies most of Durito's diatribes against capitalism. The message is that the destructive force of neoliberalism hinders its own capacity for reproduction on a global scale, while simultaneously engendering a global explosion of discontent—and this discontent can quickly become resistance.

Judy Hellman alludes to the fact that Zapatismo exists against the backdrop of neoliberalism; she suggests that the preconditions for the struggle were in fact provided by ‘rapid penetration of capitalist relations’ merging with existing oligarchies and racism to stimulate ‘a new militancy and consciousness’ in Chiapas. Yet, perhaps too wary of ‘reductionist’ analyses which frame Zapatismo around narrow economic considerations and ‘neoliberal predations’, she underestimates the *centrality* of neoliberalism to Zapatista aims and discourse, and thus the importance it attaches to building networks of resistance against neoliberalism. As Henry Veltmeyer et al. have put it, it is ‘the extension of capitalism toward all parts of Mexico, through privatization, deregulation and the “free market” that has provoked the rebellion.’³ Indeed, Chiapas offers a window on any ‘forgotten’ or ‘inconsequential’ region in which resources (the resources, of course, are not forgotten) are exploited for consumption by both a domestic elite and the ‘information societies’ of the First World, while entire populations are rendered *surplus* in numbers far beyond the reserves historically necessary to keep capitalism’s gears greased through its various cycles and surges.

Ana Esther Ceceña and Andrés Barreda have even called Chiapas ‘an illustration of the contradictions of capitalism’, suggesting that one can, in that state, ‘catch a glimpse of the redefinition of hegemonies, geo-economic integration, and the rebuilding of a world-wide proletarian army.’⁴ When ‘proletarian’ is understood to mean not simply one whose labour-power is immediately exploited for the extraction of surplus-value, but anyone whose existence is in an antagonistic relationship with capitalism, this is not a far-fetched idea. As the ranks of the dispossessed, the unemployed and the redundant grow more numerous globally, the conditions are created in which a rural state in southern Mexico that seemed inconsequential to most observers before 1994 comes to give the lie to the bourgeois promise of a ‘levelling up’ via the world market. Ceceña rightly notes of Chiapas:

What is indisputable is that in the collective imaginary, neoliberalism, if only intuitively, begins to be perceived as a mode of social organization that transcends the strictly economic and which determines and causes the deterioration of the many aspects that make up our daily lives. And to this recognition of the omnipresence of neoliberalism are added the evidence of diverse forms of violence that are essential to it: the violence of unemployment, of impunity, of racism, of competition.⁵

The Zapatista notion of dignity perhaps provides the best framework for understanding the significance of Zapatismo for the contemporary Left, and this also helps explain its mass popularity. ‘Dignidad’ for Zapatismo is quite different from the concept of dignity many North American and European scholars are used to; as John Holloway has recently shown, the fight is not for a ‘dignity-based society’ with all citizens’ civil rights enshrined in a liberal constitution (with economic and cultural rights largely ignored); nor can it be directly equated with the struggles of identity-based ‘new social movements’. Rather,

dignity is a radical, open-ended class category that is the subject of the Zapatistas' struggle against neoliberal capitalism, at a time when the latter threatens to become a totalizing social order—and at a time when the old industrial proletariat and its parties are not leading the fight. In explaining the differences between the Zapatista concept of dignity and the imperfectly defined traditional revolutionary subject (the narrowly-defined 'proletariat'), Holloway notes that the way the Zapatistas speak of 'dignity' is not only more inclusive, but involves an understanding of capitalism 'not based on the antagonism between two groups of people but on the antagonism in the way in which human social practice is organized.' And this antagonism is by no means limited to Chiapas; rather, it is the foundation for contemporary class struggle on a global scale. On this basis, let me now turn to my disagreements with Hellman's account of specific aspects of Zapatista strategy before turning to her critique of the 'cyberactivism' of the international solidarity activists.

THE LAND QUESTION

In Chiapas, the 'surplus' populations aren't merely put out of work (or, more precisely, idled by structural adjustment policies and international treaties that ensure their corn won't sell), but many are also physically displaced—some to be driven into more 'efficient' industries (such as *maquiladoras*) as the neoliberal model requires, others to be simply driven from one place to another. As such, land tenure, as Hellman points out, has been an important rallying cry for the movement. Of course, land has been a central concern of every Mayan uprising since the 'Conquest',⁷ and the class dimension was always present as the crux of the issue (despite various religious or ideological overtones).⁸ Adolfo Gilly put this concisely, explaining that '*la ley de la tierra*' has historically counterposed itself to and resisted '*la ley del dinero*':

Such rebellions ... beneath their many forms, reveal a common basis that is often ignored by their own protagonists: the resistance to accept that the land can be converted into merchandise; the refusal to send to the world of market exchanges between things that which, within the community, is the cultural and historical substrate of the direct exchanges between people; and opposition to the external world interfering in the order of such exchanges, which are understood as part of the natural order.⁹

Recognizing the importance of 'the land' does not mean that we concur with presenting those who have joined the rebellions as 'country people who did not want to move and therefore got into a revolution'—as the opening line of John Womack, Jr's classic work on Zapata puts it.¹⁰ This implies a static history of settlement that doesn't match up with the more complex reality. The history of South-east Mexico, for the past half-millennium, has been one of constant movement, upheaval, and displacement. Carlos Montemayor notes that 'the concentration of land in Chiapas ... is a permanent source of social imbal-

ance',¹¹ and it is this imbalance that created the early conditions for Zapatismo.

Hellman, however, takes the view that the 'agrarista dream' of large-scale land redistribution cannot be realized in the regions of Zapatista influence in Chiapas, because 'there is almost no "distributable" land left in large haciendas.'¹² She notes the accelerated breakup of the regions' *latifundios* beginning in the 1950s, citing in particular agrarian reform programmes that set aside small *ejido* distributions, as well as a larger programme in the 1980s that set aside 80,000 hectares of land for 159 communities. But the lack of substantial *latifundios* in eastern Chiapas is not sufficient reason to conclude that there is no redistributable land at all left in the area—unless one is to confuse *legal* redistribution with *possible* redistribution. Left out of Hellman's description of the 1980s was the signing of 7,646 'certificates of inaffectability' (i.e., non-distributability) in Chiapas during those years; these certificates protected 1,142,881 hectares of quality agricultural land across Chiapas—far more than the 80,000 redistributed in the eastern region—from legal expropriation, thus ensuring the land would remain permanently in the hands of the ranchers, *caciques*, and private landowners.¹³ The land may not have been tied up in a small number of large *latifundios*, but neither was it made available to the campesinos. By contrast, the 80,000 redistributed hectares was a beneficial gesture toward the 159 affected communities—but not a realization of all that could be done, and certainly not a solution to the problem of land concentration.

Also important to keep in mind are the specific historical roots of the land disputes in the South-eastern jungle region, since many of the present conflicts there, as Hellman notes, date from 'colonization schemes' instituted under the administration of President Echeverría in the early 1970s. Yet perhaps the most pertinent of these schemes was neglected by Hellman: a 1972 decision by President Echeverría to grant 660,000 hectares of the jungle to just 66 families of the Lacandón Maya, an act which on paper displaced more than 3,000 Chol and Tzeltal families who had migrated to the region since the 1950s. As Neil Harvey explains: 'Behind the decree was an agreement between the representatives of the Lacandon Indians and the state-owned forestry company (COFOLASA), which allowed for the latter to exploit 35,000 cubic metres of mahogany and cedar for a period of ten years.'¹⁴ The first independent, radical campesino organizations in southeast Chiapas—several of which later merged into the EZLN—were created as a direct response to this government decree, in an attempt to prevent the forced expulsion of the affected families. Since that time, the struggle for land in eastern Chiapas has been about both *expropriating* land from large landholders and *keeping* the land of indigenous and campesino communities in their own hands in the face of encroachment by loggers and ranchers.

By 1992, the Mexican Constitution's Article 27, the revolutionary clause guaranteeing land to peasants who were willing to work it, had been reformed beyond recognition, and available legal avenues for securing small parcels of land were sharply curtailed not just in Chiapas, but across the country. Much of the land was, and still is, in government possession (such as the Montes Azules bioserve) or private holdings of various sizes; but effective expropri-

ation would, after 1992, have to take extra-legal means. The EZLN saw its ranks surge after the constitutional reforms, and the EZLN's own Revolutionary Agrarian Law, established at the end of 1993, declared expropriable any private (non-collective) holdings of more than 100 hectares of poor-quality land, or 50 hectares of good-quality land.¹⁵ While there may not be many large *latifundios* to break up in the jungle region, many private landowners did find their holdings (of various sizes) taken by the Zapatistas at the beginning of the war, and many other private and government holdings remain outside the areas of direct Zapatista control. The 'agrarista dream' in question is not a naïve one of redistributing non-existent large estates; it is about securing the concentration of land in communal *ejidos* and co-operatives rather than in private holdings, and establishing permanent collective *rights* to land and to the means of agricultural production.¹⁶ This goal is a realistic one, not to be dismissed simply because the *Porfirista* estates have become scarcer.

THE INDIGENOUS QUESTION

Hellman also argues that the 'indigenous question' is more complicated than foreign supporters of the Zapatistas realize. Her interviews show there are critics in Mexico who claim autonomy is 'not the answer', and one of them even rhetorically suggests that those supporting the Accords of San Andrés Sakamch'en de los Pobres might actually be employing essentialized notions of 'el indio', or that they might believe gambling casinos (*à la* indigenous 'autonomy' in the United States) will solve the problems in Chiapas. While some such people may exist, this critique once again seems misplaced.

While explicitly a 'fundamental' demand, indigenous autonomy is not, and never was, *the* singular goal of the Zapatista movement, nor of the indigenous movement (spearheaded by the National Indigenous Congress) in which the EZLN plays a significant role. The San Andrés Accords marked the completion of the *first* stage of the peace talks, which were divided into four thematic areas with the 'easiest' ('Indigenous Rights and Culture') taking place first; the other sessions were to be 'Democracy and Justice' (begun but halted after a short time due to non-implementation of the indigenous rights agreement), 'Social Welfare and Development', and 'Rights of Indigenous Women'. Reading Hellman, one could come away with the mistaken impression that the Zapatistas and their supporters are simply fighting for a weak form of autonomy, and that the struggle would be over if only the San Andrés Accords—or even some watered-down version of them (or worse, the reservation system that Hellman seems to think is on the table)—were fulfilled.

The desire for autonomy from (and subsequent coexistence with) the state is not a recent quest among the indigenous people of the Americas.¹⁷ The Zapatistas certainly didn't begin the debate in Chiapas, where it has been a longstanding demand among many of the Maya but never granted.¹⁸ Ceceña and Barrera argue that a new relationship of autonomy is such a pertinent issue today because what is '*also involved is the capacity of the population to rebel against*

*the capitalist predation of human beings and to open the way for liberating alternatives.*¹⁹ Therefore, they assert, the issue is not merely one of land *per se*, but of 'territoriality and sovereignty'. If the state cannot provide alternatives, the demand must then be for the *space* to create those alternatives; if without state support, then at least without interference as well.

The negotiations on indigenous autonomy leading to the San Andrés Accords were not straightforward and uncomplicated, and the meaning of autonomy was the subject of much detailed public debate throughout 1995 and 1996. The EZLN sought the advice of a great many intellectuals, activists, and community leaders in staking out a position on autonomy; and the negotiated agreements, in which these representatives of civil society were able to take part at the negotiating table itself, reflect the attention paid to such voices. As may be seen by reading the Accords in detail (all the pertinent documents are readily available online), both sides agreed that the most effective way to guarantee respect for indigenous rights and culture was through autonomy, and the document explicitly states that, as part of the 'new relationship between the indigenous people, the state, and the rest of society',²⁰ national and state legislation (including the federal constitution) should 'recognize the indigenous people as subject to the right to self-determination and autonomy'.²¹ Such autonomy would involve, among other things, considerations of territory (though not as separate 'states within a state'), an increased voice for indigenous communities in local economic development and in the use of natural resources found on their lands, and the use of traditional means of election and representation for participation in state and national political bodies (e.g., voting by community assembly rather than by secret ballot). Additional constitutional changes were to include remunicipalization, indigenous education that is bilingual and intercultural, guarantees of fair access to both the judicial system and means of communication, and rights to the use and promotion of language and culture. (Neither casinos nor Reservations were part of the equation.) The fact that many of the documents are framed in very general terms, and serve as statements of intention, reflects the recognition that there are many different groups of indigenous people with varying interests, needs, and desires; the Accords suggest that the concrete manifestations of autonomy need to be defined at a local level.

The EZLN accepted the Accords with several reservations; the government accepted them as written. Vigorous discussions continued, and the Accords' promise of bringing these issues to the forefront of national debate was achieved, with an emphasis on *how* to implement the autonomy agreements, not whether or not to do so. But the government stopped short of making the promised constitutional and legislative changes. The EZLN suspended peace talks in frustration in September 1996, but it certainly wasn't a lone voice crying for autonomy. The broad-based National Indigenous Congress, whose constituent members played an important role in creating the agreements to begin with, wholly endorsed them and demanded at the time an 'immediate and complete compliance with the Accords'.²² Despite the EZLN's effective participation in

further multi-partisan discussions and proposals that same fall, President Zedillo changed his mind and rejected the San Andrés Accords themselves, preferring to wage a public relations campaign against the very concept of autonomy.

In short, indigenous autonomy, and particularly the San Andrés version of it, has become such an important issue not because anybody believes it would solve all the problems of the indigenous people of Mexico, but because the future of negotiations rests on the implementation of what was signed at San Andrés Sakamch'en de los Pobres. Those agreements constitute one step in the right direction, and they *must* be implemented. If this were to happen, it might clear the way for a resumption of the peace talks. However, if implementation continues to be stalled, with calls for 'more debate' or renegotiation, the future of Chiapas will be a dark one. The Mexican government has been trying to renegotiate the accords from square one and desperately wants people to forget that the earlier meetings at San Andrés ever happened. Such rewriting of history is an important element of the struggle Subcomandante Marcos has characterized as 'between the forgetting of those above and the memory of those below'.²³ The EZLN does not have a simplistic view of autonomy; if its supporters seem to, it's because autonomy has *already* been debated, negotiated, and an agreement signed. If as foreigners we now choose to argue against those agreements, *that* would be a far more interventionist stance than militating for the implementation of what was already agreed upon.

VIRTUAL ZAPATISMO?

Let us now turn to the question of 'foreign activists'. One of the most troubling aspects of Hellman's analysis is that, in her critiques of foreign Zapatista activists for their tendency to oversimplification, she levels her criticism at broad, unspecified categories of people and media. 'Virtual Chiapas' and 'the Internet' themselves have little descriptive meaning (and even less explanatory or analytical capacity); and Hellman lumps together activists, 'Internet junkies', Web-pages, archives, organizations and mailing lists to the point of effacing their differences and assigning all of them the worst characteristics of a few (about whom the criticisms may certainly be justified). At one point Hellman even slips into giving the Internet itself agency ('the Internet does make constant generic reference ...')²⁴—which is precisely what those of us working through that medium but arguing against fetishization are determined not to do.

The Internet is a *medium* that enables a fairly disparate set of transmissory and receptive activities to take place; to take all Zapatista-support activities on the Internet and lump them together for critique is akin to making claims against 'the press' when one's real concern is with particular instances of yellow journalism. At one point Hellman locates the problem of partiality and bias in the news distributed outside Chiapas—in 'the way that material is selected and distributed and edited for Internet distribution'—claiming that 'most of what we read about Chiapas, and civil society in general in Mexico, has been selected and transmitted by Harry Cleaver or a couple of other people';²⁵ and yet there

are literally scores of Web-pages, dozens of mailing lists and archives—not to mention dozens of ‘mainstream press’ sources that now report regularly from Chiapas and are available online—that spread information over the Internet. Every one of these has different standards for distribution of information, fact checking, and so on. While Cleaver has probably done more than any single other person to promote the Internet as a medium for activists, he is not responsible for what the Zapatistas say, what *La Jornada* prints, what Reuters reports, or what I put online; there isn’t one person (Cleaver or anybody else) who oversees what gets printed on each Web-page or what information gets spread around and what doesn’t get ‘selected or distributed’.

Hellman states that ‘careful examination of the material that is translated, summarized and distributed through a variety of networks reveals that almost all of this material is drawn from the Mexican leftist daily, *La Jornada*, which is published in Mexico City.’²⁶ This is misleading in that it greatly overplays the influence of *La Jornada*, and it is unfortunate that I was in fact cited to bolster such a claim in Hellman’s article. I stated to Lynn Stephen and others, and I have written on the *¡Ya Basta!* Web-page, that many EZLN communiqués that I distribute are first faxed to *La Jornada* and converted to hypertext for their Web-page, after which I collect them and put them online on *¡Ya Basta!*; historically, most communiqués sent out on the electronic e-mail lists and those that show up on other Web-pages have also been gleaned from the pages of *La Jornada*. But the context of my statements was an attempt to debunk myths about ‘cyberguerillas’ with cellular modems in the Lacandon Jungle—not to assert that any relevant information comes only from *La Jornada*. It is true that activists have relied extensively (although rarely exclusively) on *La Jornada* as a regular news source, but even this is less true now than it was several years ago; the Frente Zapatista (FZLN), Enlace Civil, and the Congreso Nacional Indígena (among many others)²⁷ are all ‘Internet-savvy’ and have been taking an increasing role in rapid electronic distribution of communiqués, action alerts, and so on—and each of these has at least as great a role to play in the struggle (and usually a far more proactive one) as *La Jornada*.

But Hellman’s critique of *La Jornada* goes further. She also quotes a Chiapanecan activist as saying ‘they [*La Jornada*] report things in a very partial way’, and asserts that the paper takes a consistent stance on the left somewhat critical of the Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD), and that this leads to a simplistic, pro-Zapatista bias.²⁸ Yet, editorially, *La Jornada* remains very close to the PRD, and has never wavered in its *perredista* leanings. The Founding Director, Carlos Payán, is now a PRD Senator, and when Carmen Lira took over the reins *La Jornada* swung even further toward support of the PRD, not away from it. The newspaper developed a reputation for printing news from Chiapas because it was one of the only ‘independent’ newspapers with a national circulation, and the only one that was willing to routinely cover events pertaining to the uprising. (It was also the first Mexican newspaper to achieve free international distribution on the Internet, making it a very popular source

of information among both Mexicans living abroad and sympathizers of the EZLN.) While it is true that many of *Jornada's* articles and editorials have tended to express sympathies for Zapatismo in general, the paper has nevertheless maintained a consistent opposition to armed struggle in Chiapas (which the EZLN has, of course, never renounced). In short, *La Jornada* is a much more complex paper than Hellman portrays it to be.

Hellman's discussion of the role of *La Jornada* leads her into a discussion of the media coverage surrounding the 1995 elections in Chiapas, which she claims was biased toward the EZLN boycott and perhaps contributed to the 66% abstention rate in that state. In the eyes of the left-wing PRD, a large portion of those 66% would likely have voted for the PRD had they not abstained, and so the party was (understandably) quite distressed that they did. After offering a critique of the Zapatistas' anti-electoral strategy, Hellman recommends that 'foreign activists concerned with the future of Chiapas would at least want to think through and debate these assertions' from the PRD's point of view.²⁹ Two critiques are actually at work here: a critique of foreign activists who supported the boycott, and the critique of the Zapatista boycott itself, which I believe to be the fundamental issue.³⁰

While admitting it may be 'easy to understand the EZLN's decision,' Hellman nonetheless chooses to argue against it, perhaps as devil's advocate. Fair enough. Yet, the Zapatistas made a political decision not to support the electoral process due both to the state of siege in which its communities were living, and, just as importantly, the fact that none of the parties campaigning in Chiapas adequately represented its interests. Why ought the EZLN to subordinate itself to the PRD and help legitimate an election process that it doesn't trust, or, worse, support a party that simply has quite different goals? Before the similarly-boycotted elections of 1997, the EZLN declared: 'It is easy to see that the PRD's proposal to "smooth away the sharpest spines of neoliberalism" will run into a hedgehog whose embrace wounds and kills.'³¹ This is not exactly a ringing endorsement of the party, and it reflects the fact that there are very substantive *political* differences between the EZLN and the PRD. Hellman also quotes from a single Chiapanecan PRD activist, who asserts that the PRD 'would have been able to form a majority in the Chamber of Deputies.'³² But this rests on the assumption that the election *would* have been fair and that the results would have been accepted. Hellman herself makes clear the problem that fraud has historically posed in Chiapanecan elections, and there was little reason to believe things would have been any different this time.

In a communiqué issued shortly before the 1997 elections, the EZLN provided an explanation of the Zapatista abstention from elections in general:

In electoral moments or outside of them, our political position is and has been clear. It is not in favour of any political party, but neither is it against them; it is not electoral, but neither is it anti-electoral. It is against the State-party system, it is against presidentialism, it is for democracy, liberty and justice, it is of the left, it is inclusive, and it is anti-neoliberal.³³

The crux of the issue here is that ‘democracy’ means something quite different for the EZLN than it does for the parties. As far as the EZLN is concerned, liberal-democratic electoral politics (with or without blatant fraud) have no necessary connection to *democracy*, which Zapatismo equates with the principle of ‘*mandar obediciendo*’, the horizontal exercise of power among the population itself. The EZLN is an armed revolutionary movement; the parties are not. The fact that both the EZLN and the PRD are ‘of the Left’ should not lead us to think in terms of the PRD—even if the particularities of its platform were more palatable—being *owed* EZLN electoral support in a process that in many respects is irrelevant to Zapatismo.

INTERNATIONAL ACTIVISM

At stake in the debate over international activism are not only questions of how much (and what kind) of information one needs or is obligated to ingest before taking a stand and acting on a particular issue, but also broad issues of what constitutes legitimate struggle and who one is fighting for in a movement of ‘solidarity’. These are fair issues to bring up; yet one should also be wary of the trend toward paralysis and inaction that comes with not acting unless one is ‘fully informed’ of all the complexities of an issue (an impossible, if desirable, task).

Nor should one accept the view that those who do act in solidarity thereby reflect a preference for embracing revolution elsewhere rather than struggling at home, as Hellman suggests in the introduction of her essay. Indeed, the global character of neoliberalism, and the fact that Zapatistas stress this, helps explain why people can feel that they’re struggling *both* in solidarity *and* at home by supporting the EZLN. The Zapatistas know full well, as do most of their supporters, that the struggle isn’t just about Chiapas or Mexico; they know that whether they stand or fall will depend on events around the world, just as what happens in Mexico can have a profound effect on the spread or collapse of neoliberalism as a global strategy. Is there any significant meaning to a ‘struggle at home’ when neoliberalism has placed internationalism back on the agenda, both for capitalism and those opposed to it (if they hope to have any effect)?

I won’t argue that there aren’t any foreign activists trying to ‘revolt vicariously’ through the Zapatistas; but for many EZLN supporters abroad, the Zapatistas’ appeal to dignity strikes a chord that resonates well with their own experiences of the global economy. When Subcomandante Marcos speaks of different oppressions (for which he lays much of the blame on capitalism), he speaks to the material, lived experiences of a great many people throughout the world today, and it should come as no surprise then that the EZLN has become so popular internationally. It is not unusual, in Zapatista pronouncements, to see such statements as:

In our voice shall travel the voice of others, of those who have nothing, those condemned to silence and ignorance, those thrown off their land and from history by the arrogance of the powerful, of all those good men and women who walk these lands of pain and anger, of the children and

aged dead of abandonment and solitude, of humiliated women, of little men. Through our voice will speak the dead, our dead, so alone and forgotten, so dead and yet so alive in our voices and in our footsteps.³⁴

Is this some kind of megalomania? Or, rather, can the Zapatistas really be so inclusive in their discourse and their activities that they might awaken these others' own dreams and struggles? If so, when the latter do become active, if they claim to be supporting Zapatismo, are they *avoiding* the 'struggle at home' in favour of solidarity with an indigenous uprising in Chiapas? Or have they perhaps come to the recognition that *it is part of the same struggle*? While the EZLN does have a great number of 'local' concerns, it takes great pains to not limit itself to those, nor to concerns based solely on an indigenous identity; and though the EZLN *is* indigenous, it strives to show that its struggle is *not just* an indigenous struggle.

Hellman's conclusion, suggesting that we need to be as informed as we can be about Chiapas because 'to do otherwise compromises the crucial role that foreigners can play in protecting the human rights of people at risk',³⁵ is a good point—but a limited one. The struggle, for Hellman, seems to be restricted to Chiapas; 'they' are struggling, 'we' are supporting. This is part of the truth, and intuitive or casual support for the Zapatistas would only hinder a movement operating from such a perspective. But what the EZLN has tried desperately to make clear over the past several years is that its battle is only one of the many being waged in the larger struggle for dignity, against capitalism; with this in mind, activists who have an intuitive sympathy for Zapatismo because of their own experiences or political leanings can be perfectly justified in their support for the Zapatistas—even if they've only seen a couple of Web-pages and a brief TV news story. When someone claims to be pro-Zapatista in Canada, France, Japan, or South Africa, he or she is not abandoning local politics, nor even—necessarily—flattening the image of a 'true' Chiapas, but rather is taking a side in (to use the EZLN's term) World War IV: a war not between the EZLN and the Mexican government, but between neoliberalism and a dignified existence. It is *this* war that needs support and struggle from all sectors, and if the international Zapatista movement is to be faulted it should be, more than anything else, on the basis of a failure to recognize the strategic implications of the unity of the struggle at home and the struggle in Chiapas, sometimes imagining that the world-wide anti-neoliberal army is going to march out of *Chiapas* rather than—more effectively—marching out of every corner at once.

It may well be that the ability of Zapatismo to stir up support around the world has less to do with oversimplification of the message, and much more to do with the vitality and resonance of the message itself. As the 'global proletariat' shows an enduring but changing face in the twenty-first century, so the old leftist tropes of solidarity and internationalism take on new significance. The networks we have built are far from perfect, but they have nonetheless demonstrated—so far—a capacity to endure and evolve within the struggle.

NOTES

I would like to thank Barbara Epstein and Joshua Paulson for commenting on early drafts of this paper.

1. Cf. Thomas Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree: Understanding Globalization*, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1999.
2. This is a play on words; 'globo' serves as both the root of 'globalización' and the word for a party balloon.
3. Henry Veltmeyer, James Petras, and Steven Vieux, *Neoliberalism and Class Conflict in Latin America*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997, p. 201.
4. Ana Esther Ceceña and Andrés Barreda, 'Chiapas and the Global Restructuring of Capital', in John Holloway and Eloina Peláez, eds., *Zapatista! Reinventing Revolution in Mexico*, London: Pluto Press, 1998, p. 39.
5. Ana Esther Ceceña, 'Neoliberalismo e insubordinación', *Chiapas*, 4, 1997, p. 34. (Translation mine.)
6. John Holloway, 'Dignity's Revolt' in Holloway and Peláez, 'Zapatista!', p. 183.
7. In fact, no group in Chiapas was ever 'conquered' with any sense of finality: the best study is probably Antonio García de León, *Resistencia y Utopía. Memorial de agravios y cronica de revueltas y profecías acaecidas en la provincia de Chiapas durante los últimos quinientos años de su historia*, Mexico, D.F.: Era, 1985, 2 vols.
8. See esp. Carlos Montemayor, *Chiapas: la rebellion indígena de Mexico*, Mexico, D.F.: Joaquin Mortiz, 1997, p. 72.
9. Adolfo Gilly, *Chiapas: la razón ardiente*, México, D.F.: Era, 1997, p. 19. (Translation mine.)
10. John Womack, Jr, *Zapata and the Mexican Revolution*, New York: Vintage, 1968, p. ix. See also Enrique Rajchenberg and Catherine Héau-Lambert, 'History and Symbolism in the Zapatista Movement', in Holloway and Peláez, 'Zapatista!', pp. 30–31, for a more in-depth critique of this statement.
11. Montemayor, 'Chiapas', p. 40. (Translation mine.)
12. Judith Adler Hellman, 'Real and Virtual Chiapas: Magic Realism and the Left', *Socialist Register 2000*, p. 167.
13. Montemayor, 'Chiapas', p. 101; Gilly, 'Chiapas', p. 58. See also Neil Harvey, 'Peasant Strategies and Corporatism in Chiapas' in Joe Foweraker and Ann Craig, eds., *Popular Movements and Political Change in Mexico*, Boulder: Lynn Rienner Publishers, 1990, p. 191.
14. Neil Harvey, *The Chiapas Rebellion: The Struggle for Land and Democracy*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1998, p. 80.
15. EZLN, *El Despertador Mexicano: Organo Informativo del EZLN*, 1 (December) 1993, p. 14. (Some copies of the *Despertador Mexicano* indicate the maximum allowable holdings to be 50 hectares and 25 hectares, respectively.)
16. *El Despertador Mexicano*, pp. 14–16.
17. See Hector Díaz-Polenco, *Indigenous Peoples in Latin America: The Quest for Self-Determination*, Boulder: Westview Press, 1997. Also cf. Gilly, 'Chiapas', p. 27.
18. It is worth noting in this respect that the EZLN has learned enough from history not to wait for autonomy to be granted from above; rather it has taken the initiative to create several dozen autonomous regions of its own after the government backed away from the San Andres agreements. The status of these municipalities is bitterly contested, and both the army and right-wing paramilitary groups have been involved in violent (sometimes fatal) attempts to dismantle them over the past

two years.

19. Ceceña and Barreda, 'Chiapas and the Global Restructuring', pp. 57–8 (*italics mine*).
20. Acuerdo de San Andrés. 'Documento 1: Pronunciamiento Conjunto que el Gobierno Federal y el EZLN enviarán a las Instancias de Debate y Decisión Nacional', 16 January 1996. Online: <http://spin.com.mx/~floresu/FZLN/dialogo/documento1.htm>. (Translation mine).
21. Acuerdo de San Andrés. 'Documento 3.1: Compromisos para Chiapas del Gobierno del Estado y Federal y el EZLN', 16 February 1996. Online: <http://spin.com.mx/~floresu/FZLN/dialogo/documento3.htm>. (Translation mine.)
22. Congreso Nacional Indígena, 'Resolutivos del Congreso Nacional Indígena', 8–11 October 1996. Online: <http://www.laneta.apc.org/cni/d-961011.htm>.
23. EZLN, 'La Mesa de San Andrés: Entre los Olvidos de Arriba y la Memoria de Abajo', 27 February 1998. Online: <http://www.ezln.org/archive/ezln980227.html>
24. Hellman, 'Real and Virtual Chiapas', p. 169.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 177.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 174.
27. Despite Hellman's assertion to the contrary (and her valid point that access to communication media remains uneven notwithstanding), even the EPR has at least two affiliated Web-pages, and it has also been sending its communiqués via a dedicated e-mail list for over a year now. Unlike those of the EZLN, I've also seen Web-page and e-mail addresses on the EPR's communiqués themselves, casting doubt on Hellman's conclusion that 'as a consequence [of having neither an articulate spokesperson nor a Webmaster], their perspectives are not before us on our screens, and their activities are rarely reported' (Hellman, 'Real and Virtual Chiapas', p. 177). In this case, Hellman may have—inadvertently—assigned more power to the Internet medium than was warranted, given that the mass international popularity of the EZLN, far beyond that of the EPR, must be attributed to something other than whether or not they have an affiliated webpage.
28. Hellman, 'Real and Virtual Chiapas', p. 175.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 176.
30. With regard to the foreign activists' attitude toward the Zapatista boycotts, in fact there was discussion among them about the strategy regarding the elections (I particularly recall those of 1997)—although most people involved in such discussions, as I remember them, preferred to defer to those living in Chiapas as to what attitude those most affected should take toward the political system there. I generally agree with this; although no policy ought to be supported with a knee-jerk response, there's nonetheless no compelling reason that foreign activists should be telling the Zapatistas who they can and cannot trust.
31. EZLN, communiqué, 1 July 1997. Online: <http://www.ezln.org/archive/ezln970701-eng.html>.
32. Hellman, 'Real and Virtual Chiapas', p. 176.
33. EZLN, communiqué, 1 July 1997.
34. English translation from Carlos Monsiváis, *Mexican Postcards*, New York: Verso, 1997, p. 146.
35. Hellman, 'Real and Virtual Chiapas', p. 181.