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Is the Zapatista Struggle an Anti-Capitalist Struggle?¹

The march of the zapatistas is the march of dignity. Not was: is. And not just of the indigenous, but of all.

Dignity is a march. "It is and it is to be made, a path to walk" (Words of the EZLN, 27th February 2001, in Puebla). It is a 'hard, endangered journey, a suffering, a wandering, a going astray, a searching for the hidden homeland, full of tragic interruption, boiling, bursting with leaps, eruptions, lonely promises, discontinuously laden with the consciousness of light'. (Bloch 1964, Vol. 2, p. 29)

Dignity does not march on a straight highway. The path to be walked is many paths which are made in the process of walking: paths which resist definition. More than a march, it is a walking, a wandering.

A walking, but not simply a strolling. Dignity is always a walking-against. Against all that denies dignity.

What is it that denies dignity? All that imposes a mask upon us and imprisons us within the mask.² The world without dignity says to us "you are indigenous, so that is what you can do"; "you are a woman, that is why you do what you do"; "you are homosexual, that is why you behave in this manner"; "you are old and we know what old people are like". The world without dignity encloses us within a definition. It says to us "your walking comes so far, you cannot go farther". And it says to us "you must walk on the highway, not just wherever you want". The world without dignity limits us, defines us, but it does not define us externally but with a definition that penetrates our very existence.

But where does this imposition of masks come from? Is it racism? Is it sexism? Is it homophobia? It is all that. But it is more than that. All of us are forced to wear masks. All of us are trapped in linear, homogeneous time, time that leads only forward, in a straight line, time that denies our creativity, our ability to do-otherwise. It is not only the indigenous but all of us who are forced to see the same film every day: "We want life to be like a cinema programme from which we can choose a different film every day. Now we have risen in arms because, for more than five hundred years, they have obliged us to see the same film each day" (Subcomandante Marcos, La

¹ This article was originally published in Spanish in Rebeldía no. 1 (Mexico City, November 2002). The question of the title was proposed by the editors of that journal. Some of the ideas presented here are developed in Holloway (2002). To Eloína Peláez, many thanks.

² For Subcomandante Marcos, a society of dignity would be a society in which people "would not have to use a mask to relate with others". Interview with Cristián Calónico Lucio, 11 November 1995, ms. p. 61..

Jornada, 25 August 1996) But there *is* a change in the film we are forced to watch each day: it becomes more and more violent. It becomes clearer each day that the linear time which takes us forward, the straight highway on which we are forced to walk, leads directly to the self-destruction of humanity.

What is this force that traps us within linear time, that makes us walk on the straight road to self-destruction, that entraps doing within a mask of being? What is it that negates our dignity?

It is the breaking of doing itself. Our dignity is doing, our ability to do and to do differently. Ants do not have dignity: they do, but they can not project a different doing for tomorrow. For them time is linear. But "that which [makes] our step rise above plants and animals, that which [makes] the stone be beneath our feet" (EZLN, *La Palabra*, Vol 1, p.122) is that we *do* have the ability to do-differently, to create. We can plan to do something new and then do it. This ability to do is always social, whether or not it appears to be so. Our doing always presupposes the doing of others, in the present and in the past. Our doing is always part of a social flow of doing in which the done of some flows into the doing of others.

But in present-day society, the social flow of doing is broken. The capitalist takes that which has been done and says "this is mine, mine, mine!" By seizing the done, he breaks the social flow of doing, since doing always builds upon that which has been done. By seizing the done, the capitalist is able to force the doers to sell their ability to do (which is transformed into labour power) to him, so that he now tells them what they must do. With that the doers lose their ability to do-differently: now they must do what they are told.

Capital is a process of separation. It separates the done from the doing, and therefore the doers from the done and from their own doing. In the same movement, the doers are separated from the wealth they have created and from their ability to do-differently. We are made poor and robbed of our subjectivity. Capital is a process of separating us from the richness of human social creation, from our humanity, from our dignity, from the possibility of seeing a different film tomorrow.

By separating the doers from the ability to do-differently, capital subordinates doing to that which is. Capitalism is the reign of "that's the way things are", "that's the way life is", "you are a woman and women are so", "you are indigenous and the indigenous are like that". Behind the racism, the sexism, the homophobia stands a more general problem: the domination of masks, of labels, of identities. Behind the particular denial of dignity ("you are an Indian, a woman") lies the more general denial of dignity ("you are what you are, no more"). Dignity is the struggle against its own negation: the struggle for dignity starts as a struggle against a particular denial of dignity (discrimination against indigenous, against women), and it leads on and on towards the mutual recognition of dignities, towards the uniting of dignities. The paths cross, flow together, divide and join, flow in the same direction. All dignities, if they are honest, turn not just against particular negations of dignity, but against the general negation of dignity which imposes a label and subordinates our potential as humans to that label. The march of dignity leads us not just against the particular insult, but takes us further, against the general insult. And the general insult is the labelling of people, the subordination of doing to being. And this terrible, terrible insult which now

threatens to extend the denial of humanity to the absolute destruction of humanity, this terrible insult arises quite simply from the way that doing is organised, from the fact that capital is the separation of the done from the doing, with all that follows from that.

The struggle of dignity for dignity, then, is an anti-capitalist struggle. But this must not become a new label ("I am a socialist, you are a liberal", "I am a communist, you are a revisionist"). The struggle against capital is the struggle against the process of separation that is capital: the separation of done from doing, the separation of the wealth that we create from us, the separation of our subjectivity, our dignity from us. The struggle for dignity is the struggle against separation, the struggle to bring together that which capital separates, the struggle for a different form of doing, a different way of relating to one another as active subjects, as doers. The struggle for dignity is the struggle to emancipate doing from being, the struggle to make explicit the social flow of doing. The struggle for dignity is the struggle to create a society based on the recognition of that dignity in place of one that is based on the negation of dignity.

How can we do it? Is it possible? We can struggle, of course, but is it really possible to create a society based on dignity, a society that goes beyond capitalism? Is it possible to construct alternative ways of doing within capitalism, or do we not have to destroy capitalism first in order to create such a possibility? Is it possible to create and expand spaces of dignity or are such spaces not bound to be repressed or absorbed by? Is it possible to create and expand spaces of dignity to the point where capitalism is destroyed and a society based on the mutual recognition of dignity is created?

It used to be argued that the only way to build social relations based on dignity was first to destroy capitalism and then to build the new society. It was argued that the transition from capitalism to communism is quite different from the transition from feudalism to capitalism. Capitalism grew within the interstices of feudalism, within the spaces left open by feudal domination, but, it was argued, the same could not happen with communism: the construction of new social relations required the conscious control of social doing and this could only be introduced at the level of society as a whole. The change from capitalism to a different type of society could therefore not be interstitial: it could only come about by the seizure of power at the centre of society, which would allow the introduction of a new sociality.

The problem with the old argument is that, apart from everything else, it is quite unrealistic. It assumes that the world is the sum of different societies, each with its own state, so that each state can be understood at the centre of its society. But it is now clear that the capitalist world is not like that and never has been. Capital is an essentially a-territorial relation, in the sense that the fact that social relations are mediated through money means that the capitalist exploiter can quite easily be in London and his workers in South Africa, or the producer of a product can be in Puebla and the consumer in Hong Kong. Capitalist society, then, is not the sum of many, territorially limited societies: it is (and always has been) one global society supported by a multiplicity of states. To gain control of one state is, therefore, not to conquer power at the centre of society, but merely to occupy (in the best of cases) a particular space within capitalist society. In other words, if we leave aside the possibility of taking power in all or most of the states at the same

time, the only possible way of conceiving revolutionary change is as interstitial change, as a change that comes about in the interstices of capitalist society.

We cannot think of radical social change, then, as coming about from above, or as the introduction of central planning. Revolution can only be a construction from below. But how can we build dignity in a society which systematically negates dignity, how can we make it so strong that it negates the society that negates us?

It is a question not of Revolution, but also not just of rebellion³: it is a question of revolution.⁴ Revolution (with a capital "R"), understood as the introduction of change from above, does not work. Rebellion is the struggle of dignity and will exist as long as dignity is negated. But it is not enough. We rebel because we rebel, because we are human. But we do not want just to struggle against the negation of dignity, we want to create a society based upon the mutual recognition of dignity. Our struggle, then, is not the struggle of Revolution, not just of rebellion, but of revolution. Not just rebellion, not Revolution but revolution. But what does it mean and how do we do it? In this revolutionary struggle, there are no models, no recipes, just a desperately urgent question. Not an empty question but a question filled with a thousand answers.

Fissures: these are the thousand answers to the question of revolution. Everywhere there are fissures. The struggles of dignity tear open the fabric of capitalist domination. When people stand up against the construction of the airport in Atenco, when they oppose the construction of the highway in Tepeaca, when they stand up against the Plan Puebla Panama, when the students of the UNAM oppose the introduction of fees, when workers go on strike to resist the introduction of faster rhythms of work, they are saying "NO, here no, here capital does not rule!" Each No is a flame of dignity, a crack in the rule of capital. Each No is a running away, a flight from the rule of capital.

No is the starting point of all hope. But it is not enough. We say No to capital in one area, but it keeps on attacking us, separating us from the wealth we create, denying our dignity as active subjects. Yet our dignity is not so easily denied. The No has a momentum that carries us forward.

The struggles that say No often go further than that. In the very act of struggling against capital, alternative social relations are developed. Those in struggle realise that they are not struggling simply against a particular imposition of capital, but that they are struggling for a different type of social relations. Especially in recent years, many struggles have laid great emphasis on horizontal structures, on the participation of all, on the rejection of hierarchical

³ In his interview on 9th March 2001 with Julio Scherer, Marcos says "we see ourselves more as a rebel who wants social changes. That is, the definition of the classical revolutionary does not fit us." (*Proceso*, 11th March, 2001, p. 14). Marcos is right to reject the old concept of Revolution, but the concept of rebellion is not adequate to conceptualise the challenge of transforming the world. The distinction between Revolution and revolution is more to the point. See next note.

⁴ In the "Story of the Mirrors" (*La Jornada*, 9/10/11 June 1995, p. 17 (11 June), Marcos speaks of the revolution which "will be, principally, a revolution which results from the struggle in various social fronts, by many methods, under different social forms, with different degrees of commitment and participation". He says that he uses small letters, to avoid polemics with the many vanguards and safeguards of THE REVOLUTION").

structures which reproduce the hierarchies of capitalism: thus the mandar obedeciendo of the zapatistas, the horizontal assemblies of the students of the UNAM, the *asambleas barriales* of Buenos Aires, the structures developed by the 'anti-globalisation' movement in the whole world, the comradeship developed in strikes. All of these are very often explicit and conscious experiments, all ways of saying "We are not just saying No to capital, we are developing a different concept of politics, constructing a different set of social relations, pre-figuring the society we want to build."

But that is not enough. We cannot eat democratic discussions, we cannot drink comradeship. It is no good if, after the democratic discussion in the *asamblea barrial* or *frente zapatista* in the evening, we have to sell our capacity to do (labour power) to capital the next day and participate actively in the process of separation that capital means. Yet here too the energy of the struggle carries us forward, from talking to doing.

The struggles that struggle not just to say No, but to create other social relations in practice are driven a step further, to the practical organisation of doing. The *asambleas barriales* in Argentina are increasingly moving on from discussing and protesting against the government to taking their lives in their own hands and occupying clinics that have been abandoned, houses that are empty, banks that have fled, in order to provide better health care, and to provide places for people to live and centres for people to meet and discuss. When factories close, the workers are not just protesting but occupying them and using them to produce things that are needed. The fissure becomes a place not just for refusing, not just for developing horizontal structures but for building an alternative form of doing.

But that is not enough. The fissures are often small, the alternative doings isolated. How do we connect these alternative projects? If it is done through the market, the market comes to dominate them. It cannot be done by introducing social planning from above, for that presupposes structures that do not and cannot exist at the moment. It is necessarily a process of doing it from below, in a piecemeal fashion. In Argentina, the movement of barter, in its best manifestations, is an attempt to develop other forms of articulation between producers and between producers and consumers (*prosumidores*), but that too is experimental.

But still it is not enough. Revolution cannot be poverty. The movement of revolution is to make explicit the richness of social doing. But now capital separates us from that richness, stands as gatekeeper to the social doing, telling us that we can have access to that richness only if we obey the rules of capital, the logic of profit. How can we circumvent that gatekeeper, find other ways of connecting with the richness of the doing of so many millions of people throughout the world who, they too, are saying No or would like to say No to the social connections of capital?

At every stage the state offers itself as an answer to our questions. The state says in effect "Come to me, organise yourselves through me, I am not capital. I can provide the basis for an alternative organisation of sociality." But it is a lie, a trick. The state *is* capital, a form of capital. The state is a specifically capitalist form of social relations. The state is so tightly bound into the global web of capitalist social relations that there is no way that an anti-capitalist sociality can be constructed through the state, no matter which party occupies the government. The state imposes

upon us hierarchical social relations that we do not want; the state says we must be realistic and accept capitalist logic and the calculations of power when we are quite clear that we do not accept that logic and those calculations. The state says that it will solve our problems, that we are not capable of it, it reduces us to victims, denies our subjectivity. The state is a form of reconciling our struggles with capitalist domination. The path of the state is not the path of dignity.

There are certainly many situations in which we can turn the resources of the state to our own advantage - as when the piqueteros close the roads in order to force the state to give them funds which they, the piqueteros, use to develop an alternative form of doing. There are also situations in which it may make sense to vote for one party rather than another, in order to defend or create more space for our movement. But the state does not, can not provide the alternative sociality that it seems to offer. State-owned industries, for example, do not provide a different organisation of doing: they transform doing into labour and subordinate it to the movement of capital in much the same way as any other industry (the same in the ex-Soviet Union as in Britain, as in Mexico). Even if there are situations in which we may want to use the state, just as we use money, it is important to be clear that the state, like money, is the embodiment of relations which deny our dignity. It is not through the state that we can create a society based on dignity.

Then how? The question torments us. The old solutions did not work, cannot work. But can any solution work? Can the struggle against the negation of dignity really lead us to a society based on dignity, a society in which the social power of doing is emancipated (a communist society)? Certainty is not on our side. Certainty cannot be on our side, for certainty exists only where human dignity is denied, where social relations are totally reified, where people are completely reduced to masks. The only certainty for us is that human dignity means fighting against a world that denies that dignity.

Flames of dignity, flashes of lightning, fissures in capitalist domination. Look at the map of capitalism and see how torn it is, how full of fissures, flames of revolt. Chiapas, Buenos Aires, Sao Paulo, Cochabamba, Quito, Caracas and on and on throughout the world. Our struggle is to extend the fissures as time-spaces, to fan the flames of dignity. At times the flames light up the sky so we can see clearly that which gives us hope: the rulers depend on the ruled, capital depends on us, on being able to transform our doing into work which it can exploit. It is our doing which creates the world, capital that runs behind trying to contain it. We are the fire, capital is the fire fighter. To put it in more traditional terms: the only productive force is the creative force of human doing, and capitalist relations of production struggle all the time to contain that force.

Capital is afraid of us. Capital flees from us, just as we flee from it. Flight and the threat of flight is a central feature of capitalist domination. Feudal lords did not flee from their serfs: if the serfs did not behave themselves, the lords stayed and punished them, often physically. But in capitalism it is different. Capital says all the time to us: "if you do not behave yourselves, I shall go away". We live in great stress, under the terrible threat that our rulers will go away and leave us. And often capital does go away, and then millions are left in unemployment, whole regions or countries are left without investment, whole generations are left without the experience of direct exploitation. Under neoliberalism, this threat of flight and this reality of flight become more and more central: that is what the expansion of credit and the rise of finance capital means. More and

more clearly, capital says "behave like robots, do everything that I say or I shall go away". More and more, capital flees from the fact that we are not robots, capital flees from our dignity.

Dignity and capital are incompatible. The more the march of dignity advances, the more capital flees. When the indigenous rise up, capital flees. When the workers occupy the factories, capital flees. When the students rebel against the restructuring of education, capital flees. When it seems that a left-wing government might introduce measures which affect profits, capital flees (and the government changes its mind). That is why the question of how we respond to the flight of capital is crucial for the struggle of dignity (even more basic than the question of repression, because repression is always presented as a response to the flight of capital). What shall we answer when capital says "behave yourselves or I shall go"? What shall we say when capital goes?

Let it go! Let it flee! That is the great genius of the Argentinian slogan "¡Que se vayan todos!" ("Let them all go away!") Capital dominates by threatening us that it will flee. Well, let it go away, then. We can manage perfectly well without it. We will survive.

Or can we? That is the big question. Capital is not just a process of closing fissures. By going and by threatening to go, it also opens up potential fissures. When capital threatens too much, then workers may be driven to say, "right, go then, take your money, but we shall stay with the machines and the buildings". When capital goes away from whole areas, then people are driven by choice and necessity to find other ways of surviving, other ways of doing. They are driven to build social relations that point beyond capitalism. The fissures are opened not just by our own struggles but by capital's flight from our dignity.

But how do we survive without our exploiters, when they control access to the richness of human doing? That is the great challenge. How do we strengthen the fissures so that they are not just isolated pockets of poverty but a real alternative form of doing that allows us to say to capital "well yes, go away then, if that is what you are always threatening to do"? The next time that capital makes us unemployed, how can we say "Fine, now we can do something more meaningful"? The next time that capital closes a factory, how can we say "Go, then, now we can use the equipment and the buildings and our knowledge in a different way"? The next time that capital says "help our banks or the financial system will collapse", how can we say "let it collapse, we have better ways of organising our relations"? The next time that capital threatens us "I shall go", how do we say "yes, go, go for ever and take all your friends with you. Que se vayan todos."? That is the problem of revolution (with a small "r").

What does revolution mean? It is a question, can only be a question. But it is not a question that stands still. It is not a question that gets stuck in one place, whether that place be Saint Petersburg or the Selva Lacandona or Buenos Aires, or in one moment, whether that be 1917 or the first of January 1994 or 19/20 December 2001. It is not a question that can be answered with a formula or a recipe. It is a question that can be answered only in struggle, but theoretical reflection is part of that struggle. It is a question with an energy and a rage and a longing that drives it forward. Let us push the question forward all the time, as far as we can, with

every single political action, with every single theoretical reflection. Preguntando caminamos, asking we walk. Yes, but we walk with rage, ask with passion.

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