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Sylvie Deneuve, Charles Reeve

Behind the Balaclavas of South-East Mexico

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followers amongst the ignorant or those who chase after positions and private incomes.”³¹

Paris, August 1995 Sylvie Deneuve, Charles Reeve

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³¹ Ricardo Flores Magon, *La guerre sociale*, 1911, published by Spartacus, op.cit,

to negotiate the representative power of the marginalized and excluded layers of the proletariat, a power that they have gained because of the sympathy aroused by their actions. The EZLN has become the new party of the Mexican Left. As for Marcos, confident about his media charisma, he pre-centers himself more and more as one of the chiefs and displays in the press his politicking science. The eruption of the Mexican crisis and its financial consequences have destroyed the myth of neo-liberalism's economic miracle throughout the American-continent. The American capitalists, believing only in making a good deal out of NAFTA, find themselves faced, in Mexico, with a situation which risks becoming explosive. Furthermore, if there is an explosion, they're going to face, on the one hand, the discontent of the immigrant community in the USA (not just Mexican, but Hispanic in general)²⁹ and, on the other hand, the dangers of the spread of the revolt to other Latin-American countries. Whatever happens, the political future of the EZLN won't be separated from the confrontations within the ruling class on the question of dependence on American capitalism. The activity of the Zapatistas is, from now on, a part of these political stakes. The major unknown factor in this scenario of bourgeois politics is the actions of Mexican proletarians and their ability to emancipate themselves from the control of bureaucratic organizations, both ancient (the PRI and the PRD) and modern (the EZLN). Should they engage in autonomous and independent actions, they will discover the gap which exists between their class interests and the nationalist interests of these parties and organizations. On that day, we shall see the old caciques (ancient Indian chiefs) and the new chiefs in balaclavas holding hands together. Without a doubt, the "well gifted young people"³⁰ will agree in rejecting the "unrealistic" demands of the sub-proletarian youths in revolt. They will therefore realize their ambitions, because, as a revolutionary from the epoch of Zapata remarked, "The cult of the personality can only create

²⁹ Despite the reinforcement of controls, the Mexican-US border is like a sieve. Millions of Mexicans live and work in the USA where their militant engagement is increasingly noticed in the schools, where they live and in their workplaces.

³⁰ Regis Debray, op.cit.

is such that there's a bloody settling of scores at the very top of the PRI's nomenclature. The neo-liberal tendency demands the elimination of the bureaucratic constraints which constitute the basis for the survival of the old sections of the PRI. Of course, the alliances between the different tendencies are far from being made on any clear basis since many of the partisans of neo-liberalism also come from the corrupt and speculative sectors of the PRI. There, as elsewhere, the members of the State bureaucracy transform themselves into ferocious defenders of a savage private capitalism.

Within the Mexican bourgeoisie there are many who don't wish to conform to the demands of North American capitalism. We can assume that the military action of the EZLN and the anxiety which it has aroused amongst multinational capitalist circles could have become a stake in the conflict between this tendency and the defenders of American interests. The changeover to American control of Mexican petrol — an operation which came about under the cover of the cancellation of the debt — has re-activated these -antagonisms, and exacerbated the nationalist feelings of the bourgeoisie.

Mexican Left Social Democracy — regrouped around the Party of Revolutionary Democracy (PRD) — has also been forced to find a new place on the political scene. First of all, this party tried to become allied to the leader-shin of the EZLN by offering them their own services: their institutional connections, their political and trade union structures and their influence in the media. However, this alliance didn't survive the situation's development. The EZLN couldn't allow its actions to be integrated into the national strategy of the PRD, which it regards as too compromised with certain sectors of the Mexican bourgeoisie. Their differences were emphasized after the elections of August '95, which saw the failure of the PRD and the powerful rise of the neo-liberal Catholic current of the National Action Party (PAN), a new political force which is promising to clean up the State whilst adapting it to NAFTA demands. For its part, the EZLN doesn't demand "power", which has often been underlined as proof of the EZLN's anti-authoritarianism, without saying that its leaders know perfectly well that, given the historical situation and the power struggles, they can't afford to demand the Dower of the central State. But on the other hand, the Zapatistas are in a position

"Because those who are too quick to admire and who are suddenly convinced are rarely the salt of the earth"¹

B. Traven, In *The Freest State In The World*,
1919, Insomniac Edition, Paris 1995.

1

In the Golden Age of 'actually non-existing socialism' journeys were organised to the countries of the radiant future. Believers were then invited to express their enthusiasm for a reality staged by the lords of the manor. In this way people visited the soviet socialism of the USSR, the Maoist socialism of China, the miniature socialism of Albania, the bearded socialism of Cuba, the Sandinista socialism of Nicaragua, etc. Woe betide those who contested the objective, scientific and unquestionable character of these fabricated realities. Until the day these systems collapsed. People thought they had seen but had seen nothing! Were lessons drawn from this? It would seem not! With a smile slung over their shoulder, people today again go off "to do revolutionary Chiapas" in convoys organised by fellow travelers of the Zapatistas. On a well-signed route, people have to agree to see only what they have to see and to believe in the leader's words. The irrefutable argument hasn't changed

¹ Translators' Note (T.N.): This is a translation from the French version. The English-language version, published in 'The Kidnapped Saint and other stories', reads: "Such speedy enthusiasms and speedily acquired convictions are seldom the salt to be used as seasoning in cases like these." We prefer the above. The text continues: "The real need is not to persuade the great masses, to whip them up to flaming enthusiasm, to move them to adopt a resolution. Rather the great need is to convince individual human beings. The people of the future, and the people who are preparing for that which is to come, should not be argued into this without thinking things out; they should not believe unconditionally; rather they should be filled with the consciousness that this Revolution is right and feasible, whereas that other bourgeois order is wrong and not feasible. The people who today carry within them the will to future development, should not work for the coming society by relying on the mind of a clever Führer, but rather with their own minds, with their own hearts, and with their own souls. But this they can do only when they know what it is all about, and when they also know and understand exactly what they themselves want."

one iota: because the imperialist forces are threatening and the people are defense-less, we can only put our trust in commanders. In a world in crisis the demands for the future are revised downwards! People make themselves the advocates of realism — they give in to the essential and side with new oppressive projects.

The groups of revolutionary tourists, seduced by the exoticism of the unique Indian culture², are incapable of giving out any information or direct account of what is happening in the Mexican countryside: about the occupations, the forms of organization chosen by the peasants in struggle, their objectives and political perspectives. They are also incapable of expressing the slightest critical element which could enable us to deepen our knowledge of the avant-garde organization running the armed struggle.

Was it simply the evocation of Zapata's name and the memory of a "Mexico Above the Volcano" which was enough to mobilize people? How come they can throw themselves naively in support of a movement which is a vehicle for the values of ethnic identity and patriotism, which are nowadays at the heart of the most barbaric tendencies in the world? Those who have more radical pretensions about the world can only justify their solidarity with this Zapatista army of national liberation in the name of the tactics of circumstance. It's in this way that, in the name of tactical support, people consider as acceptable for others what is unacceptable for themselves!

Rather than let the charms of the balaclavaed Savior lull us to sleep, wouldn't it have been better to analyze what is new in this type of old organization?

² For a pertinent analysis of "indigenous culture" as a commodity in the service of the tourist industry and of political manipulation, read 'El Indigenismo desde arriba: traficanando politicamente y comercialmente en el nombre del pueblo' in the Columbian review 'Contrafluxo' (no.1, Medellin, 1995), text re-printed in "Etcetera" (no.24, April 1994, Barcelona)

the links of such-and-such a country with American imperialism. Nationalist ideology identified itself with Marxist-Leninism, which was becoming the ideology of the ruling class of the new states-in-formation. Since the establishment of the New World Order, borne out of the collapse of the State capitalist system, the nationalist project can no longer aspire towards such a rupture. Any avant-garde organization must review its tactics and strategies if it's not to be condemned to disappear. As well as putting forward nationalist demands, which exploit the anti-imperialist feelings which are still very much alive in the countries dependent on the centers of capitalism, this type of organization must integrate itself into local political life in order to find there alliances within the confines of the contradictions at the heart of the ruling classes.

We know that the EZLN's military action in Chiapas was launched at the same time as the NAFTA (North American Free Trade Area) came into force — the free trade agreement between the three countries of North America. This agreement wants to create a formal juridical framework, regulating a process which has been on course for years: the seizure by the United States of the two border countries — Canada in the north and Mexico in the south. Taking into account its weakness, the consequences for the Mexican economy are very important: the closure of uncompetitive industrial units, the destruction of traditional agricultural production and the pauperisation of the majority of the population.²⁸ Added to all this is a drastic disruption of the ruling class, since the economy is characterized by powerful State intervention. The breaking of the bonds, woven over decades, between the nomenclature of the party-State and the private capitalist class is the order of the day. As a result, it's the whole system of nepotism and corruption which is being threatened. The decay of the political class — the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) — and the decomposition of the bureaucratic control network of civil society, are not recent: the student revolt of the 60s and the movements of self-organization following Mexico's earthquake have already shown that. Today we are at the stage of rotting putrefaction and the situation

²⁸ Since the signing of NAFTA the peso has lost 50% of its value, more than 6000 factories have closed, a million workers have been made redundant, and consumption has gone down 25% (Le Monde, August 9th 1995).

From the little we know of the real conditions of the social revolt which is spreading in Mexico, it appears, in decisive moments, that Mexican proletarians find themselves alone in the face of the forces of repression which defend private property. Those who sympathies with the EZLN want us to absolutely believe that the army's existence represents a shield, a self-defensive force for the poor confronted by the State and the capitalists. That is an elitist argument par excellence: weak people need an armed fist capable of defending them. But the reality is completely different. The EZLN doesn't intervene when confrontations happen outside the zone which they control militarily. The peasants in revolt are then shot with no bother. This is far from the perspective of those armed groups — which we have known about elsewhere and in other epochs — whose strategy was to bring about a response to the repression wherever it was carried out. Because the EZLN is not a classical armed group — it's the armed arm of an Organization which controls an area and its population. As long as Mexican proletarians let themselves be taken in by the belief in the self-defensive role of the EZLN, they will have to pay a terrible price. From this point of view (which is ours'), it can be argued that even the existence of the EZLN is a brake on the development of the autonomous capacity for struggle. The *raison d'être* of an avant-garde organisation is its ability to replace autonomous force by the force of the Party. But we must also recognise that the EZLN plays a dual role amongst the sub-proletarian youth who make up its base. It channels their revolt into military actions, which are controllable by the chiefs, and at the same time gives them a collective identity at a time of heavy social collapse.

6

The events of Chiapas are unfolding at a time when capitalism is going through a particular historical moment. During the epoch when the world was split into two blocs, all the projects of national independence presupposed a submission to one or the other of the capitalist powers. However, the aim of the so-called "liberation" movements was to break

2

The totalitarian character of Mayan and Incan societies no longer needs to be demonstrated. Despite that, the myth of an idyllic Indian community has a long life. This myth is partly nourished by the idea that people hold about community. As if the community form of pre-capitalist societies somehow prevented a very structured hierarchy, centralized power and barbaric forms of work exploitation. Among the Mayas, for example — including the territory comprising Chiapas today — the overwork of the peasants was intended to maintain a minority of aristocrats and priests who formed the ruling class of these city-states³. To speak of "local traditions of democratic decision-making" and to present the rules which governed them as forms of primitive democracy is to keep silent about the authority of the elders and chiefs which depended on a central theocracy to enforce orders and to defend their interests, Decision-making concerning the essential questions of material life escaped the members of this community, and the values on which social cohesion was rooted were submission to authority. On this subject, it's enough to refer to the Aztec discourse which spread the norms and principles which were meant to guide social life: "Be loving, grateful, respectful, be frightened, look with fear, be submissive, do what your mother's heart desires, and your father's too, because its his merit, his gift; because service, submission, deference are their due . . . Humiliate yourself, bow down, lower your head, bend down!!"⁴ A study of the conquest has made it possible for someone to put forward the following hypothesis concerning, "the ease with which the Spaniards won military victories over the "structured" empires rather than over the tribes, which were not confined by State forms. This can easily be explained. The inhabitants of an empire like the Incas' were already used to the 'corvées' (forced statutory labor) for the Emperor or for the Temples of the Sun and of the Moon. The transfer — from Emperor to the Spanish *encomendero* — certainly

³ See: J.Eric S.Thompson, 'Grandeur and Decadence of Mayan Civilisation', Paris, Bibliothèque Historique Payot, 1993.

⁴ 'Witness of the Ancient Word', p.48, translated from Nuhauti by Jacqueline de Thirand-Forest, Paris, La Difference, 1995.

wasn't carried out peacefully; but it was possible even if it meant using violence. On the other hand, with the free populations without any State framework, it wasn't possible for violence to be enough: war became a massacre and the survivors were reduced to slavery."⁵

These people, after having been first enslaved by the bureaucratic empires, then by the European colonizers, were crushed by the capitalist machine. B. Traven — whom people like to quote in connection with the Chiapas revolt⁶ — wrote pages full of fury about their humiliation. Once amongst them, he must have remembered what he wrote during the German revolution, "Is there even just one of your chiefs who has any aim other than to rule over you or to use you to dominate others?"⁷. A lot of indigenous people, having been expelled from their communal lands, became proletarians, submitting to the violence of waged work commodity relations. Those who, nowadays, present themselves as the armed representatives of the 'Indian communities' never forget to patriotically proclaim their attachment to the ideals of Mexican Independence! And yet we know that these ideals have occupied a special historical moment in the transformation of the indigenous population into poor peasants and into landless proletarians. Those who made up the largest part of the Zapatista army during the Mexican evolution came from the State of Orelas, "virtually the only southern State where capitalist relations of production ruled everywhere".⁸ If it was their attachment to the aspirations of a past Indian communal life that had stirred up their revolt, it also explains their inability to go further in their emancipation. These peasants were deeply rooted in their land and in their traditions. Above all, they fought for the restoration of the expropriated communal lands

⁵ Ruggiero Romano, 'The mechanisms of Colonial Conquest: the Conquistadores' (p.46), Paris, Flammarion.

⁶ See B.Traven's text "From the Mountains Of South-East Mexico", Paris, Insomniac, 1994.

⁷ B.Traven 'In the Freest State in the World', Paris, Insomniac,1995

⁸ Americo Nunes, "The Revolutions of Mexico" (p.151), Paris, Flammarion, 1975. In this brilliant critique of the myths of progressives about the Mexican Revolution, the author shows, in particular, that "the libertarian slogan 'Land & Liberty' was falsely attributed to the Zapatista movement" when in fact it had been devised by the liberal party of the Magon brothers. See also, 'The Mexican Revolution' by Ricardo Flores Magon, Paris, Spartacus, 1979.

political committees at the head (the General Command to which Marcos is answerable).

Patriotic themes are omnipresent in the EZLN's discourse. An observer who was sympathetic towards their actions still couldn't help but notice that "Marcos himself expresses a fanatical patriotism."²⁶ Without a doubt, patriotic hysteria was one of the defects, reduced to caricature, of leftist Maoism, which later became a variation of democratic nationalism. In the present instance, these themes compensate, through demagogy, for the weakness of their proposals concerning the social question. Any reference to a project of reorganizing production and society is remarkably absent from this discourse. The EZLN wants to be the spokesman for the poor peasantry, traditionally attached to the land; but nothing is said or written either against the right to private property or in favour of expropriations and occupations of land. Yet we know that, at the beginning of '95, in Chiapas State alone, more than 500 properties were occupied by poor peasants and sub-proletarians. A certain discrepancy between the Organisation and the masses seems to appear. . . On the other hand, there's no lack of lists of social "conquests" obtained by the enactment of revolutionary legalism. On this terrain the masked sub-commander is at ease and never fails to enumerate the achievements of the new local administration: "We've forbidden the cutting down of trees and we've established laws for the protection of the forests by prohibiting the hunting of wild animals. . . , as well as forbidding the growing and traffic of drugs, and these prohibitions have been respected. . . And we've put an end to prostitution, and unemployment, as well as begging, have disappeared. And the children have become acquainted with sweets and toys."²⁷ Which leaves all those who believe in the impossibility of resolving problems without attacking their causes without a voice. Since when can we get rid of alcoholism or prostitution by forbidding them? Since when has woman's participation in military tasks and their promotion in the hierarchy of command represented proof of progress in feminine emancipation?

²⁶ John Ross, "Rebellion from the Roots", op.cit

²⁷ Marcos, "La fleur promise", Le Monde, April 1st 1995

particularly worrying that that this aspect has been justified by virtually everybody involved in the militant support for this movement. More subtle minds assure us that Marcos doesn't speak in the name of the people, that he's only a spokesman. But how can we recognise the words of people if we can only hear Marcos? Only Marcos is able to do it, of course! And so we go round in a circle. Some loyal enthusiasts, however, feel embarrassed by the spectacle of this sub-commander and thus try extra-hard to prove that there is, in this military organisation "a desire to avoid the danger of caudillismo"²⁴ But it is what the sub-commander himself partly desires: "What's new is not the absence of caudillo; what is new is the fact that the caudillo hasn't got a face."²⁵ For us, this is even worse! In a world of internet networks and virtual reality, the boss's anonymity is not the end of the boss — on the contrary, it's the abstract form of authority. The cult of the hero is not superseded — it manifests itself in its pure form. Modernity is revealed to us in the form of a caricature of the past: we thought we'd got rid of Bolshevik avant-gardism only to find ourselves with the avant-gardism of Zorro. The EZLN is managerialism in a democratic balaclava.

However, a careful reading of the prose of the EZLN unveils the existence of a clear separation between "us" (the liberation army) and "them" (the masses). In order to disperse the slightest doubt, we are told that the organization consults tirelessly with the base: there must be plebiscites, assemblies, referendums. It's a question of "democratic political processes", of "new political projects", of "autonomous democracy for all (sic) levels of Mexican society", of a "new political synthesis" etc. On the other hand, when it's a question of going further than these hackneyed concepts and of being precise about the real content of the power structures, a vague formula is the rule. In fact, any clear-sighted observer would, without difficulty, find behind the haze, the basic principles of leftist Maoism, of the "torreonism" of the 70s. The Zapatista organisation conforms to this model: assemblies for the base, clandestine

²⁴ H.Cleaver: "Zapatistas — documents of the new Mexican revolution", 1995. Caudillismo = Leaderism.

²⁵ Interview, op.cit.

and for the right to own an individual plot of land. For those looking for an historical truth beyond the legend, it seems that "the Zapatista movement is not socialist, nor even progressive in the sense of wanting to evolutionarily transform the whole of Mexico. . . It is only "revolutionary" insofar as it was a response to the aspirations of a communal Indian past. . . It neither supposes nor proposes any kind of break." Or, if you prefer: "The traditionalism of the Zapatista movement is the basis for its solitude and its isolation and, above all, its in-consequence, its ambiguities and its profound contradictions. And it's this originality that allowed it to survive, at the same time legitimizing its inability to develop in a dynamic manner towards its self-transformation and to really leave its renationalized 'ghetto'."⁹ Besides, it's significant that, in the same epoch, the government successfully managed to achieve a temporary pacification of the insurgent Yacqui by promising their chiefs to return the communal lands and to construct churches. . . .¹⁰ With the revolution brought to an end, capitalism's expansion hastened the destruction of traditional forms of Indian community by integrating most of their members into the "community of capital". In Chiapas, for example,¹¹ already in the 1940s, a lot of communities survived from the waged work of the Indians employed in the coffee plantations. The ancestral values, which remained rooted in their material survival, are, for the most part, the values of submission. On the other hand, revolts which carried elements of social emancipation with them always developed from situations of proletarianisation. In Mexico, the nature of recent struggles has equally been transformed by modern currents which cross Third World societies: land evictions, social exclusion, migration, proletarianisation. The revolt in Chiapas is a part of it, and to persist in presenting it as an Indian

⁹ Ibid, page 148 and p.150.

¹⁰ Based in the State of Sonora (north-west Mexico) the Yacqui tribe revolted again and again against the expropriation of the land. It was finally crushed militarily, in 1926, by Obregon, a revolutionary general who had been allied. . . . to the Zapatistas (T.N.: This is no worse than Makhno allying with Trotsky).

¹¹ Antonio Garcia de Léon, "Los motivos de Chiapas", Barcelona, Etcetera, November 1995.

revolt can only limit the political importance of the actions of those who participate in it.¹²

3

The revolts of poor peasants and occupations are phenomena endemic to Latin American societies. To understand the nature of revolt in Chiapas it's necessary to quickly recap the specifics of this area and its place in the evolution of the social tensions of Mexico.

From the end of the 50s numerous Indian peasants, evicted from their individual plots of land (ejidos), spontaneously started to emigrate to Chiapas. The government, later on, encouraged the movement of 'expulsados' by inciting them to settle in the forests: "Socially, the lacondonian frontier was a safety valve — an area situated far from the centre of power and where the potentially explosive indigenous and peasant masses from deep Mexico could be put to work. If you want, it was a natural reserve for the poorest of the poor."¹³ In just a few years, the arrival of these "pioneers of the agrarian southern frontier" had turned the social structure of Chiapas upside down.¹⁴ The decomposition of the ancient Indian communities went side by side with the creation of a new poor peasantry, composing a mixed population (Maya and non-Maya Indians and half-castes).

As with all capitalist land distribution, this was done in an unequal manner. The newcomers were given the poorest lands, situated in the mountains and they never had access to the fertile valleys. The conditions for the appearance of new social antagonisms were created, and the "safety valve" was transformed into a time bomb. Thus, at the beginning of the 70s, "the old communities, apparently structured, started to show

¹² The poor peasants of Chiapas, where historically the frontiers have little sense, are becoming "Mexican Indians" thanks to bureaucratic thinking. Who is Indian? Who's Mexican? Who's Guatemalan? Once more, a problem which seems to escape the devotees of the Zapatista cause.

¹³ 'Rebellion from the roots', John Ross, Common Courage Press, 1995, p.257.

¹⁴ An example: the municipality of Ocosingo had a population of 12,000 people in 1960, and one of 250,000 in 1990. See John Ross, *ibid*.

of the world into two blocs. It is the first avant-gardist guerilla movement to try to find a way of operating in the era of the 'New World Order'. Its Marxist-Leninist cadres have never criticised the exploitative content of the systems which collapsed. They have simply acknowledged the disappearance of that which remains, for them, socialism: "The Soviet Union is finished — there is no longer any socialist (sic) camp; in Nicaragua the elections were lost; in Guatemala, peace was signed; in Salvador, peace is discussed, Cuba is isolated, nobody wants to hear anyone speaking about armed struggle, let alone socialism; from now on, every-one's against revolution, even if it isn't socialist."²¹ So, what's left for those Marxist-Leninists who have lost their bases of support, if not their attachment to a backward anti-imperialist patriotism, their eulogy to some national event, and their respect for parliamentary democracy. The EZLN is the first guerrilla movement of the post-communist period, a bureaucracy which has its democratic demagoguery as unsold stock.

5

Control over discussion is one of the aspects of the bureaucratic nature of the EZLN. The voices of the rebels of Chiapas are reduced to just one voice, which speaks and writes in the name of all the others!²² Some defend this in the name of art elitist conception, explaining that Marcos is an 'artist' and "today's best Latin-American writer", the representative "of a handful of very gifted young people". "He (Marcos) doesn't speak on their behalf, he transforms his companions into characters in fables or short stories. With this flaunted but collective subjectivity, he invents a new way of saying "I" which resonates with "we" without substituting himself for it, an "I" both open and mutant, which everybody can take as they wish and extend in their own way."²³ On the contrary, it's

²¹ Interview "The True Legend of Sub-Commandante Marcos", a film by T.Brissac and C.Castillo, La Sept/Arte, Paris, 1995.

²² For a caricature of an example, see "The Zapatista insurgents talk about a year of revolt in Chiapas", Editions Dagorno, Paris 1995.

²³ Regis Debray, "Tomorrow Zapata", Le Monde, May 1995.

organisations was part of this second phase. In 1991 the “Independent Alliance of Emiliano Zapata peasants” transformed itself into a national organisation, an event representing a fundamental political leap. The work of creating a ‘mass base’ was then accomplished and the ‘regionalist’ conceptions – claimed by the self-sufficient Indian communities and defended by the ‘Indigenous Church’ – had been superceded. The time for armed action had arrived. In effect, and according, to this model, the creation of military organisation was to be the final phase of the long political work of ‘implantation’¹⁹ amongst the population. Today, the Zapatista army, stemming from these ‘mass’ organisations, is only one of the Organisation’s structures; it is its visible part! The texts of the EZLN and Marcos’ declarations often refer to this question. The success of the Zapatista organisation is explained, to a great extent, by the political intelligence of its militants, who proved themselves during this long period of ‘implantation’.

The revolt in Chiapas can’t be separated from the general deterioration of the situation. At the beginning of the 90s the whole of Mexico was shaken by a succession of social movements. The integration of the local economy into the North American economic sphere accelerated transformations which had been going on for years: in particular, the industrialisation of agricultural production and, beneath that, the collapse of agricultural subsistence. The pauperisation of the small peasants increases and brings about revolts and powerful mobilisations. At the same time, the mass of young people have no access to land and can no longer find work in the towns. Is it necessary to recall that 60% of the population of Chiapas today are less than 20 years old? It’s them who are going to swell the ranks of the Organisation. “Today the Zapatista army is mainly composed of this mass of modern young marginals, speaking several languages and having an experience of waged work. Their make-up has little connection to the isolated Indian that one imagines.”²⁰

The originality of the EZLN is its notable ability to adapt to a situation borne out of the collapse of State capitalism and of the end of the division

¹⁹ See the interesting analysis of Julio Nogel, in *La Jornada*, 19th June, 1994, cited by John Ross, *op.cit.*

²⁰ Antonio Garcia de Leon, *op. cit.*

the effects of an intensive internal process of social differentiation which was eating into their mechanisms of cohesion and self-defense. Peasants with neither land nor work started to be concentrated into the miserable suburbs (of the towns of Chiapas). At the beginning of the 80s the amount of people available for work doubled whilst, at the same time, the scorched earth policy of the government of Rios Montt in Guatemala, forced onto Chiapas more than 80,000 Mayan refugees who were fleeing the neighboring country, and who came in addition to the reserve army of labor on the Mexican side of the border. The ancient system of buying and selling for the reproduction of the workforce was thus dislocated, without being replaced by a new system capable of absorbing a growing mass of agricultural workers on the dole. Despair and crisis had begun to show the most perverse effects.”¹⁵

In Mexico, the poor peasantry has always shown a strong attachment to the private ownership of land. This attitude can be explained by the Indians’ aspirations towards a past community and by the heritage of the Mexican revolution. In Chiapas, more particularly, the content of the demands of the peasants’ struggles, never went beyond the framework of capitalist social relations. The political organizations which developed in the mountains of South-East Mexico, made the idea of individual land ownership a component part of their reformist nature.

4

In October 1968, the Mexican government, astounded by the enormity of an unprecedented student movement, massacre some 300 demonstrators in the Square of the Three-Cultures in Mexico City. At the same time, a vicious repression falls upon the organizations of the extreme left. Following these tragic events, the Maoist Marxist-Leninist group ‘Politica Popular’ decide to leave the student milieu to concentrate its activities on the “mass of the people”. So it establishes itself in the towns in the northern part of the country, where, due to the drift from the land, large areas of shanty-towns exist – a favorable terrain for militant leftists.

¹⁵ A. Garcia de Leon, *op.cit.*

The aim is to create “red bases”: a network of organizations which are to cover all spheres of social life and, eventually, be able to control these poor areas. Tactics are borrowed from the leftist tendencies of the Chinese cultural revolution: the direction of the political organization was never to come out into the open, its decisions always being presented as the result of consultation with the masses, expressed in committees and in assemblies. It is the classic project of enclosing and manipulating masses of people by an avant-garde authoritarian organization masking itself with the demagogic discourse of democracy from the base. Whilst organizing their “political work” on this terrain, the Mexican Maoists inevitably come to meet the older militants the progressive priests from the liberation theology tendency. Being in competition for control of the same masses, Maoists and priests rapidly reach an understanding. From their miraculous co-operation ‘torreonism’ (from the name of the big northern town) results — the Mexican model for “work on the masses”¹⁶ In the middle of the 70s the Mexican government, worried by the success of this tendency, begin a savage repression in the course of which a lot of militants are murdered. Again, the directors of the organisation revise its positions: the ‘Masses Line’, which puts the emphasis on political work in the urban areas, is replaced by the ‘Proletarian Line’, giving priority to their implantation amongst the poor peasantry. In fact, the adoption of this new line meant, for the Mexican Maoists, moving away towards areas where they thought they were less exposed to repression: it was their ‘Long March’. This was a troubled time in the life of the group, characterised by a whole succession of failures at ‘implantation’, of breaks, of resignations, and of internal settlements of scores.¹⁷

So it is not before the end of the 70s that the first “brigades” of the -Maoist avant-garde arrive in Chiapas, where they again meet their ‘fellow travelers’ of the progressive church, already well-settled in the

¹⁶ In this part of the text I have largely used the “work of John Ross’s “Rebellion from the Roots” op.cit. See especially the chapters “Back to the Jungle” and “Into the Zapatista Zone”.

¹⁷ It’s in this way that the connection between the cacique Indians of the government party, the PRI, and some chiefs of the *Politica Popular* can be established. Two big Maoist bosses of that epoch are today high-up managers of the PRI in its official peasant organisation)fl. . . See, in relation to this, “Revolution from the Roots”, op.cit. p.276.

poor peasant communities. The alliance between these two organizations is constructed around the idea of an ‘Indigenous Church’, based on the principle of the autonomy of dioceses and on the quality of these base militants in their evangelical tasks and in their celebration of the Mass. The Dominicans, who were the majority in Chiapas, subscribed to this idea as it allowed them to carry out their “work on the soul”, whilst the Maoists used it as a means of infiltrating the communities and of creating cadres from the base. The insistence on the uniqueness of Indian culture by these avant-gardes can be explained, above all, by the role played by this ‘Indigenous Church’ during its work of ‘implantation’.

Today, it is not easy to establish a clear and straight line from the organisation developing during this ‘implantation’ period to the birth of the EZLN. But what’s for sure is the existence of this link. After a lapse of time other Maoist groups arrived in Chiapas. Marcos himself would have been among one of the last “brigades”¹⁸. A lot of militants and political leaders disappeared as a result of the merciless repression carried out by the army and mercenaries employed by landowners, as for the survivors, they had to revise some of their conceptions depending on local conditions. Finally, we know that the basic tactics and principles of the leftist Maoists began to reappear in the peasant struggles: the constant resort to assemblies as a means of hiding and protecting the political chiefs.

The Mexican Maoists — like their Peruvian counterparts in *The Shining Path* -had, in their own way, criticised the Guevarist idea of *foco*. They had understood that political ‘implantation’ would be doomed to failure if it were only the result of actions taken by a small group parachuted into very closed Indian communities hostile to all those coming from the outside. From the beginning, they proclaimed the uniqueness of Indian culture, for tactical reasons. The small groups of militants must have integrated themselves into the communities by using, amongst other things, their links with the ‘indigenous church’. In a second phase, the political organisation adapted its conceptions of leadership to the new historical conditions, characterised by the breakdown of rural communities and by the proletarianisation of Indian peasants. The creation of peasant union

¹⁸ “Rebellion from the Roots”, op.cit p.278.