

FAREWELL TO 'THE END OF HISTORY': ORGANIZATION AND VISION IN ANTI-CORPORATE MOVEMENTS

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‘We are here to show the world that another world is possible!’ the man on stage said, and a crowd of more than 10,000 roared its approval.¹ What was strange was that we weren’t cheering for a specific other world, just the possibility of one. We were cheering for the idea that another world could, in theory, exist.

For the past thirty years, a select group of CEOs and world leaders have met during the last week in January on a mountaintop in Switzerland to do what they presumed they were the only ones entitled to do, or capable of doing: determine how the global economy should be governed. We were cheering because it was, in fact, the last week of January, and this wasn’t the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland. It was the first annual World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil. And even though we weren’t CEOs or world leaders, we were still going to spend the week talking about how the global economy should be governed.

Many people said that they felt history being made in that room. What I felt was something more intangible: the end of The End of History. Fittingly, ‘Another World Is Possible’ was the event’s official slogan. After a year and a half of global protests against the World Trade Organization, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the World Economic Forum, both major US political parties, and Britain’s Labour Party — to name just a few — the World Social Forum was billed as an opportunity for an emerging movement to stop screaming about what it is against and start articulating what it is for.

The particular site was chosen because Brazil’s Workers Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores, the PT) is in power in the city of Porto Alegre, as well as in the

state of Rio Grande do Sul and has become known world-wide for its innovations in participatory democracy. The conference was organized by a network of Brazilian unions and NGOs, as well as ATTAC France. The PT made sure that no expense was spared: state-of-the-art conference facilities, a star-studded roster of speakers and international musicians, delegates greeted by officials from the local tourism department, as well as by friendly police officers — quite a culture shock for a group of people growing accustomed to being met by authorities with clouds of pepper spray, border strip searches and ‘no-protest’ zones. If Seattle was, for many people, the coming-out party of a resistance movement, then, according to Soren Ambrose, policy analyst with 50 Years Is Enough, ‘Porto Alegre is the coming-out party for the existence of serious thinking about alternatives’.

The charge that this movement lacks alternatives — or at least a coherent focus — has become something of a mantra since the Battle in Seattle in November 1999, a criticism summed up by an article on ‘The New Radicals’ in *Newsweek*: ‘One thing that seems to be lacking today is a mission statement, a credo, that gives the movement, such as it is, some focus’.²

There is no doubt that in the absence of such media-friendly packaging, critics have had free reign to portray young activists as everything from tree-wearing, drum-beating bubble brains, to violent thugs bent only on destruction.

Addressing this perceived vision deficit was the *raison d’être* of the World Social Forum: the organizers clearly saw the conference as an opportunity to whip the chaos on the streets into some kind of structured shape. And in 60 lectures and 450 workshops, there were indeed plenty of ideas flying around — about new systems of taxation, like the Tobin Tax, co-operative, organic farming, participatory budgets and free software, to name just a few. But I found myself asking a question that often pops up at similar, smaller-scale events. Even if we did manage to come up with a ten-point plan — brilliant in its clarity, elegant in its coherence, unified in its outlook — to whom, exactly, would we hand down these commandments? Put another way: who are the leaders of this movement — or are there any?

Last April, after a portion of the protests against the Free Trade Area of the Americas turned violent, the press and the police engaged in a game that might be described as ‘Find the Leader’. Mark Steyn, a columnist with Conrad Black’s *National Post*, pointed at Maude Barlow, chair of the Council of Canadians (one of the world’s largest and most committed anti-free trade NGOs), insistently referring to a group of 50,000 people as ‘Maude’s Mob’ and even going so far as to threaten retaliation against Barlow herself. ‘The next time a member of Maude’s Mob throws a rock at me, I intend to take it home, and chuck it through her window’, he wrote.³

The police, for their part, claimed that Jaggi Singh, one of the organizers of the Anti-Capitalist Convergence, ordered his minions to attack the fence that surrounded much of Quebec City. The main weapon the police cited was a theatrical catapult that lobbed teddy bears and other stuffed animals over the

fence. Singh had nothing to do with the catapult, nor did he do anything at the protest but give speeches about state violence. Yet the justification for his arrest, and for later being denied bail, was that he was a kind of protest puppet master, allegedly pulling the strings behind the actions of others. The story has been similar at other protests. During the demonstrations against the Republican National Convention in Philadelphia in August 2000, John Sellers, one of the founders of the Ruckus Society, had his bail posted at \$1 million. Two months earlier, David Solnit, one of the founders of the puppet-making political theatre group Art and Revolution, also faced a pre-emptive arrest, this time in Windsor, Ontario during a meeting of the Organization of American States.

The systematic police targeting of protest 'leaders' goes a long way towards explaining the deep suspicion of traditional hierarchies that exists in this new movement. Indeed, the figure that comes closest to a bona fide 'leader' is Subcomandante Marcos, a man in the mountains of Chiapas who hides his real identity and covers his face with a mask. Marcos, the quintessential anti-leader, insists that his black mask is a mirror, so that 'Marcos is gay in San Francisco, black in South Africa, an Asian in Europe, a Chicano in San Ysidro, an anarchist in Spain, a Palestinian in Israel, a Mayan Indian in the streets of San Cristobal, a Jew in Germany, a Gypsy in Poland, a Mohawk in Quebec, a pacifist in Bosnia, a single woman on the Metro at 10 p.m., a peasant without land, a gang member in the slums, an unemployed worker, an unhappy student and, of course, a Zapatista in the mountains'.⁴ In other words, he is simply us: we are the leader we've been looking for.

This critique of hierarchies goes far beyond charismatic leadership. Many of the participants in the anti-corporate protest movements are equally suspicious of one-size-fits-all ideologies, political parties, indeed of any group that would centralize power and organize the parts of this movement into subordinate cells and locals. So while the intellectuals and organizers up on stage at the World Social Forum may help shape the ideas of the people on the streets, they most emphatically do not have the power or even the mechanisms to lead this street movement. In this amorphous context, the ideas and plans being hatched at the World Social Forum weren't irrelevant exactly, they just weren't important in the way they clearly hoped to be. They were destined to be swept up and tossed around in the tidal wave of information — web diaries, NGO manifestos, academic papers, home-made videos, *cris de coeur* — that the global anti-corporate network produces and consumes each and every day.

To those searching for replicas of more traditional anti-capitalist politics, this absence of clear structure makes the anti-corporate movement appear infuriatingly impassive: Evidently, these people are so disorganized they can't even get it together to respond positively to those who offer to organize them. Sure they've got guts when it comes to protesting, but these are MTV-weaned activists, you can practically hear the old guard saying: scattered, non-linear, no focus.

Only maybe it's not quite so simple. Maybe the protests, from Seattle to

Quebec City, look unfocused because they are not demonstrations of one movement at all but rather convergences of many smaller ones, each with its sights trained on a specific multinational corporation (like Nike), a particular industry (like agribusiness) or a new trade initiative (like the Free Trade Area of the Americas), or in defence of indigenous self-determination (like the Zapatistas).

Look a little closer and it's clear that these smaller, targeted movements are indeed battling the same forces, forces perhaps best outlined by the Zapatista National Liberation Army when it began its uprising on January 1, 1994 (the day the North American Free Trade Agreement came into law). The strategic victory of the Zapatistas was to insist that what was going on in Chiapas could not be written off as a narrow 'ethnic' or 'local' struggle — that it was universal. They did this by identifying their enemy not only as the Mexican state but as 'neoliberalism'. The Zapatistas insisted that the poverty and desperation in Chiapas was simply a more advanced version of something happening all around the world, and which began with the first acts of colonialism. Their 500 year head start graces the indigenous people of Chiapas' place at the political vanguard now. In his communiqués, Marcos pointed to the huge numbers of people being left behind by prosperity, whose land, and work, made that prosperity possible. 'The new distribution of the world excludes "minorities." The indigenous, youth, women, homosexuals, lesbians, people of colour, immigrants, workers, peasants; the majority who make up the world basements are presented, for power, as disposable. The distribution of the world excludes the majorities.'⁵

If neoliberalism is the common target there is also an emerging consensus that participatory democracy at the local level — whether through unions, neighbourhoods, farms, villages, anarchist collectives or aboriginal self-government — is where to start building alternatives to it. The common theme is an overarching commitment to self-determination and diversity: cultural diversity, biodiversity, and, yes, political diversity. The Zapatistas call this a movement of 'one "no" and many "yeses"', a description that defies the characterization that this is one movement at all, and challenges the assumption that it should be.⁶

Rather than a single movement, what is emerging is thousands of movements intricately linked to one another, much as 'hotlinks' connect their websites on the Internet. This analogy is more than coincidental and is in fact key to understanding the changing nature of political organizing. Although many have observed that the recent mass protests would have been impossible without the Internet, what has been overlooked is how the communication technology that facilitates these campaigns is shaping the movement in its own image. Thanks to the Net, mobilizations are able to unfold with sparse bureaucracy and minimal hierarchy; forced consensus and laboured manifestos are fading into the background, replaced instead by a culture of constant, loosely structured and sometimes compulsive information-swapping.

Despite media descriptions that portrayed the events in Quebec City as two protests — one a 'peaceful' labour march, the other a 'violent' anarchist riot, there were, in fact, hundreds of protests over the course of the weekend. One was

organized by a mother and daughter from Montreal. Another by a vanload of grad students from Edmonton. Another by three friends from Toronto who aren't members of anything but their health clubs. Yet another by a couple of waiters from a local café on their lunch break. Sure there were well-organized groups in Quebec City: the unions had buses, matching placards and a parade route; the 'black bloc' of anarchists had gas masks and radio links. But for days the streets were also filled with people who simply said to a friend, 'Let's go to Quebec', and with Quebec City residents who said, 'Let's go outside'.

In the four years before Seattle, similar convergences had taken place outside WTO, G-7 and Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation summits in Auckland, Vancouver, Manila, Birmingham, London, Geneva, Kuala Lumpur and Cologne. What is emerging is an activist model that mirrors the organic, decentralized, interlinked pathways of the Internet — the Internet come to life. Interestingly, the Washington-based research centre TeleGeography has taken it upon itself to map out the architecture of the Internet as if it were the solar system. Last year, TeleGeography pronounced that the Internet is not one giant web but a network of 'hubs and spokes'.⁷ The hubs are the centres of activity, the spokes the links to other centres which are autonomous but interconnected.

It seems like a perfect description of the so-called anti-globalization protests. These mass convergences are activist hubs, made up of hundreds, possibly thousands, of autonomous spokes. During the demonstrations the spokes take the form of 'affinity groups' of between two and twenty protesters, each of which elects a spokesperson to represent them at regular 'spokes council' meetings. At some rallies, activists carry actual cloth webs. When it's time for a meeting, they lay the web on the ground, call out 'all spokes on the web' and the structure becomes a street-level boardroom.

The affinity groups agree to loosely coordinate their actions, and, at some events, to abide by a set of non-violence principles (at the very least, they agree not to endanger one another by engaging in violence during a portion of a protest that is planned as non-violent). Apart from that, however, the affinity groups function as discrete units, with the power to make their own strategic decisions — a model of coordinated decentralization that is entirely lost on those looking for leaders and puppet masters. For instance, at the spokes council meetings before the anti-FTAA protests in Quebec City, Jaggi Singh acted only as facilitator — a glorified note-taker, keeping track of all the autonomous actions planned: one group announced they would form a marching band, another planned to wrap the security fence in toilet paper, another planned to throw hundreds of paper air planes through the chain link, another — a group of Harvard grad students — planned to read Foucault to the police. Those with more confrontational plans stayed silent and met only in the relative safety of their own affinity groups.

On the ground, the results of these miniature protests converging is either frighteningly chaotic or inspiringly poetic — or both. Rather than presenting a unified front, small units of activists surround their target from all directions. And rather than build elaborate national or international bureaucracies, temporary

structures are thrown up instead: empty buildings are hastily turned into ‘convergence centres’, and independent media producers assemble impromptu activist news centres. The ad hoc coalitions behind these demonstrations are frequently named after the date of the planned event — J18, N30, A16, S11, S26 — and when the date is passed, they leave virtually no trace behind, save for an archived website.

The hubs and spokes model is more than a tactic used at protests; the protests are themselves made up of ‘coalitions of coalitions’, to borrow a phrase from Kevin Danaher of Global Exchange. Each anti-corporate campaign is comprised of many groups, mostly NGOs, labour unions, students and anarchists. They use the Internet and regular international conference calls, as well as face-to-face meetings, to do everything from cataloguing the latest transgressions of the World Bank to bombarding Shell Oil with faxes and e-mails to distributing ready-to-download anti-sweatshop leaflets for protests at Nike Town. The groups remain autonomous, but their international coordination is deft and, to their targets, frequently devastating.

The charge that the anti-corporate movement lacks ‘vision’ falls apart when looked at in the context of these campaigns. It’s true that, to a casual observer, the mass protests in Seattle, Washington, D.C., Prague and Quebec City can, in their hodgepodge of slogans and causes, seem simply like colourful parades of complaints. But in trying to find coherence in these large-scale shows of strength, observers may be confusing the outward demonstrations of the movement with the thing itself — missing the forest for the people dressed as trees. This movement *is* its spokes, and in the spokes there is no shortage of vision.

The student anti-sweatshop movement, for instance, has rapidly moved from simply criticizing companies and campus administrators to drafting alternate codes of conduct and building its own quasi-regulatory body, the Worker Rights Consortium. More significantly, campus labour activists have been expanding their focus to include targets much closer to home: the caretakers and catering staff on their campuses, as well as the migrant farm workers supplying their cafeterias. The movement against genetically engineered and modified foods has leapt from one policy victory to the next, first getting many GM foods removed from the shelves of British supermarkets, then getting labelling laws passed in Europe, then making enormous strides with the Montreal Protocol on Biosafety. Meanwhile, opponents of the World Bank’s and IMF’s export-led development models have produced bookshelves’ worth of resources on community-based development models, debt relief and reparations, as well as self-government principles.

Critics of the oil and mining industries are similarly overflowing with ideas for sustainable energy and responsible resource extraction — though they rarely get the chance to put their visions into practice. The growing movement against Big Pharma has plenty of ideas about how to get affordable AIDS drugs to those living with the disease, it’s just that they keep getting dragged into trade court for their trouble. The Zapatistas, meanwhile, have gone from saying ‘Ya Basta’ to NAFTA,

to being at the forefront of a movement for radical democratic reform within Mexico, playing a major role in toppling the corrupt seventy-one-year reign of the Institutional Revolutionary Party, and placing indigenous rights at the centre of the Mexican political agenda.

The fact that these campaigns are decentralized is not a source of incoherence and fragmentation. Rather, it is a reasonable, even ingenious adaptation both to pre-existing fragmentation within progressive networks and to changes in the broader culture. The traditional institutions that once organized citizens into neat, structured groups are all in decline: unions, religions, political parties. Yet something is propelling tens of thousands of individuals onto the streets anyway — an intuition, a gut instinct, perhaps just the profoundly human desire to be part of something larger than oneself. What but this web could catch them all?

The structure of the movement is also a by-product of the explosion of NGOs, which, since the Rio Summit in 1992, have been gaining power and prominence. There are so many NGOs involved in anti-corporate campaigns that nothing but the hubs and spokes model could possibly accommodate all their different styles, tactics and goals. Like the Internet itself, both the NGO and the affinity group networks are indefinitely expandable systems. If somebody doesn't feel like they quite fit in to one of the 30,000 or so NGOs or thousands of affinity groups out there, they can just start their own and link up.

For some, this surfer's appeal to activism is an abomination. But whether or not one agrees with the model, there is no doubt that one of its great strengths is that it has proven extraordinarily difficult to control, largely because it is so different from the organizing principles of the institutions and corporations it targets. It responds to corporate concentration with a maze of fragmentation, to centralization with its own kind of localization, to power consolidation with radical power dispersal.

Once again, this strategy has been employed most deftly by the Zapatistas. Rather than barricading themselves, from the first communiqué they flung open the doors and invited the world 'to watch over and regulate our battles'.⁸ The summer after the uprising, the Zapatistas hosted a National Democratic Convention in the jungle; 6,000 people attended, most from Mexico. In 1996, they hosted the first Encuentro For Humanity And Against Neo-Liberalism. Some 3,000 activists travelled to Chiapas to meet with others from around the world. These networks, many of them informal, made the Zapatista struggle impossible to contain.

Joshua Karliner of the Transnational Resource and Action Center calls this web-like system 'an unintentionally brilliant response to globalization'. And because it was unintentional, we still lack even the vocabulary to describe it, which may be why a rather amusing metaphor industry has evolved to fill the gap. I'm throwing my lot in with 'hubs and spokes', but Maude Barlow of the Council of Canadians says, '[w]e are up against a boulder. We can't remove it so we try to go underneath it, to go around it and over it.' Britain's John Jordan, one of the founders of Reclaim the Streets, puts it this way: 'transnationals are like giant

tankers, and we are like a school of fish. We can respond quickly; they can't.' The US-based Free Burma Coalition talks of a network of 'spiders', spinning a web strong enough to tie down the most powerful multinationals.

At almost all the global protests, this non-strategy baffled even the most outrageously over-prepared security forces: not only did it delay the opening of the World Trade Organization in Seattle, but a similar strategy saw protesters dressed as 'pink fairies' dancing on the walls of the convention centre during the World Bank/IMF meeting in Prague and saw large portions of the security fence taken down during the Summit of the Americas in Quebec City. Charles Ramsey, Washington DC's police chief, explains what the web looks like from a security point of view. 'You have to experience it to fully appreciate just how well organized they are, how many different ways they can come at you', he said on the second day of the World Bank protests in his city, sounding a little like General Custer describing the wily tactics of the Sioux in 1876.⁹

Fittingly, it's a US military report about the Zapatista uprising that provides the most comprehensive take on these 'network wars'. According to a study produced by RAND, the Zapatistas waged 'a war of the flea' that, thanks to the Internet, the *encuentros*, and the global NGO network, turned into a 'war of the swarm'.¹⁰

The military challenge of a war of the swarm, the researchers noted, is that it has no 'central leadership or command structure; it is multiheaded, impossible to decapitate'.¹¹

Of course, this multiheaded system has its weaknesses too, and they were on full display on the streets of Washington during the anti-World Bank/IMF protests. At around noon on April 16, the day of the largest protest, a spokes council meeting was convened for the affinity groups that were in the midst of blocking all the street intersections surrounding the headquarters of the World Bank and the IMF. The intersections had been blocked since 6 a.m., but the meeting delegates, the protesters had just learned, had slipped inside the police barricades before 5 a.m.

Given this new information, most of the spokespeople felt it was time to give up the intersections and join the official march at the Ellipse. The problem was that not everyone agreed: a handful of affinity groups wanted to see if they could block the delegates on their way out of their meetings. The compromise the council came up with was telling. 'OK, everybody listen up', Kevin Danaher shouted into a megaphone. 'Each intersection has autonomy. If the intersection wants to stay locked down, that's cool. If it wants to come to the Ellipse, that's cool too. It's up to you.' This was impeccably fair and democratic, but there was just one problem — it made absolutely no sense. Sealing off the access points had been a coordinated action. If some intersections now opened up and other, rebel-camp intersections stayed occupied, delegates on their way out of the meeting could just hang a right instead of a left, and they would be home free. Which, of course, is precisely what happened.

As I watched clusters of protesters get up and wander off while others stayed

seated, defiantly guarding — well, nothing — it struck me as an apt metaphor for the strengths and weaknesses of this nascent activist network. There is no question that the communication culture that reigns on the Net is better at speed and volume than at synthesis. It is capable of getting tens of thousands of people to meet on the same street corner, placards in hand, but is far less adept at helping those same people to agree on what they are really asking for before they get to the barricades — or after they leave. Perhaps that's why a certain repetitive quality has set in at these large demonstrations: from smashed McDonald's windows to giant puppets, they can begin to look a little like McProtests. The Net made them possible, but it's not proving particularly helpful in taking them to a deeper stage.

For this reason and others, many in the movement have become increasingly critical of 'summit hopping', and generally agree that there needs to be more structure between mass protests. Clearly, far too much expectation is being placed on these large demonstrations: the organizers of the Washington DC demo, for instance, announced they would literally 'shut down' two \$30 billion transnational institutions, at the same time as they attempted to convey sophisticated ideas about the fallacies of neoliberal economics to the stock-happy public. They simply couldn't do it; no single demo could, and it's only getting harder. Seattle's direct-action tactics worked as well as they did because they took the police by surprise. Now the police have subscribed to all the e-mail lists and have used the supposed threat posed by anarchists as giant fundraising schemes, allowing them to buy up all manner of new toys, from surveillance equipment to water cannons. More substantively, it was clear that by the time the protests in Prague rolled around in September 2000, the movement, no matter how decentralized, was in grave danger of seeming remote, cut off from the issues that affect people's day to day lives.

So the question is, if there is to be more structure, what kind should it be? An international political party that pushes to democratize world government? New national parties? How about a network of city and town councils each committed to introducing participatory democracy? Should it exist entirely outside of electoral politics and concentrate exclusively on creating counter-powers to the state?

These questions are more than tactical, they are strategic and often philosophical. Fundamentally, they hinge on how one defines that most slippery of terms: globalization. Is the problem with globalization simply that a good idea has been grabbed by the wrong hands, and the situation could be righted if only international institutions like the WTO were made democratic and accountable; if there were tough global rules protecting the environment, taxing financial transactions, and upholding labour standards? Or is globalization, at its core, a crisis of representative democracy in which power and decision-making are delegated to points further and further away from the places where the effects of those decisions are felt — until representative democracy means voting for politicians every few years who use that mandate to transfer national powers to the WTO and the IMF? Is this a movement trying to impose its own, more humane brand of globalization, or is it a movement against centralization and the delegation of

power *on principle*, one as critical of left-wing, one-size-fits-all ideology as of the neoliberal recipe for McGovernment?

While there is near consensus on the need to sit down and start sorting through these questions, there is precious little on the next set of obvious questions: at whose table? And who gets to decide? The World Social Forum was by the far the most ambitious attempt so far to get this process under way, drawing a remarkable 10,000 delegates. Few of them, however, seemed to know what to expect: a model UN? A giant teach-in? A mock parliament? A party? It turned out that the organizational structure of the forum was so opaque that it was nearly impossible to figure out how decisions were made or to find ways to question those decisions. There were no open plenaries and no chance to vote on the structure of future events.

Though the Forum was billed as a break in the protests, by the third day frustrated delegates began to do what they do best: they protested. There were marches and manifestos — a half-dozen at least. Beleaguered forum organizers found themselves charged with everything from reformism to sexism, not to mention ignoring the African continent. The Anti-Capitalist Youth contingent accused them of ignoring the important role direct action played in building the movement. Their manifesto condemned the conference as ‘a ruse’ using the mushy language of democracy to avoid a more divisive discussion of class. The PSTU, a breakaway faction of the Workers Party, began interrupting speeches about the possibility of another world with loud chants of: ‘Another world is not possible, unless you smash capitalism and bring in socialism!’ (It sounded much better in Portuguese.)

Some of this criticism was unfair. The forum accommodated an extraordinary range of views, and it was precisely this diversity that made conflicts inevitable. But much of the criticism was legitimate and has implications that reach far beyond a one-week conference. How *are* decisions made in this movement of movements? On the anarchist side, all the talk of radical decentralization often conceals a very real hierarchy based on who owns, understands and controls the computer networks linking the activists to one another — what Jesse Hirsh, one of the founders of the anarchist computer network Tao Communications, calls ‘a geek adhocacy’. And on the NGO side, who decides which ‘civil society representatives’ go behind the fence in Davos or Quebec City — while protesters outside are held back with water cannons and tear gas? There is no consensus among protest organizers about participating in these negotiations, and, more to the point, there is no truly representative process in place to make these decisions: no mechanism to select acceptable members of an activist delegation and no agreed-upon set of goals by which to measure the benefits and pitfalls of taking part.

And yet with a sweeping new round of WTO negotiations set for the fall of 2001, and the Free Trade Area of the Americas negotiation on-going, these questions about process were and are urgent. How do we determine whether the goal is to push for ‘social clauses’ on labour and environmental issues in international

agreements, or to take whole sections — like food safety and agriculture — out of the agreements, or to try to shoot these agreements down altogether?

There are serious debates to be had over strategy and process, but it's difficult to see how they will unfold without bogging down a movement whose greatest strength so far has been its agility. Part of the problem is structural. Among most anarchists, who are doing a great deal of the grassroots organizing, direct democracy, transparency and community self-determination are not lofty political goals, they are fundamental tenets governing their own organizations. But although fanatical about process, anarchists tend to resist efforts to structure or centralize the movement. In contrast, many of the key NGOs, though they may share the anarchists' ideas about democracy in theory, are themselves organized as traditional hierarchies. They are run by charismatic leaders and executive boards, while their members send them money and cheer from the sidelines. The International Forum on Globalization — the brain trust of the North American side of the movement — lacks transparency in its decision-making and isn't accountable to a broad membership. Meanwhile, traditional membership-based structures like political parties and unions have been reduced to bit players in these wide webs of activism.

Perhaps the real lesson of Porto Alegre is that democracy and accountability need to be worked out first on more manageable scales — within local communities and coalitions and inside individual organizations, then broadened out. Without this foundation, there's not much hope for a satisfying democratic process when 10,000 activists from wildly different backgrounds are thrown in a room together.

For a model of how to extract coherence from a movement whose greatest tactical strength so far has been its similarity to a swarm of mosquitoes, it's useful to turn, once again, to the closest thing this movement has to a leader: a mask, two eyes and a pipe — a.k.a. Subcomandante Marcos. Marcos's own story is of a man who came to his leadership not through swaggering certainty, but by coming to terms with political uncertainty, by learning to follow. Though there is no confirmation of Marcos's real identity, the most repeated legend that surrounds him goes like this: an urban Marxist intellectual and activist, Marcos was wanted by the state and was no longer safe in the cities. He fled to the mountains of Chiapas in southeast Mexico filled with revolutionary rhetoric and certainty, there to convert the poor indigenous masses to the cause of armed proletarian revolution against the bourgeoisie. He said the workers of the world must unite, and the Mayans just stared at him. They said they weren't workers and, besides, land wasn't property but the heart of their communities. Having failed as a Marxist missionary, Marcos immersed himself in Mayan culture. The more he learned, the less he knew.

Out of this process, a new kind of army emerged, the EZLN defined itself in terms of not being controlled by an elite of guerrilla commanders but by the communities themselves, through clandestine councils and open assemblies. 'Our army', says Marcos, 'became scandalously Indian.'¹² That meant that he wasn't a

commander barking orders, but a subcomandante, a conduit for the will of the councils. His first words said in the new persona were: '[t]hrough me speaks the will of the Zapatista National Liberation Army.'¹³

It's tempting to dismiss the Zapatista model as only being applicable to Indigenous struggles, but that is to miss the point entirely. The reason why there are now 45,000 Zapatista-related websites, why Marcos's communiqués are available in at least fourteen languages, and why twenty-two Zapatista books have been written and twelve documentaries made, is that there is something about the theory of Zapatismo that reaches far beyond Chiapas. It has to do, I think, with the very definition of revolution — and where power should truly rest. A few years ago, the idea of the Zapatista command travelling to Mexico City to address the congress would have been impossible to imagine. The prospect of masked guerrillas (even masked guerrillas who have left their arms at home) entering a hall of political power signals one thing: revolution. But when the Zapatistas travelled to Mexico City in March 2001, they weren't interested in overthrowing the state or naming their leader as president. In fact, when they finally gained entrance to the Congress, they left Marcos outside.

If anything, in their demands for control over land, direct political representation, and the right to protect their language and culture, the Zapatistas are demanding *less* state power over their lives, not more. What sets the Zapatistas apart from typical Marxist guerrilla insurgents is that their goal is not to win control, but to seize and build autonomous spaces where 'democracy, liberty and justice' can thrive. This is intimately linked with an organizing model that doesn't compartmentalize communities into workers, warriors, farmers and students, but instead seeks to organize communities whole, across sectors and across generations, creating genuine 'social movements'. For the Zapatistas, creating these autonomous zones isn't a recipe for dropping out of the capitalist economy, but a base from which to confront it. Marcos is convinced that these free spaces, created from reclaimed land, communal agriculture and resistance to privatization, will eventually create counter-powers to the state.

This organizing model has spread throughout Latin America, and the world. You can see it in the anarchist squats of Italy (called 'social centres') and in the Landless Peasants' Movement of Brazil, which seizes tracts of unused farmland and uses them for sustainable agriculture, markets and schools under the slogan 'Ocupar, Resistir, Producir' (Occupy, Resist, Produce). These same ideas were forcefully expressed by the students of the National Autonomous University of Mexico during the long and militant occupation of their campus. Zapata once said the land belongs to those who work it, their banners blared, WE SAY THAT THE UNIVERSITY BELONGS TO THOSE WHO STUDY IN IT.

What seemed to be emerging organically is not a movement for a single global government but a vision for an increasingly connected international network of very local initiatives, each built on direct democracy.

When critics say that the protesters lack vision, what they are really saying is that they lack an overarching revolutionary philosophy — like Marxism, deep

ecology or social anarchy — on which they all agree. That is absolutely true, and for this we should be extraordinarily thankful. At the moment, the anti-corporate street activists are ringed by would-be leaders, anxious for the opportunity to enlist them as foot soldiers. At one end there is the Socialist Workers Party, waiting to welcome all that inchoate energy in Seattle and Washington inside its own sectarian, evangelical framework. On the other, there is John Zerzan in Eugene, Oregon, who sees the rioting and property destruction as the first step toward the collapse of industrialization and a return to pre-lapsarian 'anarcho-primitivism' — a kind of hunter-gatherer utopia.

It is to this young movement's credit that it has as yet fended off all of these agendas and has rejected everyone's generously donated manifesto, holding out for an acceptably democratic, representative process to take its resistance to the next stage. Will it be a ten-point plan? A new political doctrine? Maybe not. Maybe out of the chaotic network of hubs and spokes, something else will emerge: not a blueprint for some utopian new world, but a plan to protect the possibility of many worlds — 'a world', as the Zapatistas say, 'with many worlds in it'.¹⁴

Maybe instead of meeting the proponents of neoliberalism head on, this movement of movements will surround them from all directions.

NOTES

Portions of this essay first appeared in *The Nation*, *The Guardian* and *The Globe and Mail*.

- 1 In cases where no specific source is referred to, quotations and information are based on personal observation or communication.
- 2 *Newsweek*, 13 December 1999, p 36.
- 3 Mark Steyn, 'Zealots' Only Concrete Argument: They Grasp Their Projectiles; Less So Their Principles', *National Post*, 23 April 2001.
- 4 Subcomandante Marcos quoted in Robert Collier, 'Commander Marcos Identifies With All', *San Francisco Chronicle*, 13 June 1994.
- 5 Subcomandante Marcos, *First Declaration of La Realidad For Humanity Against Neoliberalism*, by the Clandestine Indigenous Revolutionary Committee General Command of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation, Mexico, January 1996. Available at <http://www.ezln.org/documentos/1996/19960130.en.htm>.
- 6 Subcomandante Marcos in Juana Ponce de Leon, ed., *Our Word Is Our Weapon*, Toronto: Seven Stories Press, 2001.
- 7 TeleGeography Inc, *Hubs and Spokes: A TeleGeography Internet Reader*, Washington, D.C.: TeleGeography, 2000, p. 9.
- 8 Subcomandante Marcos, *EZLN's Declaration of War: Today We Say Enough Is Enough (Ya Basta!)*, General command of the EZLN, 1993.
- 9 Charles H. Ramsey during a press conference, Washington, DC, 17 April

2000. Bob Dart and Alec Schultz report Ramsey to have said that '[t]hey are very very organized' ('Protests Shut Parts of Capital: Meetings Go On; Bankers Vow Reform', *The Palm Beach Post*, 17 April 2000).

10 David F. Ronfeldt, John Arquilla, Graham E. Fuller, Melissa Fuller, *The Zapatista Social Netwar in Mexico*, Los Angeles: Rand, 1998, p. 50.

11 Ibid., p. 119.

12 Marcos in Ponce de Leon, ed., *Our Word Is Our Weapon*.

13 Ibid.

14 For the quote 'a world made of many worlds', see Zapatista Army of National Liberation (read by Subcomandante Marcos), *Second Declaration of La Realidad* at the closing act of the First Intercontinental Encounter for Humanity and Against Neoliberalism, August 1996.