THE ZAPATISTAS AND THE NOTION OF ‘POWER’.
CONTRADICTIONS AND DILEMMAS

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the notion of ‘power’ which is central to the movement initiated by the Zapatistas. By analysing the contradictions within the Zapatistas movement, it argues that the EZLN gradually seized the power of the Mexican State. Consequently, this paper considers three elements central to the EZLN: democracy versus anarchy, Zapatistas’ desire to change the world without taking power and finally the notions of autonomy and inclusion. This paper therefore questions the notion of autonomy within the Zapatistas movement which refers to isolation rather than integration by considering examples from the education and health sectors.

Keywords: power, the Zapatistas, Mexico, autonomy.

INTRODUCTION

¡Ya basta! (Enough is enough!) is perhaps the best known cry of human justice in the “New Social Movements” (NSM) arena. As Escobar and Alvarez (1992: 2) state, this way of organisation by the masses is a new form of doing politics. The Zapatistas is a movement of resistance to the neoliberal model of economic globalisation. On January 1, 1994, over 3 000 indigenous people started an armed uprising against the Mexican government. The rebellion coincided with the start of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), an accord which meant that the indigenous people would lose their ancestral lands (ejidos). Their ability to contest the accepted way of doing politics (Stahler-Sholk et al. 2007: 5) demonstrated their capacity to control the political system from below.

This paper focuses on the role of ‘power’ in the relation between the Zapatistas and the Mexican government. For the purpose of this essay, we will retain Hay (2002: 184)’s definition of ‘power’: “the ability of actors to ‘have an effect’ upon a context”. It represents any challenge to the mainstream values, which is the type of ‘power’ embodied by the Zapatistas over the Mexican State.

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This paper looks at the relation of power between the Zapatista Movement of National Liberation (EZLN) and the Mexican State. It analyses three contradictions within the Zapatistas movement which lead, in my view, to more than just loosening the power of the Mexican government. The EZLN gradually seizes the power of the State. I look at democracy versus anarchy within the Zapatistas movement by pointing at various challenges: theoretical and practical in “liberty, justice and democracy”, ‘people’s power’ and the lack of unity, and the struggle of democracy which leads to violence. I will then move on to the Zapatistas’ desire to change the world without taking power. This is achieved by analysing the notions of ‘counter-power’, dignity and hope and their limits. The third part focuses on autonomy versus inclusion; I argue that self-determination is not possible in society. I question the notion of autonomy within the Zapatistas movement which means isolation rather than integration and I look at the limits of autonomy in two sectors: education and health.

DEMOCRACY VERSUS ANARCHY

THEORY AND PRACTICE IN ‘LIBERTY, JUSTICE AND DEMOCRACY’

These concepts which are at the core of any political discourse (Khasnabish 2010: 84) rest on the notion of power and resistance to the homogenisation promoted by both national imperialism and neo-liberalism. The Zapatistas’ struggle is for a reinterpretation of what these principles mean. Nash (1997: 261) notes the Zapatistas’ interpretation of these concepts.

Justice means “not to punish, but to give back to each what he or she deserves, and this is what the mirror gives back”. Liberty is “not that each one does what he or she wants, but to choose whatever road that the mirror wants in order to arrive at the true word”. Democracy requires “not all think the same, but that all thoughts or the majority of the thoughts seek and arrive at a good agreement”.

Moral rightness (justice) and the power to act according to one’s beliefs (liberty) promoted by the EZLN can be questioned. This was shown in the 1994 uprising, when, as Barmeyer (2008: 514) notes, the indigenous people who did not agree with “the true word” promoted by the EZLN, were expelled from the EZLN army, and any land returned to them was seized once more. In my view, this is not justice, but rather a form of neo-dictatorship, since only affiliation to EZLN guarantees the possession of an ejido.

The Zapatistas’ use ‘democracy’ to refer to parliamentary democracy which would rest on local and national elections, i.e. the end of the Revolutionary Institutional Party (PRI) (Cuninghame and Corona 1998: 17). Even if the Zapatistas have not expressed their intention to participate in elections, this could be foreseen. Indeed, in order to make a change, democracy is not enough. Sharing
the power is one step, but only detaining it entirely guarantees the possibility to change the world. Since the absence of indigenous’ people representation on the political scene will continue to be a limit of democracy (Harvey 2005: 238), the Zapatistas should probably try to reach a compromise with the Government in order to ameliorate their situation, instead of being radical and completely rejecting it.

‘PEOPLE’S POWER’ BUT NO UNITY

Zapatistas’ struggle aims “to widen, strengthen and deepen the space where people can exert their own power” (Esteva 1998:154), in a context where changing the world cannot be possible without relying on nation. As Marcos, the Zapatistas’ main spokesperson, stated, all Mexicans should participate in the creation of a more democratic, just and sovereign state (Harvey 2005: 12). For the Zapatistas, democracy means ‘people’s power’, where the people govern their lives. Yet, some rules should be imposed. If each individual had a different understanding of what ‘democracy’ was, democracy would become anarchy. A framework of rules is therefore needed, but the actors who would impose them would be a government-like.

The Zapatistas reject however the notion of ‘government’. ‘People’s power’ is therefore a loose concept, which leads to anarchy. ‘People’s power’ also involves unity, because power is amplified when many participants share their individual power, as in “United we stand and divided we fall” (Aesop: 6th century). United, people can achieve a goal. A “Divide and Conquer” strategy is often employed by a leader to rule over the masses. If divided, the community is easily controlled and the power of the leader is maintained because it is easier to deal with small concentrations of power.

The Zapatistas claim ‘people’s power’ which aims at ending the privileges of the upper class. They stand for the acceptance of the diversity of all peoples and cultures and their interaction in order to establish “the harmonious coexistence of all the ‘different’” (Esteva 1998: 157). Coexistence is possible when all the people see themselves as equal, but ethnic groups distinguish themselves between Indians, castlanes, gente de razón, ladinos etc. They refer to a different social status and systems of interpersonal relations (Tulchin 2003: 119). The lack of unity is expressed by an indigenous man from San Emiliano who says “(...) We are not united anymore. In fact, we are divided (...)” (Barmeyer 2008: 515).

Some communities were unwilling to be ruled by the EZLN, which at the beginning were seen as the ‘outsiders’ and chose to organise a local militia (Henck 2007: 135). This is opposed to the ideal of ‘people’s power’, thus unity promoted by the Zapatistas. Moreover, this weakens the EZLN, since the military power became decentralised. Even if the aim of the EZLN is ‘unity in diversity’, the result is the opposite. The unified people becomes a multitude of individuals unwilling to be ruled by a centralised leadership (Harvey 2005: 13). Power is materialised as “the plurality of powers” (De Angelis 2000: 24). The Zapatistas’ revolution seems to divide both within (local) and outside (national).
The Zapatistas promise a new form of democracy, which represents “democracy in its most essential form” (Esteva 1998: 155). This ‘radical democracy’ therefore rejects ‘abstract democracy’ (Dinerstein 2009: 20) since the latter is not based on the human person as such, in his or her complexity (Zizek 2000: 163). However, democracy as ‘people’s power’ is ambiguous. A central principle for the Zapatistas is ‘equality’, which is the main element for ‘radical democracy’. This is found in the concept “command obeying”, which means that those who lead should be subjected to the rule of the followers. The challenge raises from the use of the verb “to command”, which implies ‘authority’, and more precisely ‘authority over’ others. Thus actors become subjects to the rules of others and all people are not equal. Esteva (1998: 157) argues “[p]eople are not homogeneous and even less equals. They are heterogeneous and different”. ‘Radical democracy’ aims at peace for the Chiapas community. Nevertheless, this ideal of peace has been broken. While calling for peace, they disturbed it. Even if the EZLN is an important vehicle for fostering and promoting the identity and the rights of indigenous people, many EZLN members left the organisation because it was undemocratic and unjust. Henck (2007: 144–168) reports that some believed that it was unjust for poor people to be made to buy arms. The inconsistency within the movement is most stark when it asked the Mexican government for a peaceful road to democracy (Hodges and Gandy 2002: 201), whilst refusing to disarm. The newspaper La Jornada (cited in Henck 2007: 17) reported that in the period 1994–1997, there had been approximately 300 killings during the cease-fires in the State of Chiapas. Nothing can be achieved without sacrifice, but the Zapatistas’ ‘radical’ way of defining ‘democracy’ seems to rest on an ‘all or nothing’ concept. From all this it follows that ideology and outcome with regards to democracy seem to contradict itself.

One question needs attention: could the Zapatistas have become an anti-statist movement if Mexico would not have experienced a process of democratization? Kirby (1997) thinks it could not have. After inquiring on the degree of democracy, I think rebellion is possible because of democracy. However, the idea of democracy promoted by the Zapatistas could lead to anarchy because they reject rules. This could seize the power of the Mexican State by not respecting its rules but imposing their owns. Their argument is, however, that they want to change the world without taking the power.
CHANGING THE WORLD WITHOUT TAKING POWER

COUNTER-POWER

Changing the world is possible through reform of the state, but it tends to be a slow transition. The actors have to win elections and introduce change by parliamentary means. Society can thus be changed only by winning state power (Holloway 2005: 11). The Zapatistas introduced a new mechanism. They do not aim to control the State. Yet, they want to change the society from below, to convert the actual world into a new one based on dignity and humanity. The notion of ‘counter-power’ or ‘anti-power’ is central to their approach. This refers to “a weakening of the process by which discontent is focused on the State” (Holloway 2005: 20). Social discontent takes therefore the form of campaigns and collective actions promoted by the civil society, while revolution is not a central concept. This is where theory and practice within the EZLN clash.

They are an authoritarian armed revolutionary movement which has an anarchical outcome. It is a movement that does not aim at taking the power of the State, yet they want to change the society through revolution. The aim of a revolution is, however, taking the power of the State (Holloway 2002: 158). This is what makes Zapatismo a new form of resistance. It “does not fit into any previously established moulds of what revolution should be” (Holloway and Peláez 1998). This is probably the most important contradiction within the Zapatista movement. I believe that it is not possible to change the world without taking the power of the State. The Zapatistas, even if they reject the authority of the State, act like a State themselves. Independence is also foreseeable because of the international solidarity they benefit from.

The rebellion of the Zapatistas focuses on the emancipation of a non-identity represented by the ordinary people, not on the emancipation of oppressed identities (women etc.) (Holloway 2005: 156). Their struggle is the struggle for the indigenous land. As Haar (488–489) notes, by rewriting Mexico’s agrarian legislation in its Ley Revolutionaria Agraria (Revolutionary Agrarian Law) which entitles them to claim jurisdiction over all property in Mexico’s territory, the EZLN adopt a law-making capability. Furthermore, since the law had national applicability, “the EZLN challenged the executive prerogative of the Mexican State: the exclusive capacity both to legislate in matters of land tenure and to carry out land reform” (ibid: 489). This example shows that the EZLN claim the legitimacy and the capacity to govern even if the State had not delegated them the power. They are gradually appropriating functions of the State, which has lead to a change of the balance of powers. However, they consider themselves to be different from the State because they struggle in the name of dignity.
DIGNITY AND ITS LIMITS

For the Zapatistas, dignity represents the refusal to be similar and accept humiliation and “disillusionment” (Holloway 2002: 156). Even if the EZLN has been accused of manipulation of the indigenous people, it is commonly acknowledged that the rebellion is “the assertion of indigenous dignity” (Holloway 1998: 161). Fighting for dignity means fighting for the nation, as opposed to the State.

Holloway (1998: 168–169) suggests that the lack of clear definition of ‘dignity’ points to the fact that for the Zapatistas, this concept is understood as a category of struggle opposed to cowardice (Esteva 1998: 172). The dilemma of this concept arises from the fact that although it is a struggle to be recognised and accepted, the Zapatistas want more than that. The Zapatistas want to reconstruct a world of dignity, but they see themselves as the ‘undignified’.

However, for a group that has been humiliated it is impossible to reinvent a world based on dignity, since the only status they have known has been humiliation. Moreover, if dignity means to fight for what you are entitled to have, then the EZLN has not achieved it. This is shown by the fact that they dispossessed of land the families that had been resistant to them.

I agree with the EZLN’s interpretation of ‘dignity’ which rejects “a condition of exploitation and oppression” (De Angelis 2000: 27) in order to fight for better living conditions. However, if I defined dignity as ‘doing what is morally correct’, I would disagree with some of the Zapatistas’ practices: they fight against globalisation, but they need the Internet in order to benefit from the international solidarity, they are against capitalism, but they sell Coca-Cola in the shops they run.

Only one idea seems to be clear within this concept: the fact that dignity is a rebellion against the ideology promoted by the State, because its legitimacy is being questioned. In that respect, the struggle for dignity becomes a struggle for legitimacy. And since the Mexican government would not change its definition of dignity, the only solution seems to be to overthrow it. The Zapatistas can therefore only hope that as time passes, their dream to make the world anew will become reality. Hope represents the third dimension of power within the Zapatista movement.

HOPE

Only one thing is certain within the Zapatistas movement: its uncertainty. We know nothing about the “arrival at the promised land, nor any certainty about what this promised land might look like” (Holloway 1998: 184). This is because Zapatismo is not a coherent ideology that rests on rules (Khasnabish 2010: 83). This is embodied by the principle “walking questioning” which explains the lack of a fixed strategy by the absence of a fixed meaning or truth. Flexibility allows the realisation of goals, but one has to know what the aim is.
Hope is the ability to imagine a new political space where ordinary people will trust each other (Esteva 1998: 174). This is to be understood as a spiritual interpretation of power, as it relies on the power of each individual to imagine such a community. It will be a structure which will still oppose the State and will try to make the impossible possible. However, this utopian idea cannot be implemented while the State is sovereign. Even if the Mexican government allows the Zapatistas to organise themselves in autonomous communities, it does so because this does not affect it.

**AUTONOMY VERSUS INCLUSION**

*SELF-DETERMINATION & IMPOSSIBILITIES OF THE AUTONOMY*

In January 1994 the EZLN occupied seven counties of Chiapas, Southeast Mexico, marking the process of territorial autonomy. As Holloway (2005: 217) argues, self-determination is the alternative when revolutionary groups do not want control of the State. But social and individual self-determination cannot exist in a capitalist society because capitalism is the negation of self-determination. The way we act blends together with other actors’ self-determination.

Here arises a dilemma within the Zapatistas movement: are they brave or coward for wanting self-determination? In a society one has to adapt and change, to make compromises, in order to coexist with other members. This is, in my view, a sign of braveness. I consider the alternative – isolation because the world is unjust – a sign of weakness because it is easier to live on your own than to interact with others. This stands in contrast with their notion of dignity, which relies on braveness. Since self-determination is a movement against society, it goes in the opposite direction. Although Zapatistas’ self-determination is understood as a reaction to neoliberalism and indigenous peoples’ rights, they seem to want a change which only takes into consideration their desires. They do not compromise, they want to impose their ideology.

The Convention 169 of the International Labour Organisation (ILO), which Mexico signed, recognizes the rights of indigenous peoples to self-determination (Style 2000: 265). However, the Mexican State declared illegal the autonomous municipalities. This is due to the fact that the ILO Convention is not binding, and the nation-State cannot agree with a new indigenous way of doing politics which would be an attack to its sovereignty. Self-determination could be seen as an attempt to seize the State power, because as a simple process of decentralization it would be “a specific order of government, constituting the system of vertical power of the State” (Diaz cited in Burbach 2001: 163), which would lead to the submission of the indigenous peoples within the State order (Esteva 1998: 165).
The Zapatistas rising for autonomy builds on their refusal to acknowledge a type of autonomy which is incorporated into an institutional framework which uses empowerment and participation in policy-making processes. They rather provide autonomously the community with policy from below in various areas of welfare: education, health, justice, legislative agricultural matters and facilitation of the formulation of work cooperatives (Dinerstein 2009: 15). Since they construct a new legitimacy based on their comprehension of the law, the practice of the autonomy leads to a clash between legitimate and legal. The conflict with the Mexican government arises from the fact that Zapatistas’ understanding of legal and legitimate is incompatible with the State’s. That is the major issue that prevents peace between the EZLN and the Mexican government. The Zapatistas come with a new understanding of the world order with new definitions, and they expect the State to agree with this ‘newness’. This is impossible because the State would lose its sovereignty.

The creation of new political bodies – five Caracoles (Snails) and Juntas de Buen Gobierno (Good Government Council, as opposed to the ‘bad’ government) – took place as a reaction to the unfulfilled promises of the 1996 San Andreas Accords between EZLN and the Mexican government. The agreements were supposed to grant constitutional recognition of the indigenous peoples’ rights to autonomy, self-government and collective production (Dinerstein 2009: 12). The State refused to put into practice the agreements because it would have weakened its sovereignty. However, the EZLN created new political structures without permission from the State (autonomía sin permiso) (Haar 2005: 489). This shows that the model of the State as a site of power has been adopted in the creation of local governance.

The Zapatistas interpretation of autonomy implies the right to self-organisation and self-government according to their needs, customs and practices (Cuningame and Corona 1998: 17) as a way to be part of the State through the slogan autonomía es integración (autonomy means integration) (Gallaher and Froehling 2002: 82). They argue that they can only be part of the functioning of the State and of the nation if they can exist autonomously within it. But what does integration mean? I interpret ‘integration’ to mean equal opportunities to all the individuals of a society. Therefore, the host society should act as a ‘sponge’ with a big absorption capacity and admit and incorporate the ‘foreigners’ within its structures. ‘Foreigners’ will therefore have the social opportunities to develop their human capital. But this can only be possible if both parties have the desire to blend, to become one. Autonomy can therefore not mean integration, but rather isolation. Their argument is that they do not want to dismiss the Mexican government from indigenous territories, they only want to be able to interact with it on equal footing (Gallaher and Froehling 2002: 93). This raises two dilemmas: how long would the
EZLN accept the State being involved in indigenous affairs for and why should a rebellious minority have the same rights as a peaceful majority? We do not know.

Autonomy in the Zapatistas understanding of the term is a form of ‘dissent’ and it represents a marker of a political identity (Harvey: 2005). Although its utopian connotation would be in the advantage of the community, it faces various challenges due to the interpretation ‘autonomy means integration’. Also, the Zapatistas face the challenge of providing the community with land and social programmes (Stahler-Sholk 2007: 51–52). In that respect, autonomy remains, as Bohn et al. (2010: 27) argue, a hope. A hope which has, however, been translated into facts mainly in the areas of education and health.

**EDUCATION AND HEALTH**

The EZLN decided to reject any subsidies, coming from the government on the assumption that it was being done in an attempt to win over the indigenous people. Even if the indigenous communities did not agree with the EZLN’s order to reject government aid (Barmeyer 2008: 511–513), nothing changed. This stands in contradiction to the definition of democracy the Zapatistas believe in, which rests on ‘everything for the people to have a better life’.

Within the Zapatista community, education is reliant on community teachers who are between fourteen and seventeen years old. Although this brings into question the quality of the education, Baronnet (2008: 118) argues that this could be interpreted as a project of empowerment of the rural youth. The main problems of the system of education are the lack of sustainability, as it relies on international sustainability and untrained teachers. Also, as Dinerstein (2009: 16) notes, the lack of official recognition of this educational project is a significant issue, as it leads to further discrimination on the labour market.

The Zapatistas educational project focuses on the integration of educational services and community life “with the objective to develop a participative educational system in line with the ongoing autonomy process” (Barmeyer 2008: 519). Moreover, everything that is not considered as appropriate for indigenous pupils is not taught. What is appropriate? If it is only what the EZLN thinks is good for the indigenous population to know, this is in contrast with the principle of democracy.

In the area of health, each ‘snail’ has a health system which is closely coordinated with the other systems. The La Guadalupana Clinic from Oventic focuses on health and preventive medicine. However, malnourishment affects 76% of the population (Pickard cited in Dinerstein 2009) and many children die of curable diseases such as diarrhoea. The aim of the Zapatistas’ health system is to recover and promote old medical practices, herbs and massages. However, as Dinerstein (2009: 16) points out, the three main problems are: the lack of volunteers and the dependence on charity, financial shortages which trigger a lack
of medicines and technology and cultural issues which make the promotion of family planning difficult.

Even if the quality of autonomous educational and health projects is questionable, these are vehicles of autonomy expressed by the Zapatistas. Although they reject the State, they act like one. Autonomous education and health represent more than undermining the State power. It is taking its legitimacy within a territory.

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that by its attempts to create a State within a State, the final aim of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) is to take over the Mexican State. The Zapatistas’ ‘power’ can be represented by their desire of freedom which is translated into autonomy. However, the possession of power triggers more power.

The paper has pointed to various contradictions within the movement that translate into dilemmas. At the core of the EZLN there is a type of democracy that takes the form of anarchy. It is based on different interpretations of ‘liberty, justice and democracy’. I have shown that ‘people’s power’ and ‘radical democracy’ are rather loose concepts.

The second part has shown the dilemmas and contradictions within the notion of power. It analysed the notion of counter-power and ‘dignity’ in order to make sense of the Zapatistas’ desire to change the world without taking power. The only constant and certain notion within the Zapatistas movement is therefore ‘hope’, which points to the progressist character of the Zapatistas movement.

In the third part, autonomy has been analysed. It has been argued that self-determination is not possible in a capitalist world. The type of autonomy the Zapatistas embody means exclusion and not integration. By doing so, and by running their own systems of education and health they not only undermine the power of the Mexican State, but they seize it. Since changing the world is not possible while the Mexican government is still at power, the Zapatistas aim at exercising power over the State.

To conclude, even if their intention is not to seize the power of the State, they have to do it in order to make a change, because the Mexican State would not surrender its sovereignty. Maybe the Zapatistas should aim to find a compromise with the Mexican government. If they wanted peace and democracy within their territories, the best attitude to adopt would probably be to accept a balance of powers, where the Mexican State has its power as well. Full power is not possible while the Mexican government still exists. Power cannot be sustainable unless the movement has enough partisans. On the other hand, the Mexican State should have more agencies that represent it in order for its power to be consolidated and not undermined or seized by the Zapatistas.
REFERENCES
