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## **Anarchism, The Zapatistas and The Global Solidarity Movement**

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### **Introduction**

Speaking to a group of tourists in San Cristobal de las Casas on the 1<sup>st</sup> of January 1994, explaining why they could not travel on to the Maya ruins at Palenque, Chiapas, Subcomandante Marcos of the The Zapatista Army of National Liberation reportedly said: “I’m sorry. This is a revolution”. Many tourists in San Cristobal de las Casas on that day called home, others called local media. Meanwhile, local activists and radicals in Chiapas used recently established Internet connections to communicate with radicals and activists globally. Before long a global solidarity movement was growing in numbers and importance. This global solidarity movement played a decisive role in halting the Mexican military offensives over the next few years, illustrating the potential power of activists using the Internet to communicate globally. Or at least, so goes one history of the conflict in Chiapas.

In 1994, I had been actively engaged in an “autonomous” cultural centre in Trondheim, Norway for approximately 10 years. The centre was initially established in a squatted building but was now “legalized” and included a cafe, a stage and a book shop named “Ivar Matlaus Bokkafe”. Ivar “Matlaus” was a Norwegian anarchist (real name Ivar Mortensson-Egnund (1857-1934)). The bookshop sold a variety of books, including anarchist classics and titles by Chomsky, Zinn, Bookchin, Malatesta, Bakunin, Goldman and others. At the time I worked as an independent journalist for alternative media and Norwegian newspapers. The newspapers agreed to finance a first trip to Chiapas in April 1994. This turned out to be the beginning of a now 16 year long relationship with Zapatista communities, which, among other things, led to a PhD dissertation in History on the Zapatistas, the media and the global solidarity movement.<sup>2</sup> I provide this information not because my personal history is particularly interesting, but because the type of argument I will develop in this article often tells as much about the author as the phenomena the author discusses. A little information about the author is thus intended to facilitate a critical reading of the article.

Many have commented on the global solidarity movement from a variety of perspectives. One fascinating perspective was given by researchers at the North American think-tank RAND Corporation. Ronfeldt and Fuller warned that the Zapatista uprising demonstrated how new technology now made it possible for “swarms” of “flies” to overrun governments.<sup>3</sup> Castells saw the development of global

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<sup>2</sup> Roy Krøvel, "Fra Gerilja Til Globale Solidaritetsnettverk I Chiapas, Mexico" (Norges teknisk-naturvitenskapelige universitet, Det historisk-filosofiske fakultet, Institutt for historie og klassiske fag, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> J. Arquilla and Ronfeldt D., *Networks and Netwars: The Future of Terror, Crime, and Militancy* (Santa Monica 2001); A. Ronfeldt and F. Fuller, *The Zapatista "Social Netwar" In Mexico* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 1998).



networks facilitated by the internet as revolutionary.<sup>4</sup> Old style hierarchical organizations would be no match for flexible networks. Cleaver believed to observe how the “fabric” of politics was being “rewoven” as activists formed global networks of solidarity to exchange information and organize in support of the Zapatistas.<sup>5</sup> Based on the Zapatista experience, Holloway argued for changing the world without taking power.<sup>6</sup> These arguments are relevant for anyone studying the relationship between International Relations and anarchism.

There is at least one more reason why the case of the Zapatista global solidarity movement is of interest for students of International Relations and anarchism. The solidarity movement with the Zapatistas stands out from other earlier solidarity movements with armed revolutionaries in the region, for example in El Salvador, Nicaragua and Guatemala. In Nicaragua, for example, a number of European states sided with the Sandinista government against the Contras supported by the US. North American and European trade unions were involved in the international movement in support of those who struggled against the authoritarian governments in Guatemala and El Salvador. Faith based groups also played a pivotal role in the solidarity movement with Central America. These and other actors were largely absent in the global solidarity movement with the Zapatistas. The global solidarity movement thus came to rely on individual activists and small informal organizations forming a loose network. Although many would hesitate to define themselves as “anarchists”, I would argue that the network was heavily influenced by various strains of “anarchism” in the broadest sense of the word.

The aim of this paper is to contribute to the existing literature on the global solidarity movement. It is intended to understand the development of the global solidarity movement in relation to anarchist literature. It asks two research questions: Why did the activists of the global solidarity network identify themselves with the indigenous peoples of the Zapatista communities in Chiapas? How did the communication between the two groups influence the development of the political organization of the Zapatistas and the development of a wider global movement against neoliberal globalization? The research takes a historical approach. It will argue that the political debate in the global solidarity movement evolved around a few central themes. The article will follow the discussion as it developed gradually after January 1<sup>st</sup> 1994 onwards. For clarity I try to divide the developing discussion into three phases, even though they often overlap. In the first phase the indigenous identity of the Zapatistas was “discovered and underlined by a number of visiting activists and scholars. The second phase followed closely. In this phase a particular Zapatista democratic practice was investigated and reported by activists and scholars. The article will move on to analyze the third phase where demands for particular collective indigenous rights came to the forefront of the struggle. Collective indigenous rights invite a discussion of individualism vs. collectivism. The last section tries to link these debates to the anarchist literature on environmentalism. I will argue that

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<sup>4</sup> Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society* (Cambridge, Mass: Blackwell Publishers, 1996); ———, *The Power of Identity* (Oxford 1997).

<sup>5</sup> H. Cleaver and J. og Pelaez E. Holloway, "The Zapatistas and the Electronic Fabric of the Struggle," in *Zapatista!: Reinventing Revolution in Mexico* (Chicago: 1998); Harry M. Jr. Cleaver, "The Zapatista Effect: The Internet and the Rise of an Alternative Political Fabric," *Journal of International Affairs* 51(1998).

<sup>6</sup> John Holloway, *Change the World without Taking Power* (London: Pluto Press, 2005); ———, *Zapatista! Reinventing Revolution in Mexico* (London 1998).



understanding these debates is necessary to understand why and how the global solidarity movement came to develop and grow in influence during the 1990's. Understanding them is also necessary for a critical analysis of why the movement was ridden by splits and conflicts.

## 1. Background on the Zapatista Uprising

The Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) was founded in Chiapas in 1983 by members of National Liberation Forces (FLN). The FLN had organized armed guerrilla organizations on several previously occasions, but the organizations had always been annihilated by the Mexican police and army before being able to pose serious threat to the regime. The EZLN was originally formed within the framework set out by Ernesto Guevara in his writings on Cuba, Latin America and revolution.<sup>7</sup> But in the Lacandon jungle and the highlands of Chiapas the guerrilla organization met with indigenous peoples with a strong tradition of political organization of their own, often forged through generations of struggle for land and against big land owners and the local authoritarian political classes. Many of the indigenous leaders had been trained in Maoist inspired peasant unions or as catechists in the networks of the radical Bishop of San Cristóbal de las Casas, Samuel Ruiz. When the EZLN decided to go to war on the 1<sup>st</sup> of January 1994, most of the urban intellectual cadres with university education seem to have left the organization.

By the time the EZLN became internationally famous, the organizations had been converted into a something very different from the guerrilla movements in Mexico and Central America of the 60's, 70's and 80's: The organization seemed to be controlled by the same local communities it claimed to be representing. After a few days of fighting a ceasefire was declared. Negotiations between the Zapatistas and representatives of the Mexican government began in San Andres in late 1995. An agreement was indeed reached in 1996, but the president Ernesto Zedillo refused to accept it. President Zedillo in particular resented the relatively wide reaching reforms on indigenous rights and autonomy. In 2001 a constitutional reform also failed to fully implement the San Andres Accord. The Zapatistas have since concentrated much of their energy on constructing alternative political structures in Chiapas, declining to return to the negotiating table as long as the Mexican government ignores the San Andres Accord.

## 2. A Reflection on Existing Literature on IR and Chiapas

Until the 1970's the field of International Relations was dominated by a realist paradigm where states were seen as protagonists. Research often focused on military or economic cooperation or conflict between states or alliances of states, or sometimes on individuals deemed particularly important, such as diplomats or politicians. The field of International Relations was opened up to include other actors and other types of activity. This "alternative" literature is helpful as a point of departure when discussing the Zapatistas, anarchy and International Relations. Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye were pioneers regarding the study social activities outside state control as having significant impact on International Relations.<sup>8</sup> According to authors like Nye

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<sup>7</sup> Ernesto Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare* (Wilmington 1997).

<sup>8</sup> R. Keohane and J. Nye, "Transnational Relations and World Politics," (Cambridge 1970).



and Keohane, the state centred approach often meant that scholars missed important aspects of importance to the study of International Relations. Others have since focused on the influence of the rapidly growing number of Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and social movements, thus inviting a much more complex understanding of international politics.

What I here will call “constructivist perspectives” on International Relations has been particularly visible in the literature on the Zapatistas and the global solidarity movement. Brysk investigates the development of a global indigenous movement since the 1970’s. According to Brysk, symbols signalling identity as belonging to indigenous peoples have been converted from a “problem” to be overcome into something that can be used or exploited for political end.<sup>9</sup> Brysk sees social movements as actors struggling to *construct meaning*. Brysk explains that systems of meaning are exercised through norms. Norms are constantly constructed and reconstructed and new types of interaction, new information and new actors can contribute to reconstructing the underlying “scripts” of social life. New information can thus contribute to the formulation of new stories which again lead to changes in political paradigms in the audience. Successful information succeeds through re-writing individual or collective identities in the audience, and can lead to changes in the political system by mobilizing collective action based on identity, change the social agenda or challenge the legitimacy of the current regime.

Castells, Cleaver, Holloway and much of the literature on the Zapatistas and the global solidarity movement can be interpreted in light of the constructivist literature on International Relations. According to Manuel Castells, some individuals can have a defining effect on how meaning is constructed: “their identity may enter the realm of symbolic struggles, and stand a chance of seizing power”.<sup>10</sup> This, according to Castells, is the case with subcomandante Marcos, the military leader of the Zapatistas. Information which is new to the audience, or which is presented from a different or new angle, can thus “enter the realm of symbolic struggles”. In the case of the “symbolic struggle” on what it means to be “indigenous”, social movements and individual activists have contributed to construct meanings of the term “indigenous” which are fundamentally different from those constructed only a generation ago.<sup>11</sup>

A slightly more sceptical brand of literature on the Zapatistas is represented by Leyva and Olesen.<sup>12</sup> According to Olesen, “network” is a better term than

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<sup>9</sup> A. Brysk, *From Tribal Village to Global Village. Indian Rights and International Relations in Latin America* (Stanford 2002); Alison Brysk, *Globalization and Human Rights* (Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 2002); ———, “Human Rights and Private Wrongs Constructing Global Civil Society,” (2005).

<sup>10</sup> Manuel Castells, *The Power of Identity, Information Age*; (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1997), 361.

<sup>11</sup> Brysk, *From Tribal Village to Global Village. Indian Rights and International Relations in Latin America*.

<sup>12</sup> T. Olesen, *International Zapatismo: The Construction of Solidarity in the Age of Globalization* (London 2005); Thomas Olesen, “Globalising the Zapatistas: From Third World Solidarity to Global Solidarity?,” *Third World Quarterly* 25, no. 1 (2004); T. Olesen, “The Transnational Zapatista Solidarity Network: An Infrastructure Analysis,” *Global Networks: A Journal of Transnational Affairs* 4(2004); Xochitl Solano Leyva, “De Las Cañadas a Europa: Niveles, Actores Y Discursos Del Nuevo Movimiento Zapatista (Nmz) (1994-1997),” *THULE Centro Studi Americanistici “Circolo Amerindiano”*, no. April-October (2000); ———, “Neozapatismo: Networks of Power and War” (University of Manchester, 2001); Xochitl Solano Leyva and Willibald Sonnleitner, “Qué Es El Neo-Zapatismo?,” *Revista Espiral. Estudios sobre Estado y Sociedad, Guadalajara, Jalisco* VI, no. January-April (2000).



“movement” to describe the global communication between activists and Zapatistas, since “movement” would imply that the communication lead to reconstruction of identity. Olesen therefore argues for using the term “network” to suggest a more mechanical exchange of information with a more limited effect than what is described by Cleaver, Castells and Holloway.

Berger has warned against Northern intellectuals risk “romancing” the Zapatistas.<sup>13</sup> The danger is “seeing” new forms of power when or if the Zapatistas is best understood as excluded peasants struggling to achieve land and basic goods, much as generations of poor peasants in Latin America them. Still more sceptical is Chandler. According to Chandler these activists are mainly engaged in constructing themselves, using the various causes to produce symbols of identity, with the intent of making us aware of their awareness.<sup>14</sup> This type of activism could thus be described as a form of escape; the activists are “illusory participants”. Instead of taking part in real communities with real commitments home, they seek commitment free participation in struggles far from home.

A significant literature exists on normative aspects of the Zapatistas and on the global solidarity movement. Much of this literature also tries to analyze the meanings of new information and communication technology and consequences for globalization on a systemic level. In comparison, relatively little research has taken the content of the communication seriously enough to investigate how the communication between Zapatistas and activists in the global movement has contributed towards the development and formulation of political ideology.

### 3. Methodology

This investigation builds on participant observation, interviews and research of written sources. I have done fieldwork in the Zapatista villages of La Garucha, Patihuitz, Morelia, Oventic and Diez de Abril, observing and participating together with representatives of the Zapatistas and members of the global solidarity movement.

I have interviewed a large number of Zapatistas, mainly in the period from 1994 to 2006. This includes interviews with subcomandante Marcos, Majorises and numerous members of the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN). Civilian Zapatistas have been interviewed since 1994 in the vil La Garucha, San Andres and Diez de Abril. Civilian Zapatista political leaders have been interviewed in Oventic, La Garucha, Morelos and Roberto Barrios.

In addition I have interviewed local activists and members of NGOs in San Cristobal de las Casas, such as CAPISE, CIEPAC, El Centro de Derechos Humanos Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas, A. C, Red de Defensores Comunitarios and Desarrollo Económico Social de los Mexicanos Indígenas, A.C. A full list of interviews can be found in Krøvel.<sup>15</sup>

For the investigation of the global solidarity movement I have relied mainly on researching publicly accessible written sources. I have not limited the search for relevant sources to those written by self-declared anarchists. Many in this sample would hesitate to use any type of label. I have systematically researched articles in the

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<sup>13</sup> Mark T. Berger, "Romancing the Zapatistas: International Intellectuals and the Chiapas Rebellion," *Latin American Perspectives* 28, no. 2 (2001).

<sup>14</sup> D. Chandler, "Building Global Civil Society "From Below"?", *Millennium* 33, no. 2 (2004).

<sup>15</sup> Krøvel, "Fra Gerilja Til Globale Solidaritetsnettverk I Chiapas, Mexico".



following magazines and websites: Love and Rage, ¡Ya Basta!,<sup>16</sup> Irish Mexico Group (no longer exists but some documents can be found at black flag),<sup>17</sup> Chiapas –L (mailing list), Chiapas 95 (mailing list) and various of publications by Latin-Amerika gruppene i Norge (The Norwegian Solidarity Com with Latin America).<sup>18</sup> Other sources, for instance [www.ezln.org.mx](http://www.ezln.org.mx), have been consulted when necessary.<sup>19</sup>

Although a large number of additional sources could also have been included in this investigation, I believe this selection gives a relevant cross-section of the dialogue between Zapatistas and members of the global solidarity movement. The sources have been studied, in particular, in relation to on-going debates among anarchists on individualism, collectivism, community, omy and freedom. The next section of the article will deal with the global solidarity network and how the Zapatistas were represented by solidarity activists. This will lead to a discussion of “individualism”, “freedom” and gender in light of indigenous rights.

#### **4. Zapatistas as Catalyst for Global Movement against Neoliberalism (Graeber: xii)**

The Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) was founded by a group of Marxists inspired by Cuba and in particular by “Che” Guevara’s theory of revolution.<sup>20</sup> According to Guevara, the guerrilla could create a revolutionary situation in Latin-American countries by attacking the regimes militarily. The guerrilla could take the role reserved for the party in traditional Marxism Leninism. Ordinary Mexicans sympathized with the Zapatistas and upported their demands, but failed to join the armed uprising. After ten days of fighting, the two parties agreed to a ceasefire.

In April 1994 I travelled with a small group of alternative journalists to Las Cañadas where the EZLN in 1983 had established itself and begun military training of tzeltal, tzotzil, tojolobal and chol peasants. The Zapatistas had set up a check point outside a small village called San Miguel, where we were sent to a hut to wait a few days for permission to enter the territory then held by the Zapatistas. In that hut we met other activists and journalists, among them a large group from “Love & Rage”. A large number of “internationalists” continued to trave to the Zapatista communities in Las Cañadas over the next months, culminating in a large event in the tojolobal village of Guadalupe Tepeyac with approximately 5000 Mexican and international participants.

At that time the nascent solidarity movement in reality consisted of at least four different types of alliances, each possibly amounting to a “movement” in its own right. Here, each will be called “sub-movements” for the sake of simplicity. The four sub-movements did not necessarily have much in common and differences between them might help explain why many activists and organizations before long drifted away.

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<sup>16</sup> Ya Basta, <http://www.yabasta.it>.

<sup>17</sup> Black Flag, <http://flag.blackened.net/revolt/mexico/pdf.html>.

<sup>18</sup> Latin-Amerikagruppene i Norge (The Norwegian Solidarity Committee with Latin America), <http://www.latin-amerikagruppene.no>.

<sup>19</sup> EZLN, [www.ezln.org.mx](http://www.ezln.org.mx).

<sup>20</sup> Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare*.



The first sub-movement can best be understood based on its defining struggle against the ruling political party (PRI) and democratic reforms. This sub-movement consisted of all types of political organizations and activists, many gradually drifting off to compete for political offices as that possibility opened up.

The second sub-movement consisted of a large number of independent peasant organizations demanding land reforms. The Zapatista uprising broke a dam. In the first six months of 1994, 60 000 hectares of land were taken by landless peasants. In many places in Chiapas the whole system of ownership of land broke down as tens of thousands of peasants participated in a wave of land takeovers.<sup>21</sup> In January 1994, 285 peasant organizations had formed a formidable network of organizations, the CEOIC (Consejo Estatal de Organizaciones Indígenas y Campesinas). But the network began falling apart as some member organizations were given and thus pacified. Others chose to align themselves with various political parties in the hope of receiving land when or if their party and political representative achieved some political influence. This was how the political game was traditionally played in Chiapas. The common front for a general land reform lasted only a few months before it disintegrated into systems of clientelism. The third sub-movement proved more resilient than the two first. A large number of indigenous groups and organizations sent representatives to Chiapas and a national alliance of indigenous groups began to take form.

The fourth sub-movement consisted of various types of organizations and activists struggling against free trade, “structural reform” and the type of liberalization promoted by Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher in the 1980’s. At first this sub-movement included different strains of Marxist organizations. Only gradually did this sub-movement become dominated by anti-authoritarians.

As a consequence of this process, the Zapatistas became influential in radical anti-authoritarian circles internationally. According to Graeber, the Zapatistas marked a turning point, inspiring a global movement against neoliberal hegemony.<sup>22</sup> To some extent the link between supporting the Zapatistas and struggle against neoliberalism is understandable considering the date chosen for the uprising (on the 1<sup>st</sup> of January 1994 the North American Free Trade Agreement entered into force). The long and winding road leading up to NAFTA had seen a number of structural reforms, for instance the abolishment of guarantees enshrined in the Mexican constitution since the Mexican revolution. These entitlements, based on Emiliano Zapata’s “Plan de Ayala” which gave landless peasants the right to land, were abolished. A direct link between a Mexican anarchist tradition and the struggle against free trade based on the principles of the “Washington Consensus” was thus visible from the outset of the armed conflict.

Nonetheless, the first Zapatista declaration also contained more problematic passages from a libertarian perspective. The declaration promised that the Zapatistas would march on the capital, implicitly to replace the government. It was held in a wording reminiscent of earlier Cuban inspired guerrilla organisations, for example in neighbouring Guatemala and El Salvador. “Love & Rage”, for example, thus admitted to some initial scepticism based on earlier experiences with authoritarian military guerrilla organizations in Latin America.<sup>23</sup> This initial scepticism among many North

<sup>21</sup> D. Villafuerte Solís, *La Tierra En Chiapas. Viejos Problemas Nuevos* (Mexico 2002).

<sup>22</sup> David Graeber, *Direct Action: An Ethnography* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2008), xii.

<sup>23</sup> Love & Rage, "Introduction to Mar/Apr 1995 Edition," *Love & Rage Newspaper* 1995.





American anarchists was not based on a principled opposition to military action. On the contrary, anarchist organizations welcomed the uprising.

The first military actions by the Zapatistas could be interpreted as a form of “propaganda by the deed”, and thus could be related to anarchist classics like Malatesta and Berkman.<sup>24</sup> The thought of “taking power” was not entirely alien to anarchists, either. Michel Foucault, for example, had influenced many when arguing that power can never be abolished; only transformed. The task of the revolutionary is to conquer power, according to Foucault.<sup>25</sup> The carefully worded first declaration from the Zapatistas was also vague enough on political strategy to be compatible with Noam Chomsky’s attitude that the aim should not necessarily be to overthrow government itself, but to take control of government from corporations.<sup>26</sup> In fact, the Zapatistas themselves on numerous occasions accused the government of serving the interests of big corporations, especially regarding exploitation of land, natural resources and the rainforest in Chiapas.

As the global solidarity movement grew in numbers and strength, activists increasingly framed the struggle of the Zapatistas in terms familiar to struggles at home. It was “the same struggle”, as one Irish activist put it in a letter home.<sup>27</sup> This made it possible to envisage a global solidarity based on a general human interest, transcending nationality and borders; something that had always appealed to anarchists.

The Zapatista military leader, in particular, became famous for his playful and imaginative writings. This playful tone resonated well with many activists globally. Quite a few well-known anarchists have underlined the importance of celebrating “play, fantasy and imagination”.<sup>28</sup> Having fun for the Zapatistas sometimes meant waking up foreign activists at five in the morning to observe EZLN military parades and the hoisting the Mexican flag. A persistent rumour had it that subcomandante Marcos thoroughly enjoyed himself when studying the long faces of foreign anarchists faced with such symbols of discipline, order and nationalism. Few anarchists dwelled with the irony of such happenings when reporting home. Most focused on other aspects of the Zapatistas, for example some of the more poetic statements of subcomandante Marcos: “Marcos is gay in San Francisco, black in South Africa, an Asian in Europe... A pacifist in Bosnia, a housewife alone on Saturday night in any neighbourhood in any city in Mexico ... a reporter writing filler stories for the back pages, a single woman on the subway at 10 pm, a peasant without land, an unemployed worker... an unhappy student, a dissident amid free market economics, a writer without books or readers, and, of course, a Zapatista in the mountains of southeast Mexico”.<sup>29</sup> Again, it sounded like something that someone who had studied Foucault could have said. Foucault had called for “particularized struggles” by women, prisoners, conscripted soldiers, immigrants, patients and

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<sup>24</sup> P. Marshall, *Demanding the Impossible: A History of Anarchism* (London 1993), 632.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 586.

<sup>26</sup> James A. McGilvray, *Chomsky: Language, Mind, and Politics* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press; Blackwell, 1999), 200.

<sup>27</sup> Anonymous, “Of Coffee Beans and Military Intervention - 1998 in Diez. A Report from an Irish Observer in the Zapatista Community of Diez De Abril, 1998,” ed. Irish Mexico Group (IMG) Solidarity Project (Dublin: Irish Mexico Group 1998).

<sup>28</sup> Murray Bookchin, *Toward an Ecological Society* (Montréal ; Buffalo: Black Rose Books, 1980), 26.

<sup>29</sup> subcomandante Marcos, “Z Quote,” Z Communications, <http://ruby.zcommunications.org/by-subcomandante-marcos>.



homosexuals.<sup>30</sup> And indeed, as revealed later, subcomandante Marcos had first studied and later taught philosophy at universities in Mexico City. As a student, he had written a thesis based on Foucault.<sup>31</sup>

So far, this exposition has presented a few of the arguments and visions anarchists internationally and the Zapatistas in Chiapas initially had in common. The intention has been to illustrate why anarchists internationally and Zapatistas came to form a global solidarity movement which in its turn was a major inspiration for the global movement against neoliberalism. The next section expands two themes that became increasingly important for the global solidarity movement: Participatory democracy and indigenous identity.

## 5. Constructing the Zapatistas

Both anarchists and other activists in the global solidarity movement increasingly came to argue that the Zapatistas practiced a particular version of participatory democracy. This perceived Zapatista practice of participatory democracy seems to have been pivotal in dispelling initial scepticism among the members of “Love & Rage”.<sup>32</sup> In fact, describing some of the anarchist groups in the global movement against neoliberalism, Graeber argues that “the democratic practice... is their ideology”.<sup>33</sup> This focus on participatory democracy is shared with other activists and intellectuals supporting the Zapatistas, for instance Saramago, Klein, Márquez, Mosiváis and Vázquez Montalbán.<sup>34</sup> The argument is taken one step further by some writers: Democratic participation means something deeper and more meaningful in indigenous Zapatista communities than in Western society. According to many of these authors, the Zapatistas are democratic because they are indigenous. Some, for instance Debray, come close to constructing a vision of a “romantic Indian”; proud and free and bound in a special relationship to the environment.<sup>35</sup>

From an anarchist perspective, there is nothing new in seeing “tribal” peoples as models for anarchism. Kropotkin and Tolstoy, for instance, found inspiration in observations of tribal organizations and peasant villages.<sup>36</sup> The vast majority of the Zapatistas were indeed tojolobal, tzeltal, tzotzil or tzotzil. Nonetheless, we also need to acknowledge that activists and intellectuals *framed* the conflict in Chiapas, making some elements of the perceived reality more salient than others, as Entman puts it.<sup>37</sup> The connection between “participatory democracy” and “indigenous peoples” in Chiapas is problematic for at least two reasons. The first reason is that many indigenous communities in Chiapas are actually authoritarian. There is no direct link

<sup>30</sup> Marshall, *Demanding the Impossible: A History of Anarchism*, 586.

<sup>31</sup> Rafael Sebastián Guillen Vicente, "La Escuela, El Saber Y El Poder" (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1980).

<sup>32</sup> Andrew Flood, "What Is the Ezln?," in *WSM public meeting* (1994).

<sup>33</sup> Graeber, *Direct Action: An Ethnography*, 11.

<sup>34</sup> J. Saramago, "Moral Force Versus the State. Chiapas, Land of Hope and Sorrow," *Le Monde Diplomatique*, English version 1999; N. Klein, "'The Unknown Icon,'" *The Guardian* 2001; Carlos Monsiváis Aceves, "El Indígena Visible.(Movimiento Por Los Derechos Civiles De Pueblos Indígenas En Mexico)," *El Proceso* 2001; Manuel Vázquez Montalbán, *Marcos, El Señor De Los Espejos* (Madrid 1999).

<sup>35</sup> R. Debray, "Talking to the Zapatistas," *New Left Review*, no. 218, July/August (1996).

<sup>36</sup> Marshall, *Demanding the Impossible: A History of Anarchism*, 17.

<sup>37</sup> Robert M. Entman, *Projections of Power: Framing News, Public Opinion, and U.S. Foreign Policy*, Studies in Communication, Media, and Public Opinion (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).



between being indigenous and “participatory democracy”.<sup>38</sup> In fact, protecting “tradition” in order to preserve “indigenous culture” often used as an argument for violent repression in Chiapas. Many Zapatistas themselves were earlier victims of persecution and had sometimes been expelled from their communities precisely because of some perceived breach of indigenous “tradition”. The second reason is that the Zapatistas initially framed themselves not primarily as indigenous peoples, but as peasants and Mexicans. We therefore need to question further the perceived relationship between the Zapatistas, “indigenous peoples” and “democracy”.

## **6. A Few Notes on Freedom and Individualism in Anarchism Thought**

According to McGilwray, Chomsky’s list of human needs be reduced to two: “freedom” and “community”.<sup>39</sup> By “freedom”, Chomsky means “creative work, spontaneous initiative, play, creative language use, poetry,... generally what he calls ‘free and creative activity’”.<sup>40</sup> The concept of “freedom” is often used by anarchists interchangeably with “individual freedom”, in the sense of “celebration of individuality”. Many anarchists agree with Bertrand Russell: Good community springs from unfettered development of individuals. According to Marshall, anarchists encourage variety and experimentation in lifestyles and social forms.<sup>41</sup>

The vast majority of activists engaged in the global solidarity movement were in their 20’s or 30’s, came from North America or Europe, had a history of involvement in leftist politics, were university students or former students and in general valued freedom from authority highly. They were, in short, products of particular societies at a particular juncture of time characterized by increasing “individualism”. By “individualism”, I mean here the idea that individuals can construct their own identity. “Individualism” values diversity in the sense that these individually constructed identities should not necessarily conform to an existing norm. Development and change can thus be seen as norms in themselves. A number of anarchists were influenced by early existentialist philosophers like Kierkegaard and Stirner, taking “the single individual” as the point of departure for their argument. Others have promoted a position of “existentialism individualism” as an alternative to social anarchism.<sup>42</sup>

Individualist anarchism has been criticised by Bookchin. Individualist anarchists have exercised little influence on the working class, according to Bookchin.<sup>43</sup> They have generally “expressed their opposition in uniquely personal

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<sup>38</sup> J. Hernández Castillo R. A. and Mattiace S. L. Rus, *Mayan Lives, Mayan Utopias: The Indigenous Peoples of Chiapas and the Zapatista Rebellion* (Lanham 2003); G. Collier and L. de Leon Pasquel, "Identidades Emergentes En Chiapas, 1986-1993," in *Costumbres, Leyes Y Movimiento Indio En Oaxaca Y Chiapas* (Mexico: 2001); ———, "El Nuevo Movimiento Indígena," in *Costumbres, Leyes Y Movimiento Indio En Oaxaca Y Chiapas* (Mexico: 2001); G. A. and Collier J. F. Collier, "The Zapatista Rebellion in the Context of Globalization," *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 32, Number, no. 3-4 / July / October (2005).

<sup>39</sup> McGilwray, *Chomsky: Language, Mind, and Politics*, 226.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Marshall, *Demanding the Impossible: A History of Anarchism*, 651.

<sup>42</sup> L. Susan Brown, *The Politics of Individualism : Liberalism, Liberal Feminism and Anarchism* (Montréal ; New York: Black Rose Books, 1993).

<sup>43</sup> Murray Bookchin, *Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism: An Unbridgeable Chasm* (Oakland: AK Press, 1995).



forms... outrageous behaviour... in the cultural ghettos".<sup>44</sup> From a critical perspective, Chandler has argued that the activists in the global solidarity movement were primarily interested in using the Zapatista cause to construct themselves; to make us aware of "their awareness".<sup>45</sup> While I do not share Chandler's negative view of the activists, I agree that in the activist discourse the "freedom" was almost exclusively used in the sense of "individual freedom". This is, in my view, very different from the Zapatista understanding of the term.

According to Marshall, anarchists do not want to "submerge the individual in the community".<sup>46</sup> Social anarchists have tried to reconcile the freedom of the individual with freedom of the others, so as to achieve maximum degree of individuality of all. Marshall calls this the "apparent paradox of communal individuality".<sup>47</sup> Bookchin argues that humans are above all social beings. "Selfhood" is "not merely a personal dimension, but also a social one".<sup>48</sup> Individuals construct the community by imagining it. At the same time communities construct individual members of the community.

## 7. The Meaning of Autonomy

The Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) was founded as a traditional Latin American guerrilla organization, but was transformed to something different before 1994. The decision to go to war was apparently taken at a congress in a remote village in Las Cañadas. The decision was reportedly supported by representatives of the indigenous communities, but was taken against the will of a large majority of university educated cadres. Many Marxist intellectuals left the EZLN, which increasingly became dominated by the indigenous communities. This was a process very different from the ones described by proponents of guerrilla warfare in Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua, for instance Ortega, Cabezas, Cardenal, Macías, Payeras and Cruz.<sup>49</sup> There, this type of question was left for the comandantes to decide. The EZLN was the first example in modern Latin American guerrilla history where ordinary members of the movement or organization participated in decision-making processes.

The question of indigenous rights came to the forefront of the struggle in 1995 and 1996 as the Zapatistas and government representatives began negotiations on a peace agreement in San Andrés. The EZLN invited 358 local, national and

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Chandler, "Building Global Civil Society "From Below"?"

<sup>46</sup> Marshall, *Demanding the Impossible: A History of Anarchism*, 48.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 651.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 607.

<sup>49</sup> Mario Payeras, *Los Días De La Selva* (Mexico 1989); ———, *El Trueno En La Ciudad* (Mexico D.F. 1987); ———, *Los Fusiles De Octubre : Ensayos Y Artículos Militares Sobre La Revolución Guatemalteca, 1985-1988*, 1a ed. ed. (México: J. Pablos, 1991); ———, "Los Pueblos Indígenas Y La Revolución Guatemalteca : Ensayos Éticos 1982-1992," *Nueva Antropología* 5, no. 20 (1983); Humberto Ortega Saavedra, *Cincuenta Años De Lucha Sandinista*, 1. ed. ed. (México: Editorial Diógenes, 1979); Santiago Santa Cruz Mendoza, *Insurgentes : Guatemala, La Paz Arrancada*, 1a. ed. ed. (Santiago: LOM Eds., 2004); Julio César Macías, *La Guerrilla Fue Mi Camino: Epitafio Para César Montes* (Guatemala: Editorial Piedra Santa, 1997); Ernesto Cardenal, *La Batalla De Nicaragua*, Ed. mexicana. ed. (México: Bruguera Mexicana de Ediciones, 1980); Omar Cabezas, *Fire from the Mountain. The Making of a Sandinista* (New York: New American Library, 1986).



international advisors to the negotiations.<sup>50</sup> Many were renowned experts on indigenous rights. The Zapatistas and the government representatives did reach an agreement on indigenous cultural rights, but president Zedillo refused to present the agreement to Congress for ratification on the grounds that particular rights for indigenous peoples would be detrimental to the development of indigenous communities. What was needed, according to the president, was more education and integration, not particular rights and “isolation”. The EZLN refused to return to the negotiation table until the San Andres Agreement has been ratified. Therefore, the question of indigenous rights has come to dominate much of the debate on Chiapas and the Zapatistas in the years after 1996.

The agreement in San Andres was to a large degree based on international agreements already signed by Mexico, in particular Convention concerning Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in Independent Countries of The International Labour Organization (ILO 169). International conventions guarantee indigenous peoples equal right to education, language and cultural expressions. The convention also stipulates particular collective rights for indigenous peoples. Indigenous peoples have, for instance, certain collective rights to a “habitat”, often understood as the territories where they live. These rights are not universal. They are not the rights of citizens of a country; only by indigenous peoples.

Particular collective rights to indigenous peoples have been met with resistance. Jovanovic divides the liberal counter arguments into three categories.<sup>51</sup> The counter arguments are also enlightening for the Zapatista case and the debate in the global solidarity movement. The first category of arguments accepts individual rights, but not collective ones, although some individual rights, for instance the right to join a union and strike, can be *exercised* collectively. Many anarchists and other libertarian activists on *Chiapas – L* and *Chiapas 95* expressed views along the same lines. The second category accepts particular rights for some groups in order to overcome specific forms of discrimination. The goal of such particular rights is to make particular rights redundant as the root cause, the discrimination, disappears. Particular rights should therefore be conceived as limited in time. Many feminists in the global solidarity movement saw a parallel between women’s rights and indigenous rights and supported collective indigenous rights. The third category accepts the need for permanent particular rights.<sup>52</sup> According to proponents of this line of argument, some cultural rights, like the right to education, language and culture, can only be exercised in a meaningful manner if it is exercised by a community. Only a community can guarantee the long time survival of a language, for example. Therefore, some collective rights need to be permanent.

From an individualist anarchist perspective, this concept of permanent indigenous rights is difficult to reconcile with individual freedom. One way to try to reconcile freedom with particular rights would be to start with Marx. For Marx, capitalism was a totalizing system, shaping the consciousness of all those who lived

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<sup>50</sup> Andres Aubry, "La Autonomía En Los Acuerdos De San Andrés: Expresión Y Ejercicio De Un Nuevo Pacto Federal," in *Tierra, Libertad Y Autonomía: Impactos Regionales Del Zapatismo En Chiapas*, ed. S. L. Mattiace, R. A. Hernández Castillo, and J. Rus (Mexico City: CIESAS and IWGIA, 2002).

<sup>51</sup> Miodrag A. Jovanovic, "Recognizing Minority Identities through Collective Rights," *Human Rights Quarterly* 27, no. 2 May (2005).

<sup>52</sup> W. Kymlycka, *Liberalism, Community and Culture* (Oxford 1989).



under it, as Graeber puts it.<sup>53</sup> This is the line of argument presented by Berger in a much read article on the Zapatistas.<sup>54</sup> According to Berger, free trade and the free markets may have celebrated victories all over the world, but the world will become poorer if the supposedly rational competition to maximise profits wins everywhere. Neo-liberalism is totalizing because it threatens to make other and alternative ways of being human impossible. José Saramago, Carlos Monsiváis and John Holloway employ similar arguments to support the Zapatistas,<sup>55</sup> with the Zapatistas seen to be fighting for the right to be different from the rational profit-maximising ideal of neoliberalism.

Grounding the argument for permanent indigenous rights in an argument for diversity resonated well with greens in the global solidarity movement. In my view, the literature on ecology and anarchism can illuminate aspects of the debate on permanent collective indigenous rights from an anarchist perspective. According to Marshall, “modern ecology conforms many of the central themes of classic anarchism”.<sup>56</sup> Modern ecology offers a model of nature “which embraces unity in diversity, equality with difference”.<sup>57</sup> Bookchin, for instance, uses a description of the ecosystem as guidance for developing a philosophy of a society free of hierarchy and domination.<sup>58</sup> The Norwegian eco-philosophers, Arne Næss and Sigmund Kvaløy Setreng, also see variety as a critical issue for understanding nature; nature needs variety to flourish. Inspired by Nepali Buddhism, Næss and Kvaløy Setreng became leading proponents of what is now known as “deep ecology”.<sup>59</sup> It holds that from an ecological point of view all forms of life have a universal right to live. This right can not be quantified.<sup>60</sup> Arne Næss was inspired by a number of thinkers, among them Kropotkin and Tolstoy<sup>61</sup>, and “deep ecology” has in its turn inspired many green anarchists to go one step further. Some radical green anarchists argue that industrialization is destroying the planet and call for a system of autonomous and self sufficient villages where all members of the community work the land.

Bookchin has criticised “deep ecology” for being “anti-humanist”,<sup>62</sup> who holds that the root causes of environmental destruction lie in society.<sup>63</sup> Arne Næss responded that the deep ecology movement had already included many of the points

<sup>53</sup> Graeber, *Direct Action: An Ethnography*, 213.

<sup>54</sup> John Berger, "Against the Great Defeat of the World," *Race Class* 40, no. 2-3 (1999).

<sup>55</sup> Holloway, *Change the World without Taking Power*; ———, *Zapatista! Reinventing Revolution in Mexico*; Monsiváis Aceves, "El Indígena Visible.(Movimiento Por Los Derechos Civiles De Pueblos Indígenas En Mexico)."

<sup>56</sup> Marshall, *Demanding the Impossible: A History of Anarchism*, 556.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> Murray Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom : The Emergence and Dissolution of Hierarchy* (Oakland, CA :: AK Press, 2005).

<sup>59</sup> Arne Næss, Alan R. Drengson, and Bill Devall, *Ecology of Wisdom: Writings by Arne Naess* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2008); Peter Reed and David Rothenberg, *Wisdom in the Open Air : The Norwegian Roots of Deep Ecology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); Andrew Brennan, Nina Witoszek, and Arne Næss, *Philosophical Dialogues: Arne Næss and the Progress of Ecophilosophy* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999).

<sup>60</sup> Arne Næss, "The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement," *Inquiry* no. 16 (1973).

<sup>61</sup> Arne Næss and Henrik B. Tschudi, *Hvor Kommer Virkeligheten Fra?: Samtaler Med Arne Næss ("Where Does Reality Come From? Conversations with Arne Næss")* (Oslo: Kagge, 2005).

<sup>62</sup> Marshall, *Demanding the Impossible: A History of Anarchism*, 611.

<sup>63</sup> Murray Bookchin, "Social Ecology Versus Deep Ecology: A Challenge for the Ecology Movement," *Green Perspectives: Newsletter of the Green Program Project*, no. 4-5 Summer (1987).



made by Bookchin in its early program.<sup>64</sup> It would be wrong to say that “deep ecology” in its original form did not contemplate social justice as is clear from an interview Næss gave in his mid 80’s titled “Deep Socialism? An Interview with Arne Naess”.<sup>65</sup> Nonetheless, the debate illuminates discussion and conflict between activists in the global solidarity movement and some greens and conservationists in Chiapas. Ecology and the struggle to save the rainforest in Chiapas was in fact one of the issues behind the conflict.<sup>66</sup> Many of the most dedicated Zapatista communities had from the 70’s onwards lived with the threat of being disintegrated and further impoverished as a consequence of government “environmental” policies to *conserve* the rainforest. Activists in the global solidarity movement thus tended to be sceptical towards “deep ecology” type arguments, although cases in which the life of poor members of village communities is romanticized continue to abound. Conservationists in Chiapas, meanwhile, mostly avoided the Zapatistas and the global solidarity movement.

Regardless of the debate between Bookchin and green anarchists, arguments relating support for the Zapatistas and indigenous rights to ecology and human diversity continued to function as a bridge between indigenous communities and activists in the global solidarity movement. In my view, the global solidarity movement evolved and developed around visions of the Zapatista struggle related to human diversity grounded in social ecology and the concept of “participatory democracy”.

## **8. A Short Note on Community, Authority and Consensus**

Accepting particular permanent indigenous rights based on an argument of difference raised numerous questions for libertarians. Visiting camps for observers in Zapatista communities in Roberto Barrios, Oventic, Morelia and elsewhere, I witnessed again and again heated debates among the national and international observers on the justification of the Zapatista prohibition of alcohol. Zapatista women had demanded a ban on the consumption of alcohol to protect children and families. Everybody could see that alcoholism was a terrible problem in indigenous villages. But was a ban justified? From an individualist perspective it looked like a violation of the “individual’s right of private judgement”.<sup>67</sup> Most anarchists I interviewed were pragmatic enough to respect the Zapatista law on alcohol. Nonetheless, a few were expelled for breaching the ban on alcohol.

A more serious argument arose around diverging concepts of women’s liberation. The EZLN held that women in the indigenous communities were exploited

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<sup>64</sup> Arne Næss, “Note Concerning Murray Bookchin’s Article ‘Social Ecology Versus Deep Ecology: A Challenge for the Ecology Movement’,” *Green Perspectives: Newsletter of the Green Program Project* 1, no. 4 - 5 (1987).

<sup>65</sup> Andrew Light, “Deep Socialism? An Interview with Arne Naess,” *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 8, no. 1 (1997).

<sup>66</sup> Jan de Vos, *No Queremos Ser Cristianos: Historia De La Resistencia De Los Lacandones, 1530-1695, a Traves De Testimonios Españoles E Indígenas* (Mexico1990); ———, *Oro Verde: La Conquista De La Selva Lacandona Por Los Madereros Tabasqueños, 1822-1949* (Mexico1988); ———, *Una Tierra Para Sembrar Sueños. Historia Reciente De La Selva Lacandona, 1950 - 2000* (Mexico2002); ———, *Viajes Al Desierto De La Soledad: Un Retrato Hablado De La Selva Lacandona* (Mexico2003); ———, *Vivir En Frontera: La Experiencia De Los Indios De Chiapas* (*Historia De Los Pueblos Indígenas De México*) (Mexico1997).

<sup>67</sup> Marshall, *Demanding the Impossible: A History of Anarchism*, 651.



in numerous ways. According to the women's organization of the EZLN, it was necessary to change "tradition".<sup>68</sup> The women's law stipulated that women should be able to participate fully in all aspects of life in the Zapatista communities. Still, from the perspective of the indigenous communities, women and men were different, as illustrated in a famous mural of the community: "Flores Magón". Here, a vision of future life in the community is given. The men are standing in one circle, the women in another. While they all belong to the same community, they also belong to sub-community defined by gender. From an indigenous perspective, Western feminism often came across as individualistic. Accepting unlimited individualism would undermine the identity of the community as collectively different from the majority society. Feminist organisations in the global solidarity movement, meanwhile, often grew frustrated by the continued exploitation and oppression of women in indigenous communities, including Zapatista communities.<sup>69</sup>

## 9. Conclusions

It would be a mistake to equate Zapatista politics with indigenous rights. Later developments, for example the campaign "La Sexta", indicate a Zapatista desire to remind us that they are also a revolutionary movement. Nonetheless, the intention of this investigation has been to reflect on the development of diverging understandings of freedom and autonomy in the global solidarity movement. The understandings of autonomy and freedom which developed historically in indigenous communities in Chiapas were very different from the autonomy envisaged by anarchists in Europe and North America. Nonetheless, for a brief moment in these two distinct, diverse movements played pivotal roles in fomenting a global movement against neoliberalism. This investigation has pointed towards some of the reasons why anarchists and Zapatistas could work together in the first place. It has also tried to connect ideology and the specific historical context to better understand the development of ideology in the movement. It has also suggested a few of the many reasons why the movement suffered constant friction, conflict and splits.

Returning to the initial question on anarchism and International Relations, the results of the movement was much less dramatic than envisaged by Castells, Cleaver and others. Over the last 25 years, a number of indigenous peoples in Latin America have won wide reaching concessions, including local or regional autonomy. The Zapatistas, meanwhile, are still denied the rights promised to them in the San Andres Agreement. This should lead us to carefully reconsider the sometimes inflated importance ascribed to NGOs, global movements and other non-state actors in International Relations.

At the same time, the Zapatistas and the global solidarity movement have demonstrated that non-state actors can play important and even decisive roles under specific circumstances, like those in Mexico in 1994. In this case, anarchist literature is necessary to understand the development of ideology in the global movement. The

<sup>68</sup> La organización de mujeres zapatistas "Compañera Lucha", "¡Viva Nuestra Historia! Libro De Historia De La Organización De Mujeres Zapatistas "Compañera Lucha", ed. EZLN (Unknown: EZLN, Unknown).

<sup>69</sup> G. van der Haar, *Gaining Ground. Land Reform and the Constitution of Community in the Tojolobal Highlands of Chiapas* (Amsterdam 2001); Gemma van der Haar, "The Zapatista Struggle and the Struggle for Indigenous Autonomy," *Revista Europea de Estudios Latinoamericanos y del Caribe* 76 no. abril (2004).





understanding of key issues like freedom and autonomy enriched by input from anarchist classics, as are debates on individualism, collectivism, community and authority. The communication and interaction between anarchists in the global solidarity movement and Zapatistas can also contribute to a better understanding of how and why Zapatistas developed and changed over time.

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