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## Autonomist Marxist Interpretations of the Zapatista Uprising: A Critique

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*ABSTRACT.* The 1994 Zapatista uprising in Chiapas, Mexico suggested a rupture with Marxist orthodoxies and the possibility of a new radical anti-capitalist politics. Arguing that they should be viewed as transitional between the “old” hierarchical forms of the Leninist party and the “new” distributed network form of the multitude, Autonomist Marxist theorists Antonio Negri, Michael Hardt, John Holloway, and Harry Cleaver have broadly influenced how both scholars and activists understand the Zapatistas. Their interpretations, however, neglect the critical function of centralized and disciplined organization within the networked forms considered emblematic of the Zapatistas, contributing to a distorted understanding of the genesis of their distinctive politics. Hardt and Negri’s insight that forms of revolutionary organization parallel the organization of production suggests an alternative interpretation: that the hybrid distributed and hierarchical character of the Zapatista organization is better understood as keeping pace with the similarly hybrid logic of global capitalist production and accumulation.

**T**HE NEW YEARS DAY 1994 Zapatista uprising in Mexico’s southernmost state of Chiapas took on global significance for several reasons. The capture of seven cities and major towns in the eastern half of the state by the *Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional* — the Zapatista National Liberation Army, or EZLN, composed overwhelmingly of indigenous Mayan peasants — was experienced by people around the world as a rupture, a crystallization of several major global processes already underway, the nature of which up to that moment, however, few had been able to articulate. As a consequence, the Zapatistas quickly became an important point of

reference in discussions of both the political–economic transformations now widely referred to as neoliberal globalization and the possibilities for resistance under the new global capitalist regime (see Castells, 2009, 78–86). In particular, the Zapatistas were taken up by the then-emerging alter-globalization movement as representing new organizational forms and methods of struggle that both answered problems confronting established electoral and revolutionary left parties and organizations, and met the particular challenges posed by the new conditions of neoliberal globalization (Rovira, 2009).

While they no longer occupy the central place in the imagination of the international left that they did at the height of the alter-globalization protests at the turn of the 21st century, the Zapatistas still remain an important point of reference for many activists. This was illustrated during the latter phase of the Occupy Wall Street protests in 2012 in an exchange between Christopher Hedges and David Graeber on the merits and demerits of the use of Black Block tactics, in which both invoked the example of the Zapatistas to support their opposing positions (Graeber, 2012; Hedges, 2012). More important than their continuing direct influence on the contemporary left, however, has been the longer-term influence of the political and organizational lessons drawn from them by the alter-globalization movement, lessons that have since become a major part of the often unexamined common sense of left-wing activism.

This study is based on my dissertation research, a historical–sociological inquiry into the genesis of the distinctive political discourse and practices of the EZLN, sometimes designated as “neo-Zapatismo” to distinguish them from the “Zapatismo” of the EZLN’s namesake, General Emiliano Zapata, who played a leading role in Mexico’s 1911 revolution. In it I review several attempts to account for the distinctive features of neo-Zapatismo rooted in the current known as autonomist Marxism and consider their adequacy in light of the known history of the EZLN and its antecedents in the indigenous communities of eastern Chiapas. I begin with a brief look at the distinctive features of neo-Zapatismo and its significance in the development of the alter-globalization movement. I then consider the works of Harry Cleaver and John Holloway, two autonomist Marxist scholars intimately involved in Zapatista solidarity work. Next I consider the importance of the Zapatistas in the arguments of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in their collaborative works, *Empire* and *Multitude*. I then very

briefly review the genesis of the EZLN. Finally, I discuss the limits of the autonomist Marxist approach taken by these four authors, focusing specifically on their neglect of the critical role of more centralized organizations in the development of the EZLN and their reading of neo-Zapatismo as a simple repudiation of Leninism in favor of their own semi-anarchist views on organization.

*From the Selva Lacandon to Seattle and Beyond*

While the Zapatistas continue to refine and elaborate their politics, the defining and distinctive features of neo-Zapatismo were all largely articulated in declarations and communiqués over the period beginning with the 1994 uprising and concluding with the signing of the San Andres Accords in 1996. While I discuss this larger body of Zapatista texts elsewhere (Gunderson, 2013), for the purposes of this study the key document was an early communiqué, *Mandar Obedeciendo* (To Lead Obeying) (EZLN, 1994, 175–77), which demanded that Mexican President Carlos Salinas and the governors of the Mexican states resign, that new and democratic elections be organized under a transitional government, and that these be monitored by non-partisan citizens' organizations. The real importance of this communiqué, however, was to be found in its suggestion of the Zapatistas' distinctive vision of democracy and the role of leadership. Presented with a mytho-poetic solemnity that would become one of several distinctive voices employed in Zapatista communiqués, this vision has several elements. The first is a critique of the rule of the few who rule "without obeying the will of the many." In contrast with this method of rule, which is attributed to the government, the "truthful faceless men" (*sic*) of the EZLN uphold the principles that while the majority should rule, minorities must not be silenced, and that the hearts of those who would lead must become able to obey and act according to the will of the majority.

The concept of *mandar obedeciendo* is arguably the central distinctive feature of neo-Zapatismo. Its implications would be continuously elaborated in subsequent communiqués and statements. It proved to be a very potent rhetorical weapon in the hands of the Zapatistas, so much so that Mexican politicians started sprinkling the term into speeches. In essence it refers to a method of political leadership and governance that takes seriously, and is fundamentally accountable to,

the people. The term is deliberately paradoxical and as such recognizes an inherent tension between democracy and political leadership, and, without denying the importance of the latter, insists on its ultimate subordination to the former.

The concept of *mandar obedeciendo* would underpin all subsequent Zapatista critiques of the anti-democratic character of the Mexican state, their fundamental distrust of all political parties, their style of leadership in relation to the broad Zapatista solidarity movement that was emerging nationally and internationally, and in the organization of the autonomous structures of self-governance within and between the Zapatista communities.

The first two years following the Zapatista uprising was a period of intense political innovation and experimentation on the part of the Zapatistas, during which they sought to respond to unexpected and rapidly unfolding events and developments. One such very significant development was the emergence of what Rovira (2009) has called “the transnational Zapatista solidarity network.” Rovira documents in detail the process by which this network was initially constituted, how it developed over time, the tactical repertoire that came to characterize it, and how by initiating the wave of protests targeting international summit meetings it metamorphosed into the alter-globalization movement.

While the internet played a central role in initially constituting the transnational Zapatista solidarity network, it would be a mistake to think of it as existing exclusively on the internet. Rather, the availability of information on the internet seemed to encourage activists to travel to Chiapas and then, as their reports on their travels circulated on the internet, amplified their impact. All of these comings and going from Chiapas established a very dense network of face-to-face relationships, both between the Zapatistas and their supporters and among their supporters. The tens of thousands of people who traveled to Chiapas and had some direct personal experience of the Zapatista uprising thus constituted a large committed core of a much larger network of their friends, family members, co-workers, church members, students, and other activists with whom they would share information and mobilize as events demanded.

It was in the hope of consolidating this network further that the Zapatistas called for the first Intercontinental Encuentro Against Neo-Liberalism and for Humanity (to be held in Zapatista territory in the

summer of 1996), which brought together for the first time thousands of Zapatista solidarity activists from dozens of countries (EZLN, 1997). While participants listened to speeches by the EZLN's charismatic spokesman and military leader, Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos and other Zapatistas, and participated in formal meetings, the real significance of the Encuentro (later dubbed the "Intergalactica" by Marcos) was the face-to-face consolidation of heretofore largely electronic lines of communications among Zapatista sympathizers, laying the foundations for what would soon emerge as the alter-globalization movement. This is most clearly illustrated by the role of the Encuentro in the formation of Peoples Global Action (Wood, 2005).

The First Intercontinental Encuentro in Chiapas resulted in a call for a Second Intercontinental Encuentro Against Neo-Liberalism and for Humanity in Spain in 1997. Out of that meeting a call was made for another meeting in Geneva in February, 1998 to organize Peoples Global Action (PGA) to coordinate resistance to neoliberal globalization generally and to the upcoming May ministerial meeting of the WTO in Geneva in particular. The protests in Geneva marked the beginning of the cycle of transnational protests at major international summit meetings that became the most visible expression of the alter-globalization movement. The influence of neo-Zapatismo on the political outlook and organizational practice of the alter-globalization movement is evident in the Five Hallmarks that constitute the main basis of political unity in PGA. The Five Hallmarks are:

- Very clear rejection of capitalism, imperialism and feudalism; all trade agreements, institutions and governments that promote destructive globalization.
- We reject all forms and systems of domination and discrimination including, but not limited to, patriarchy, racism and religious fundamentalism of all creeds. We embrace the full dignity of all human beings.
- A confrontational attitude, since we do not think that lobbying can have a major impact on such biased and undemocratic organizations, in which transnational capital is the only real policy-maker.
- Call to direct action and civil disobedience, support for social movements' struggles, advocating forms of resistance which maximize respect for life and oppressed peoples' rights, as well as the construction of local alternatives to global capitalism.

- An organizational philosophy based on decentralization and autonomy. (Wood, 2005.)

Although the alter-globalization movement was socially and ideologically heterogeneous, the Five Hallmarks reflect a core set of political assumptions and practices that predominated within it and that came to define it. These included: a profound distrust of the state in all its forms and of political parties that seek state power; a belief in the superiority of decentralized, networked or horizontal forms of political organization and a general hostility to hierarchical organizational forms; a reliance on consensus-based methods of decision-making; and an affirmation of social and cultural diversity as virtues in their own right.

While these political assumptions and practices draw on a variety of lineages including anarchism, feminism, and the participatory democratic ethos of the New Left of the 1960s, it is clear that the Zapatista uprising played a critical role in catalyzing the emergence of the alter-globalization movement, and that neo-Zapatismo has had a major influence on its political outlook and practices. While the PGA and other forms specific to the alter-globalization protests of the early 21st century have passed, the political outlook and practices developed in this period exercised considerable influence on the Movements of the Squares in Southern Europe, Occupy Wall Street in the United States, and many other more recent episodes of resistance to neoliberal policies and regimes.

### *Interpretations of the Zapatista Uprising*

In the wake of the Zapatista uprising a wide variety of interpretations of the significance of the uprising and the subsequent declarations and practices of the EZLN were advanced (*e.g.*, Benjamin, 2000; Burbach, 1994; Gossen, 1996; Nash, 1997; Obregon R., 1997). Many of these interpretations had only a fleeting impact, but several would over time cohere into a dominant analysis within the alter-globalization movement. Given the important catalytic and inspirational role of the Zapatista uprising itself in the emergence of the alter-globalization movement, this dominant analysis would also profoundly shape the discourse within that broader movement on a whole range of critical questions, concerning both the nature of the new terrain of social

struggles and how that terrain should be navigated by social movement actors.

This dominant analysis of the Zapatistas was largely articulated by several authors with roots in the theoretical current known as autonomist Marxism, or increasingly simply as *autonomismo*. Autonomist Marxism has its origins in the Italian workerist groups that broke away from the Italian Communist Party in the 1960s, in particular *Operaia Autonomia*, and shares significant affinities with council communism, anarchism and other libertarian socialist or communist currents. The analysis of the Zapatistas developed by these autonomist Marxist authors played an important role in laying the ground for the popular reception, particularly within the alter-globalization movement, of several new works also informed by autonomist Marxism, specifically the works of Hardt and Negri (2000, 2004) and Holloway (2002).

Two figures in particular stand out in the expression and elaboration of the dominant analysis of the Zapatistas: Harry M. Cleaver and John Holloway. Cleaver, Associate Professor of Economics at the University of Texas in Austin and the author of *Reading Capital Politically* (1979), played a critical role in the early dissemination of information about the Zapatistas by helping establish the multilingual Chiapas-95 internet list. In several influential articles (Cleaver, 1994b, 1998a, 1998b), an introduction to a collection of documents of the Zapatista uprising (Cleaver, 1994a), and in a series of book reviews (Cleaver, 1995b, 1995c, 1995a), Cleaver advanced several major theses.

In a widely reprinted article written only six weeks after the uprising (Cleaver, 1994b) Cleaver notes the extraordinarily rapid circulation of information about the Zapatista revolt and the broad mobilization of solidarity with an armed organization previously not even known to exist. He responds in the negative to his own tendentious question of whether the Zapatistas were “just another foredoomed repetition of earlier, failed Leninist attempts to organize the peasantry to join the party and smash the state.” Rather, linking the Zapatistas to the then recent cross-border movement against NAFTA, and the role of the internet within that movement, he argues that “the process of alliance building has created a new organizational form — a multiplicity of rhizomatically linked autonomous groups — connecting all kinds of struggles throughout North America that have previously been disconnected and separate.” Cleaver draws a connection between

what he characterizes as the horizontal, non-hierarchical networks built up by indigenous and campesino groups in Mexico, “sometimes based on traditional ethnic culture and language,” and the similar networked organizational forms associated with the electronic web.

Similarly, Cleaver seeks to distinguish the Zapatistas’ assertion of indigenous autonomy from the expression of nationalist aspirations within both the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, which he describes as “inextricable from the inherited structures of capital accumulation understood as structures of social command organized through the subordination of life to endless work.” By contrast,

among the Indian nations and peoples of the Americas . . . the affirmation of national identity, of cultural uniqueness and of linguistic and political autonomy is rooted not only in an extensive critique of the various forms of Western Culture and capitalist organization which were imposed on them through conquest, colonialism and genocide, but also in the affirmation of a wide variety of renewed and reinvented practices that include both social relations and the relationship between human communities and the rest of nature.

Challenging the supposedly orthodox Marxist view that regards such cultural assertions as only a reactionary defense of tradition and the “idiocy” of rural life, Cleaver sees in them an attempt by the indigenous communities at “self-valorization” outside the circuits of capitalism.

Cleaver regards the Zapatistas’ refusal to subordinate either their developed critique of racism or their struggle for the transformation of the status of women within indigenous communities (as expressed in the Revolutionary Women’s Law) to narrowly conceived “class interests” as the expression of an enriched vision of the revolutionary project. While arguing that the Zapatista revolt should not be taken as “a formula to be imitated,” he asserts that “it provides . . . an inspiring example of how a workable solution to the post-socialist problem of revolutionary organization and struggle can be sought.”

Later Cleaver (1998a) elaborates on these themes and links the emergence of the new organizational forms associated with the Zapatista uprising with the supposed decline in the power of the nation–state. He also argues that the Zapatistas themselves have played a critical role in the constitution of “an alternative political fabric.” After describing the growth of networks of NGOs and other civil



society organization as a result of their use of the internet, Cleaver claims that “no catalyst of that growth has been more important than the indigenous Zapatista rebellion . . . and the widespread political mobilization to which it has contributed.” Cleaver supports this claim with detailed accounts of the ways that information about the Zapatista revolt drew together previously disconnected online circles of scholars and activists interested in quite disparate issues (*e.g.*, indigenous rights, land struggles, feminism, ecology, international trade agreements). Noting that some of this had occurred in the fight against NAFTA, Cleaver claims that the Zapatista revolt had the effect of both deepening that process already in progress and greatly expanding it globally to produce what he calls “‘the Zapatista effect’ . . . homologous to, but ultimately much more threatening to the New World Order of neoliberalism than the ‘Tequila Effect’ that rippled through emerging financial markets in the wake of the Peso Crisis of 1994.”

Cleaver is careful to distinguish between a broadly defined “civil society” that lumps together insurgent community organizations with elite institutions like the Ford Foundation, on the one hand; and the network of progressive scholars and genuinely grassroots organizations which is the real object of his interest, on the other. He also corrects the popular image of the Zapatistas themselves as savvy cyber-activists sending out communiqués by internet from the Lacandon Jungle. What is important about the Zapatistas is rather their capacity to rapidly adapt to this new terrain, to make effective use of the academics, NGO workers and activists who were circulating reports of their words and deeds around the world, and to recognize the ways in which this new terrain might radically alter their strategic orientation. Cleaver then discusses the significance of the several national and international gatherings initiated by the Zapatistas, which he characterizes as “generative moments in the coalescence of more and more tightly knit global circuits of cyberspatial communications and organization that threaten traditional top-down monopolies of such activity.” Rovira (2009) will later give a much more detailed account of this process.

John Holloway, Professor of Sociology at the Instituto de Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades of the Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla in Mexico, was a member of the editorial committee and frequent contributor to the Spanish-language journal *Chiapas*, which played an important role in shaping scholarly perceptions of the EZLN in the decade following the 1994 uprising. With Eloina Peláez he also

edited an English-language collection of articles on the Zapatistas (1998) and is the author of *Change the World Without Taking Power* (2002), an influential work among alter-globalization activists which relies heavily on the Zapatistas as an example of a movement that is “making the world anew without taking power” (20). Holloway’s analysis of the Zapatistas builds on and repeats major themes from his contributions to the dispute among different Marxist currents in the 1970s known as “the state debate” (Holloway and Picciotto, 1978).

Holloway (1998, 1–18) argues that the global significance of the Zapatista revolt derives from the universality of its demand for “dignity” in opposition to both the “authoritarian discipline which has characterized so many revolutionary movements of the past” and the fragmented particularities of identity politics. The Zapatistas, he argues, are “reinventing revolution” by waging “a struggle, not for power, but against it.” Furthermore, the Zapatistas

are not saying: “We are Tzeltals and we want to defend our glorious traditions,” but rather: “We want a world in which there are many worlds, a world in which our world, and the worlds of others, will fit: a world in which we are heard, but as one of many voices.” Their “here we are!” simultaneously asserts identity and transcends it.

Arguing that “the idea of dignity has not been invented by the Zapatistas, but they have given it a prominence that it has never before possessed in revolutionary thought” (160), Holloway finds that the importance of the idea of dignity resides in its potential to constitute a unity of the diverse struggles against global capitalism that the classical Marxist attempt to subordinate all struggles to the class struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat had manifestly failed to achieve.

Holloway insists, however, that “dignity is a class concept, not a humanistic one.” What he is attempting to do here is to reject the orthodox Marxist definition of class based on subordination of the working class to capital in favor of a relational one based on “the relation insubordination/subordination” (182). The principal antagonism in society does not exist then between two groups of people, but rather between different ways in which human social practice might be organized:

Class struggle does not take place within the constituted forms of capitalist social relations: rather the constitution of those forms is itself class struggle. This leads to a much richer concept of class struggle in which the whole of social practice is at issue. *All* social practice is an unceasing antagonism between the subjection of practice to the fetishized, perverted, defining forms of capitalism and the attempt to live against-and-beyond those forms. There can thus be no question of the existence of non-class forms of struggle. (183.)

In short, Holloway does not reject the centrality of class struggle, but rather refuses to view it narrowly in terms of the struggle of a reified proletariat.

This reconceptualization of class struggle is central to Holloway's attempts to resolve the problem which he regards as "at the heart of any concept of revolution," namely:

How could it be possible for those who are currently alienated (or humiliated) to create a world of non-alienation (or dignity)? If we are all permeated by the conditions of social oppression in which we live, and if our perceptions are constrained by those conditions, shall we not always reproduce these conditions in everything we do? (185.)

Counterposing the Zapatista practice of *mandar obedeciendo* to the Leninist notion of the vanguard party, which he characterizes as a *deus ex machina* non-solution to the problem, Holloway argues that only a politics that starts from the contradictory nature of our existence under capitalism, from the resistance that arises from our conditions of oppression, can possibly produce a resolution to this fundamental problem. But this in turn involves a reconceptualization of revolution as "simply the constant, uncompromising struggle for that which cannot be achieved under capitalism: dignity, control over our own lives" (186).

### *Empire and Multitude*

Cleaver and Holloway's themes were taken up and repeated so widely that they became a kind of common sense within the alter-globalization movement, a common sense that did much to prepare the popular reception of the influential works of Hardt and Negri, also rooted in autonomist Marxism. While Hardt and Negri's *Empire* (2000)

makes only passing references to the struggle in Chiapas, its understanding of the supposed declining importance of the nation–state echoed ideas already popularized among Zapatista solidarity activists by Cleaver and Holloway. *Multitude* (2004) much more explicitly and repeatedly invokes the Zapatistas as representative of the transformations they seek to analyze, describing them as “the hinge between the old guerrilla model and the new model of biopolitical structures” and as “demonstrating in the clearest possible terms the nature and direction of the postmodern transition of organizational forms” (85).

*Multitude* poses the emergence of a new revolutionary subject, the multitude, in conjunction with the new imperial sovereignty posited in *Empire*. The multitude is the product of the newly hegemonic forms of immaterial labor and the organization of immaterial production in the non-hierarchical form of distributed networks. Supposedly unlike previous historic attempts to constitute a revolutionary subject (the proletariat, the people, etc.), the multitude draws strength from its diversity rather than attempting to suppress it through the establishment of a new sovereignty.

The emergence of the multitude signals the possibility of an enriched and global democracy for the first time in history on the basis of the greatly enlarged “common” — that which the various singularities that make up the multitude share, or rather produce, in common as a result of their common participation in immaterial labor (which produces ideas, knowledge, affects, relationships, etc.). The appearance of the multitude is the product of a prolonged genealogy of resistance that “demonstrates a tendency toward increasingly democratic organization, from centralized forms of revolutionary dictatorship and command to network organizations that displace authority in collaborative relationships” (xvi).

*Multitude* is a sweepingly ambitious political–philosophical investigation into the emergent and distinctive logic of global capitalism at the beginning of the 21st century and its implications for the possibilities of its revolutionary overthrow. It identifies and theorizes many of the profound changes associated with globalization and considers their impact on the constitution of new subjectivities in the course of resistance to capital. While Hardt and Negri remind us twice that they are not advancing a particular program or strategy for contemporary social movements, the sweeping character of their claims for the possibilities of a global democratic and anti-capitalist revolution

and their rejection of the historic models developed by liberalism and Leninism inevitably raise questions about the programmatic implications of their argument.

Here that argument rests heavily on supposed examples of the multitude in action. Hardt and Negri cite a number of contemporary movements and struggles as expressions of this new revolutionary subject. These include the White Overalls movement in Italy, the militant demonstrations against the various international summits in Seattle, Quebec, Genoa, Cancún and so on, as well as some assorted land and environmental struggles. But no single contemporary struggle gets the attention awarded the Zapatistas. It is worth quoting their first appearance in the book at some length:

The Zapatistas . . . demonstrate wonderfully how the economic transition of post-Fordism can function equally in urban and rural territories, linking local experiences with global struggles. The Zapatistas, which were born and primarily remain a peasant and indigenous movement, use the Internet and communications technologies not only as a means of distributing their communiqués to the outside world but also, at least to some extent, as a structural element inside their organization, especially as it extends beyond southern Mexico to the national and global levels. Communication is central to the Zapatistas' notion of revolution, and they continually emphasize the need to create horizontal network organizations rather than vertical centralized structures. One should point out, of course, that this decentered organizational model stands at odds with the traditional military nomenclature of the EZLN. The Zapatistas after all, call themselves an army and are organized in an array of military titles and ranks. When one looks more closely, however, one can see that although the Zapatistas adopt a traditional version of the Latin American guerrilla model, including its tendencies toward centralized military hierarchy, they continually in practice undercut those hierarchies and decenter authority with the elegant inversions and irony typical of their rhetoric. (In fact, they make irony itself into a political strategy.) The paradoxical Zapatista motto "command obeying," for example, is aimed at inverting the traditional relationships of hierarchy within the organization. Leadership positions are rotated, and there seems to be a vacuum of authority at the center. Marcos, the primary spokesperson and quasi-mythical icon of the Zapatistas, has the rank of subcomandante to emphasize his relative subordination. Furthermore, their goal has never been to defeat the state and claim sovereign authority but rather to change the world without taking power. The Zapatistas, in other words, adopt all the elements of the traditional structure and transform them, demonstrating

in the clearest possible terms the nature and direction of the postmodern transition of organizational forms. (85.)

We see in this single passage both a condensation of the persistent common sense of the alter-globalization movement and an illustration of the centrality of the example of the Zapatistas to the grounding of that common sense. The Zapatistas are thus not simply a good illustration of the multitude in action, but are recognized as a particularly important influence on other cases. In a discussion of the Italian movement known as the White Overalls, for example, Hardt and Negri claim that “the reawakened European metropolitan proletariat needed a new politics . . . and they found it in the jungles of Chiapas” (266). Although they are careful to offer caveats, Hardt and Negri have the Zapatistas doing a lot of the heavy lifting when it comes to demonstrating the reality of their new revolutionary subject. As we will see, however, this statement contains significant factual as well as interpretive errors that should call into serious question the movement common sense that it so neatly condenses.

The suggestion that there is “a vacuum of authority at the center” of the EZLN and that this is related to the supposed rotation of leadership is confused. While it is true that the structures of autonomous civilian government, most significantly the regional *Juntas de Buen Gobierno* (Good Government Councils, or JBGs) developed by the Zapatistas in the 2000s, employ a system of rotating delegates elected by their constitutive autonomous municipalities, this statement ignores the continuing political–military authority of the EZLN’s highest leadership body, the *Comité Clandestino Revolucionario Indígena — Comandancia General* (Revolutionary Indigenous Clandestine Committee — General Command, or CCRI–GC). While the make-up of the CCRI–GC has changed some over the years, this is the result of normal turnover and not of any principle of rotation. Similarly, Marcos’ rank of Subcomandante was not, as suggested, a clever literary gesture, but rather an expression of his formal subordination to the authority of the CCRI–GC. It was the rank he held before the CCRI–GC was created in 1993, when the decision was taken to go to war. It was, furthermore, a rank he shared with two other Zapatistas, Subcomandante Daniel (who opposed the decision to launch the uprising and betrayed the organization to the Mexican state), and Subcomandante Pedro, who was killed in action in the town of Las Margaritas during the 1994

uprising (Tello Díaz, 2000). In 2013, Lt. Colonel Moises was promoted to the rank of Subcomandante, replacing Marcos (who had adopted the name Galeano) as spokesman for the rebel army (Muñoz Ramírez, 2013). None of this is to suggest that the relationship between the CCRI–GC and Marcos was a simple one, but rather to insist that it was decidedly not characterized by “a vacuum of authority at the center.” Hardt and Negri’s errors on these factual matters are not, as we will see, without consequence for their interpretations of the lessons of the Zapatista experience.

### *The Geneology of Neo-Zapatismo*

Before examining the strengths and deficiencies of the autonomist Marxist analyses of the Zapatistas, it is necessary to establish, at least in outline form, the circumstances of the EZLN’s genesis. While the roots of the Zapatista revolt arguably go back to the Spanish conquest (Ruz, 1995, 13), the distinctive politics of neo-Zapatismo are of more recent origin.

The EZLN was founded on November 17, 1983 with the establishment of an encampment by a guerrilla nucleus deep in the mountains of the Lacandon Jungle, where it subsequently secured broad support from many of the communities established there over several decades of intensive settlement beginning in the 1930s (De Vos, 2002, 135–80). Most of these settlements were established by Mayan Indians fleeing either the land-poor villages in the Highlands or the *fincas* that had supplied the logging industry in the jungle at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries. Most of these communities would organize themselves as *ejidos* — in which land is owned communally but parcels are farmed by individual households — irrespective of whether or not they were formally recognized as such by the Mexican state.

The guerrilla nucleus consisted of six members of the *Fuerzas de Liberación Nacional* (National Liberation Forces, or FLN) divided evenly between Indians and ladinos (Cedillo, 2010; LeBot, 1997). The FLN was itself a clandestine political–military organization founded in 1969 in the northern city of Monterrey and composed mainly of university students and young professionals radicalized by their participation in a series of social struggles over the course of the 1960s and by the deadly repression of the Mexican student movement in 1968 (Cedillo, 2008). Four of the founding members of the FLN had

participated in a very short-lived and ill-fated attempt to establish a guerrilla group called the Insurgent Mexican Army (EIM) in the Lacandon Jungle in the first months of 1969. The FLN itself would make a second attempt to establish a guerrilla nucleus in the Lacandon Jungle in late 1972. Their plans were cut short when on February 14, 1974 the Mexican Army, having captured two FLN members in Monterey, raided the FLN's new headquarters in the town of Nepantla, south of Mexico City. The resulting shootout cost the lives of five FLN members. Documents captured in Nepantla led the Mexican Army to the FLN's camp in Chiapas. While the members of the guerrilla nucleus escaped the initial raid, they were successfully hunted down, captured or killed over the next several weeks. It would be almost ten more years before the FLN made another serious attempt to establish a guerrilla base in Lacandon.

In the course of those ten years much would change. The repression suffered in 1974 devastated the FLN. When they returned to Chiapas in the late 1970s the FLN's approach apparently reflected both their own experience of repression and an appreciation of the necessity to sink much deeper roots in the indigenous communities before attempting to establish another guerrilla force (Cedillo, 2008). Instead of rushing into the jungle, they patiently cultivated relations with and recruited from a layer of experienced veterans of the indigenous–campesino movement that the EZLN's spokesman and military leader, Subcomandante Marcos, would later call “the politicized indigenous elite,” which he is careful to distinguish from the indigenous communities in the Cañadas who were to become the EZLN's primary bases of support. Marcos describes the former group as having

a great organizational capacity [and] a very rich experience of political struggle. They were in practically all the political organizations of the left that there were then and they were familiar with all the prisons in the country. They realized that to solve their problems with land, with living conditions, and political rights there was no other way out than violence. (LeBot, 1997, 132.)

This cohort of indigenous activists was recruited from communities in the municipalities of Sabanilla and Huitiupan in the Northern Zone of Chiapas. It, in turn, recruited their adolescent siblings and cousins to receive political and military instruction in the FLN's



network of urban safe-houses (Cedillo, 2010; Ímaz Gispert, 2004). When, in 1983, several of their number joined several ladino members of the FLN to establish the first encampment of the guerrilla nucleus that would become the EZLN, they were, in effect, following a path blazed by some of their family members who had, over the previous several decades, established several colonies deep in the Lacandon Jungle in the vicinity of Laguna Miramar. After the guerrilla nucleus had established itself, those same communities would become, starting around 1985, the Zapatistas' first support bases from which they would rapidly extend their influence to such an extent that by the end of 1988 almost the whole of the Cañadas region was affiliated with the EZLN (Iribarren, 2008; LeBot, 1997; Morquecho Escamilla, 2008; Womack, 1999).

The FLN were able to build on a substantial legacy of political education and organizational capacity-building in the Lacandon Jungle on the part of two Maoist organizations, *Unión del Pueblo* (Union of the People, or UP) and *Política Popular* (Popular Politics, or PP), that assisted in the organization of several militant and independent unions of *ejidos* (Legorreta Díaz, 1998; Rubio López, 2001). *Unión del Pueblo* began work in the region in 1973 and were joined by *Política Popular* in 1976. In many cases living in the communities, the Maoists had a significant impact on their political culture up until their expulsion in 1983 several months before the FLN was to launch the EZLN. This prior process of political development meant that the communities that first entered into contact with the guerrillas of the FLN/EZLN were not political neophytes and brought their own accumulated experience and analyses to this new project.

The work of the Maoists in turn built on the earlier work of the Diocese, training indigenous catechists in Liberation Theology (Gunderson, 2011; Meyer, 2000; Morales Bermúdez, 2005) and a broader revival of land struggles and the appearance of several independent campesino organizations under the leadership of various left-wing organizations (Harvey, 1998). The thousands of catechists trained by the Diocese provided many of the future leaders of the ejidal unions established by the Maoists and then the EZLN and constituted a layer of "organic indigenous campesino intellectuals" (Gunderson, 2011) who were able to synthesize the experiences of the indigenous communities with the insights of these successive projects to produce the distinctive discourse and practice now called neo-Zapatismo.

*The Limits of Autonomist Marxism*

The influence of autonomist Marxist thinking on the alter-globalization movement reflected welcome first signs of exhaustion of some of the more politically paralyzing varieties of postmodernist discourse that had arisen in the 1980s in the context of a worldwide retreat of popular forces in the face of global capitalist restructuring (Eagleton, 1996; Harvey, 1991). Unfortunately, the spontaneist conclusions that they all draw from their (mis)reading of the Zapatista experience ultimately mark a continued failure to escape the anti-organizational logic of that discourse.

The main problems with Holloway, Cleaver, Hardt and Negri are essentially two: First, in their attention to the extensive development of networked organizational forms, locally, nationally and globally, that occurred in the wake of the 1994 uprising, they neglect the critical function of more centralized and disciplined organizational forms in facilitating the development and maintenance of those networked forms, chief among these being the EZLN itself. At the end of the day the EZLN remains a disciplined and hierarchically organized political–military organization, and it is difficult to imagine it accomplishing a fraction of what it has without the advantages offered by that organizational form. While eschewing the pursuit of state power at the national level, the Zapatistas have, in effect, constituted themselves as a state within a state with all of the attendant capacities for tax collection, law enforcement, adjudication of disputes, and so on.

Second, the autonomist Marxists read the development of the distinctive ideology of the Zapatistas simply as a repudiation of the various Leninisms of *Unión del Pueblo*, *Política Popular* and the FLN in favor of their own semi-anarchist views of organization, leadership and democracy. This reading rests on a caricature of these earlier organizations that flattens out both the differences between them and the contradictions within each group. I would argue, for example, that the supposedly most libertarian practices of the Zapatistas are strongly anticipated in the participatory democratic ethos of the decidedly unorthodox Maoism of *Unión del Pueblo* and *Política Popular* (despite the subsequent trajectories of some of their leaders and members into the neoliberal wing of Mexico's ruling party, the PRI) (Cano, 1998; Montemayor, 1998) and of the mass campesino organizations that they helped build in the 1970s, despite the fact that those practices were

not sustainable in the face of intensified state repression beginning in the early 1980s. Indeed, it was precisely for this reason that the communities were won to the necessity of a more militarized organization advanced by the cadres of the FLN in the form of the EZLN. A closer examination of the FLN, I believe, will also show that it does not conform to the caricature of it implied by the autonomist Marxist reading of this history. Rather, the politics of the FLN evolved in response to the experiences that it and other Mexican guerrilla groups had in the 1970s in ways that enabled them to productively fuse with the communities that had initially experienced mass radicalization under the leadership of the Diocese and the Maoists.

Hardt and Negri betray little knowledge of this critical prehistory of the EZLN, and treat the statements of Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos about the internal regime of the EZLN completely uncritically. In contradiction with Cleaver, Hardt, Negri and Holloway's faith in the spontaneous generation of revolutionary consciousness, the documented history of the EZLN before 1994 shows that highly disciplined and centralized organizations (the Catholic Diocese, the Maoist groups, and the FLN), pursuing clearly formulated ideological objectives, played a critical role at each step in this process that produced a deepening of the conscious collective self-activity of the indigenous communities. Hardt and Negri are simply fooling themselves when they write:

The Colombian drug cartels and al-Qaeda, for example, may look like networks from the perspective of counterinsurgency, but in fact they are highly centralized, with traditional vertical chains of command. Their organizational structures are not democratic at all. The Intifada and the Zapatistas, in contrast, as we have seen, do in some respects tend toward distributed network structures with no center of command and maximum autonomy of all the participating elements. Their center is rather their resistance to domination and their protest against poverty or, in positive terms, their struggle for a democratic organization of the biopolitical commons. (89.)

The point here is not that the Zapatistas are not a valuable point of reference for understanding the implications of globalization for the organization of resistance, and it certainly isn't that they are not meaningfully distinguishable from the drug cartels or Al-Qaeda. Of course they are. The point is that, while the international support structure that arose in the wake of the 1994 uprising certainly takes

the form of a distributed network, the EZLN itself did not, could not and should not have taken such a form. Indeed, if one were searching for an example of an organization that more closely resembled the distributed network form it would be the *ejidal* unions built by the Maoists in the 1970s, which had proven inadequate in either effectively resisting the repressive violence directed at the communities or generating significant national or international interest in their plight. It was precisely the inadequacy of these more horizontal forms that led the communities not to abandon them, but to supplement them by embracing the decidedly vertical political–military project of the EZLN. Similar problems attach to Hardt and Negri’s claim that

this subordination of the military to the political is indeed one of the principles of the Zapatistas in Chiapas. In many ways the Zapatistas have adopted the tradition of Latin American guerrilla armies with an ironic twist. They do call themselves an army and have commandants, but they invert the traditional structure. Whereas the traditional Cuban model poses the military leader dressed in fatigues as the supreme political power, the Zapatistas insist that all military activity must remain subordinate, at the service of the political decisions of the community. (343.)

This “inversion” is a far more contradictory matter than is suggested here. The EZLN’s leading body, the Revolutionary Indigenous Clandestine Committee — General Command (CCRI–CG), while composed of ostensible civilian “representatives” of the various regions and ethnic groups that make up the EZLN’s support bases, as already noted, was only established a year prior to the 1994 uprising. There is no reason to believe that its members were “elected” by the communities, and this has never been claimed by the Zapatistas themselves. The members of this body are all or mostly all experienced veterans of the clandestine life of the political–military organization. While perhaps not all are involved directly in military matters, the distinction is a blurry one in an armed clandestine revolutionary organization. Contrasting the EZLN’s structure with the “Cuban model” makes it seem more innovative than would comparing it to the Chinese or Vietnamese models, in which the military structure of the popular army was always subordinated to the civilian authority of the Communist Party. The point here is not that there aren’t differences between

the EZLN's structure and other structures, but rather that there is a continuum of structural solutions to the problems of military and civilian authority, suggesting a generalized hybridity and not the tidy dichotomy between authoritarian and anti-authoritarian forms that Hardt and Negri suggest.

Indeed, I would argue that it is precisely the fact that the EZLN is organized along the traditional lines of a hierarchical political-military vanguard organization that has enabled them to survive the often intense repression directed at the communities that are their base and to secure a political space in which the distributed network forms, which the autonomists are so fond of, were able to develop. The autonomist Marxists' blindness to this contradiction in their analyses reveals an underlying methodological flaw in their still-valuable approaches.

This flaw is to treat a new tendency in capitalist development as if it weren't subject to the effects of countertendencies or internal contradictions. The new forms of immaterial production may very well generate distributed network forms of organization, which in turn have some of the effects attributed to them. But the emergence of these forms is not the end of the story. The contradictory nature of capitalism generates contradictory organizational logics which interpenetrate and produce hybrid results. Rather than an absolute tendency towards more and larger distributed networks, we are just as, or even more, likely to encounter distributed networks tasked with certain responsibilities but subordinated to disciplined hierarchical structures empowered to make big decisions. Software companies, for example, use distributed networks of developers to solve problems within architectures determined by leading teams who answer to strategies developed by business management. The proliferation of distributed networks has generally brought in its wake a proliferation of hierarchical surveillance technologies and regimes to oversee them.

While it is understandably seductive to see the distributed networks as virtuous and forward-looking, and the more hierarchical structures as pernicious legacies of the past, I would argue that in analyzing an insurgent movement like the EZLN, such judgments need to be checked against a close examination of the historical development of the respective forms in the context of particular concrete conditions.

*Conclusions*

If we accept Hardt and Negri's insight that the appropriate revolutionary organizational forms of an era parallel the organization of production of that era, then the acknowledged hybrid character of the Zapatista's organizational forms might be better understood as keeping pace with the logic of global capital rather than as a transitional form between the "old" hierarchical forms of the Leninist party and the "new" distributed network form of the multitude. If this is the case, it suggests a need for radical reappraisal of the real implications of the processes that the autonomist Marxists have done so much to illuminate. The autonomist Marxist authors considered here have all identified important emergent phenomena in the workings of global capital and the resistance to those workings. Their insistence on the critical role of resistance in informing the strategic transformations in the organization of capital and their appreciation of how the new organizational forms arising from immaterial production inform the new organizational forms that resistance takes make for fruitful analyses of contemporary social movements, the Zapatistas in particular. Unfortunately, their accounts are insufficiently dialectical in their failure to grasp the contradictions internal to the tendencies they have sought to explicate. These contradictions are real and exercise a powerful influence on the organization of capital, as well as any resistance that seriously seeks to challenge capital. Since their theory has the ambition of not simply identifying, but also assisting in the constitution of, a new revolutionary subject, its failures in this regard have more than academic consequences. A closer and more historically grounded examination of the Zapatistas, who figure prominently in their arguments, reveals the limitations of their approach and is suggestive of important ways in which their central theses might be re-conceived.

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