

COMMON SENSE

Journal of Edinburgh Conference of Socialist Economists



- *CHIAPAS UPRISING IN MEXICO*
- *THE TIME OF TRIAL BY SPACE*
- *OPEN MARXISM*
- *ON THOMAS PAINE*
- *REVIEWS: ORIGINS OF CRISIS IN USSR
& RECOMPOSITION OF THE BRITISH STATE*

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COMMON SENSE • EDINBURGH

*Published in Scotland by Common Sense, PO Box 311,
Southern District Office, Edinburgh, EH9 1SF, Scotland.*

Printed by Clydeside Press, Glasgow.

Typeset in 9pt Times Roman.

Produced and Designed on Apple MacIntosh computers.

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Editorial Committee for this issue:

Werner Bonefeld, Bob Goupillot, Richard Gunn, Derek Kerr, Brian McGrail.

Notes for Contributors: if at all possible send articles (of no greater than 6000 words) on 3.5 inch IBM or Apple MacIntosh computer disc, otherwise send articles in clean typescript, please note that it would help the editorial committee greatly if more than one copy can be sent.

Subscriptions: please see backpages.

World-wide Distribution: *AK Distribution, 22 Lutton Place, Edinburgh
EH8 9PE.*

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Edinburgh Conference of Socialist Economists,

Common Sense

1. Social Theory

2. Philosophy - Education - Scotland

I. Title

ISSN: 0957 - 240X

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SCIENCE *as* CULTURE

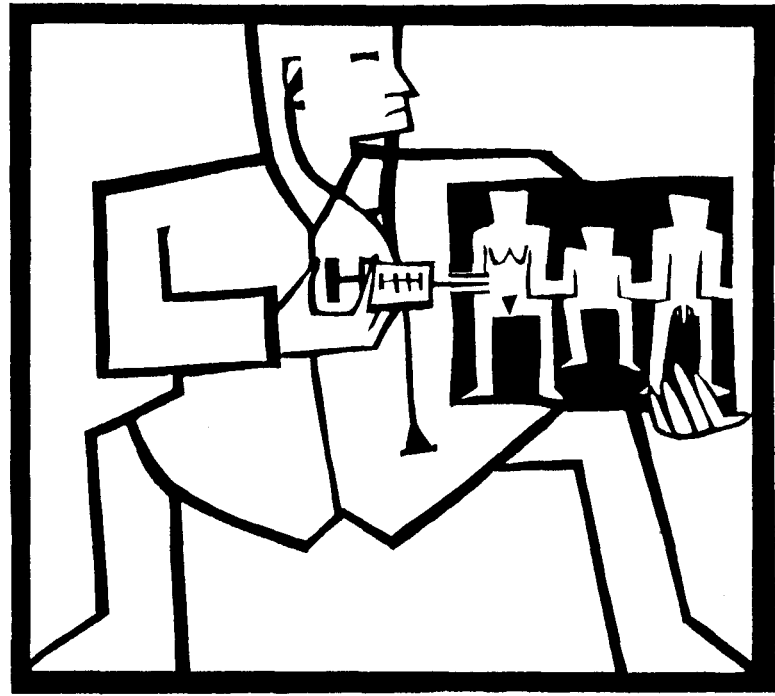
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Subs: £25/\$30 individual, £50/\$65 institutional, from Bailey Management Services, 127 Sandgate Road, Folkestone, Kent CT20 2BL, tel: 0303 850501; North America: Guilford Pubs, 72 Spring St, NY, NY 10012, tel. 212-431 9800. Editorial: Free Association Books Ltd, 26 Freegrove Road, London N7 9RQ.



The Chiapas Uprising and the Future of Class Struggle in the New World Order

Harry Cleaver

If you have come here to help me,
You are wasting your time . . .
But if you have come because
Your liberation is bound up with mine,
Then let us work together.

Aboriginal Woman

Is the armed uprising of the Zapatista National Liberation Army in the Mexican state of Chiapas just another protest by the wretched of the earth in a 500 year history of resistance? Is it just another foredoomed repetition of earlier, failed Leninist attempts to organize the peasantry to join the party and smash the state. Or, are there things about the uprising which are going to have profound effects and can teach us something about how to struggle in the present period? The answer, I think, is that the actions of Mayan Indians in Chiapas and the way they have circulated in Mexico, to North America and around the world do indeed have some vital lessons for all of us.

The Electronic Fabric of Struggle

The most striking thing about the sequence of events set in motion on January 1, 1994 has been the speed with which news of the struggle circulated and the rapidity of the mobilization of support which resulted. In the first instance, from the very first day the EZLN has been able to effectively publicize its actions through the faxing of its declarations, and subsequent communiques, directly to a wide variety of news media. In the second instance, the circulation of its actions and demands through the mass media -- effective because they were totally unexpected and on enough of a scale to constitute

"news"-- has been complemented and reinforced by a spontaneous and equally rapid diffusion of its demands and reports on its actions through computer communication networks which connect vast numbers of people interested in events there both inside and outside of Mexico.

This diffusion, which flashed into conferences and lists on networks such as Peacenet, the Internet and Usenet, was then collected, sorted, compiled and sometimes synthesized and rediffused by particularly interested parties in the nets. For example, the Latin American Data Base at New Mexico State University began to issue a regular compendium of Chiapas News. The Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy began to issue Chiapas Digest. The Mexican Rural Development discussion group of the Applied Anthropology Computer Network began to compile news and analysis and make it available through an easily accessible gopher site: Chiapas-Zapatista News. The Institute of Latin American Studies at the University of Texas has duplicated those files at its own Lanic gopher site. Information about the existence and paths of access to these sources were passed from those in the know (Mexican specialists) to those who wanted to know (anyone interested in the uprising).

As EZLN documents and news reports circulated they generated and were quickly accompanied by discussion, additional information from those with an intimate knowledge of Chiapas (e.g., academics who had done research in the area, human rights advocates concerned with its long history of abuse) and rapidly multiplying analyses of the developing situation and its background. All of this electronically circulated information and analysis fed into more traditional means of circulating news of working class struggle: militant newspapers, magazines and radio stations.

The Anti-NAFTA Background

The rapidity of this diffusion has been due, to a considerable degree, not only to the technical capacity of such networks but to their political responsiveness and militancy. Basic to this rapid circulation of news and analysis of the uprising in Chiapas, has been the experience of the struggle against the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

Over the last few years the fight against NAFTA took the form of growing coalitions of grassroot groups in Canada, the United States and Mexico. In each country a broad coalition, such as the Mexican Action Network on Free Trade, was constituted by knitting together several hundred groups opposed to the new trade pact. That knitting together was accomplished partly through joint discussions and actions and partly through the sharing of information and analysis about the meaning and implications of the agreement. Increasingly, computer communications became a basic political tool for the extremely rapid sharing among groups and individuals. The same processes of communication linked the coalitions in each country in a manner never before seen in the Western Hemisphere. The Anti-NAFTA campaign as a whole has sometimes been called an "unholy alliance" because alongside the grassroots networks which make up the bulk of the movement a variety of conservatives added their voices to the condemnation of NAFTA, including the leadership of the AFL-CIO and politicians like Pat Buchanan and Ross Perot. Such political manoeuvres to co-opt or recoup an autonomous movement are typical of American politics (whether in the U.S., Canada or Mexico) but these efforts have failed and the character and organization of the movement as a whole survives. Although the anti-NAFTA movement was unable to block ratification of the agreement, efforts to

monitor the impact of NAFTA in order to facilitate struggle against it are ongoing and the goal is clearly its cancellation.

A New Organizational Form

Beyond the particular issue of the agreement, the process of alliance building has created a new organizational form --a multiplicity of rhizomatically connected autonomous groups-- that is connecting all kinds of struggles throughout North America that have previously been disconnected and separate.

The responsiveness of this organizational form to the EZLN declaration of war derives from its composition. From the beginning, the building of alliances to oppose NAFTA involved not only the obviously concerned (U.S. workers threatened with losing their jobs as plants were relocated to Mexico, Mexicans concerned with the invasion of U.S. capital) but a wide variety of others who could see the indirect threats in this capitalist reorganization of trade relations, e.g., ecological activists, women's groups, human rights organizations and yes, organizations of indigenous groups throughout the continent. Through the years of struggle against NAFTA position papers circulated, studies were undertaken, discussion raged about the interconnections of the concerns of all these groups. The anti-NAFTA struggle proved to be both a catalyst and a vehicle for overcoming the separateness and isolation which had previously weakened all of its component groups.

So, when the Zapatista National Liberation Army marched into San Cristbal and the other towns of Chiapas not only did those already concerned with the struggles of indigenous peoples react quickly, but so did the much more extensive organizational connections of the anti-NAFTA struggles. Already in place, and tapped daily by a broad assortment of groups were the computer conferences and lists of the anti-NAFTA alliances. Therefore, for a great many of those who would subsequently mobilize in support of the EZLN the first information on their struggles came in the regular postings of the NAFTA Monitor on "trade.news" or "trade.strategy" either on Peacenet or through the Internet. Even if EZLN spokespeople had not explicitly damned NAFTA and timed their offensive to coincide with the first day of its operation in Mexico, the connections would have been made and understood throughout the anti-NAFTA network.

From Communicative to Physical Action

This same pre-existing fabric of connections helps explain why the incredibly rapid circulation of news and information was followed not only by analysis and written declarations of support, but by a wide variety of physical actions as well. What was surprising from the early days of January right through on into February, was not the widespread and heartfelt demonstrations of support by tiny groups of leftists with traditions of international solidarity work, but the much more important rapid mobilization of other groups who not only took to the the streets, e.g., the huge demonstrations in Mexico and smaller ones scattered through the U.S. and Canada (usually at Mexican embassies or consulates), but who immediately dispatched representatives to Chiapas to limit government repression by subjecting its actions to critical scrutiny, documenting its crimes and publically denouncing them. There can be no doubt that their actions -- and the subsequent rapid circulation of their findings and declarations-- contributed to blunting the states' military counter-offensive, helping (along with all the

other forms of protest in Mexico and without) force it to de-emphasize military repression, accept mediation and undertake negotiations with an armed enemy it quite clearly would have preferred to squash (if it could, which is by no means obvious).

Autonomous Indigenous Movement

Particularly important in these actions were not only groups concerned with human rights, both religious (e.g. the Catholic Bishops of Chiapas, the Canadian Inter-Church Committee on Human Rights in Latin America) and secular (Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the Mexican National Network of Civil Human Rights Organizations) --who have been increasing their capacity for such intervention in recent years-- but also the movement of indigenous peoples which has been organizing itself locally and on an increasingly international scale for some time now.

Within Mexico, over the last several years, Indian and peasant groups and communities have been developing networks of cooperation to fight for the things they need: things like schools, clean water, the return of their lands, freedom from state repression (police and army torture, jailings and murders), and so on. Given the fierce autonomy of the participating communities sometimes based on traditional ethnic culture and language-- these networks have been shaped like the electronic web described above: in a horizontal, non-hierarchical manner. Indeed, one term often used by the participants in preference to "networks" --whose term "net" evokes being caught-- is "hammock", the name of a widely used, suspended sleeping device made from loosely woven string that reforms itself according to the needs (i.e., body shapes) of each user. These networks that have been developed to interlink peasant and indigenous communities not only connect villages in the countryside but also reach into the cities where neighborhoods created by rural-urban migrants retain connections to their rural points of origin.

Many indigenous groups with clearly defined Indian culture and languages have not only organized themselves as such in self-defense but have reached out to each other across space to form regional and international alliances. This process has been going on in an accelerating fashion for several years, not only in Mexico but throughout much of Americas and beyond. Spurred into new efforts by the example of the Black Civil Rights Movement in North America as early as the mid 1960s (e.g., the rise of the American Indian Movement) and forced into action by state backed assaults on their land in South and Central America (e.g., the enclosure of the Amazon), indigenous peoples have been overcoming the spacial and political divisions which have isolated and weakened them through alliance and mutual aid.

In 1990 a First Continental Encounter of Indigenous Peoples was organized in Quito, Ecuador. Delegates from over 200 indigenous nations attended from throughout the hemisphere and launched a collaborative movement to achieve continental unity. To sustain the process a Continental Coordinating Commission of Indigenous Nations and Organizations (CONIC) was formed at a subsequent meeting in Panama in 1991.

