

COMMON SENSE

Journal of Edinburgh Conference of Socialist Economists



- *THE ZAPATISTA UPRISING*
- *WOMEN AND THE ZAPATISTAS*
- *THE PROPERTY FORM OF CIVILISATION*
- *THE POLITICS OF DEBT & CITIZENSHIP*
- *REVIEWS: 'THE SPECTERS OF MARX'*
& 'THE CRITIQUE OF STATE FORM'

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Contents

Page 1 . . .	<i>THE ZAPATISTA UPRISING</i> A LETTER FROM THE ZAPATISTAS <i>by the E. Z. L. N.</i>
Page 4 . . .	<i>THE ZAPATISTAS</i> <i>by John Holloway</i>
Page 11 . . .	<i>DEVELOPMENT & REPRODUCTION</i> <i>by Mariarosa Dalla Costa</i>
Page 34 . . .	<i>MAYAS & ZAPATISTAS</i> <i>by Javier Villanueva</i>
Page 39 . . .	<i>WHAT DO WE OWE TO THE SCOTS?</i> Reflections on Caffentzis, the Property Form and Civilization <i>by Richard Gunn</i>
Page 69 . . .	<i>THE POLITICS OF DEBT: SOCIAL</i> <i>DISCIPLINE AND CONTROL</i> <i>by Werner Bonefeld</i>
Page 92 . . .	<i>BOOK REVIEWS</i> <i>by Adrian Wilding and Peter Fraser</i>
Page 98 . . .	<i>SUBSCRIPTION AND BACK-ISSUES</i>

Science as Culture

SaC 21 (1995) includes:

Demolition derby as destruction ritual (Stephen C. Zehr)

Electronic curb cuts and disability (David Hakken)

Te(k)nowledge & the student/subject (James McDonald)

The zoo: theatre of the animals (Scott L. Montgomery)

SaC 22 (1995): 'Science on Display' includes:

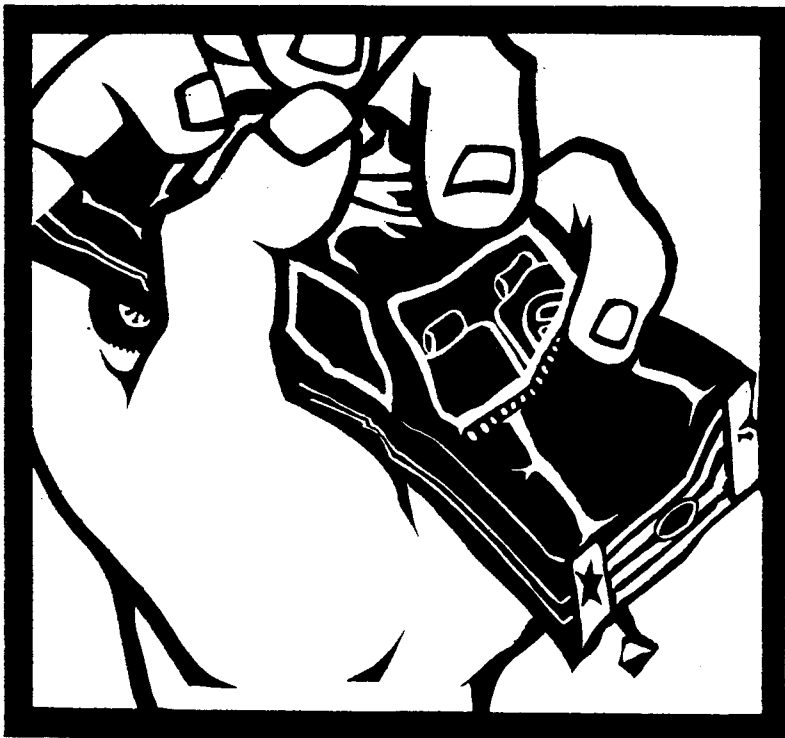
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Supermarket science? (Sharon Macdonald)

Realism in representing race (Tracy Teslow)

Nations on display at Expo '92 (Penelope Harvey)

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A Letter from the Zapatistas

TRANSITIONAL GOVERNMENT IN REBELLION STATE OF CHIAPAS
COUNCIL OF THE GOVERNMENT,
San Cristobal de las Casas, 10th February, 1995

To the American People, Brothers and Sisters:

The arrogant power that reigns in Mexico, from the Government Palace, has called war amongst ourselves, the people of Mexico. Federal troops have entered zapatista territory. Persons from this country have already fallen. The war has begun once more.

Men of money and power are no longer tolerant of the YA BASTA of the Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional (the Zapatista National Liberation Army), of the indigenous and campesinos (peasants), of those without voice and without faces.

They are trampling all civil and peaceful action of the people of Chiapas and Mexico to construct a Peace with Justice and Dignity.

The mass media throw lies at the Mexican population. They try to muddy all that is good and all that is beautiful. Dozens of military vehicles are in the jungle and other points of Chiapas now, armoured helicopters, troops; fearful informers signal out persons in the civil population for public denouncement; police have arrested and detained many in different parts of the nation.

The ones responsible for the bankruptcy of the nation, those who support the guardias blancas (white guards – the private armies of the landowners and ranchers), those who have money to pay for hired guns, those who support the one-party government of the PRI, calculate they can liquidate 500 years of indigenous and

popular resistance.

Is it too much to ask for Justice, Democracy and Liberty? Do we commit a crime for fighting for a roof, land, health, education, employment, culture, the right to information, independence and peace?

Today lead falls in our hearts. From this sorrow that overflows every hour, we receive your news and we do not feel alone. We know we have with us the best men and women of the American people, who will know how to be with us and will know how to be brave to impede fratricide in our nation. There is urgent need for international observers that testify to the events we denounce. That you promote more united and massive mobilizations to stop this horror of war.

May we awaken the people of the world to Life, for Peace with Justice and Dignity.

Amado Avendano Figueroa Governor for the Council of Government
Aide Rojas Gabriel Ramirez

Map: The Zapatista Uprising & the Chiapas Region of Mexico



The Zapatistas

John Holloway

I. Introduction

I'm here not as an expert, but just because it seems very important that someone should speak about the Zapatista rebellion. I offered to do it because I just happen to live for most of the year in what claims to be the biggest city in the world (Mexico City), and for me, as for most of the Mexican Left, the doings and sayings of the zapatistas are a daily obsession. I think it is important to talk about the zapatistas not because they are a peasant uprising in the south east of Mexico (as they are often described in the newspapers here), but because what they are saying and doing raises crucial questions about what revolutionary activity means today and because they are, in important ways, at the very core of world capitalist development.

I want to give first a brief account of the main developments of the zapatista uprising before going on to talk about why I think it is so important.

II.

The Zapatista Army of National Liberation first burst upon the world on 1st of January last year, the day on which the North American Free Trade Agreement between Mexico, the United States and Canada came into force. "Burst upon the world" is not an exaggeration because, although they had been preparing for over ten years, nobody knew of their existence until they seized control of the city of San Cristobal de las Casas and three other towns in the state of Chiapas in the south east of Mexico.

The occupation of the towns was almost completely free of violence. The move took the authorities so completely by surprise that there was no armed resistance. The insurgents made public the Declaration of the Lacandona Jungle in which they formally declared war on the federal government and explained their struggle as being for work, land, housing, food, health, education, independence,

freedom, democracy, justice and peace. Their principal slogan was the simple ¡Ya Basta! (Enough!).

In the days that followed, however, the army attacked as the zapatistas withdrew from the towns which they had occupied, and there was heavy fighting for the next twelve days, in which about fifty zapatistas were killed. On the 12th January there was a massive demonstration in Mexico City and the government declared a unilateral ceasefire, appointed a commissioner for peace to dialogue with the zapatistas and recognised in practice the autonomy of the Lacandona Jungle occupied by the zapatistas. The zapatistas accepted the cease-fire, and in the year since then there has not been any open armed conflict.

As part of their new policy the government offered a pardon to the insurgents, to which the zapatistas replied with a letter sent by Subcomandante Marcos to the national press (or rather, to selected newspapers):

"What are we supposed to ask pardon for? What are they going to pardon us for? For not dying of hunger? For not being silent in our misery? For not having accepted humbly the gigantic historical burden of contempt and neglect? For having risen up in arms when we found all other roads blocked? For not adhering to the Penal Code of Chiapas, the most absurd and repressive that has been recorded? For having shown the rest of the country and the whole world that human dignity still lives and is to be found in its most impoverished inhabitants? For having prepared well and consciously before beginning? For having carried rifles into battle instead of bows and arrows?...

Who should ask for pardon and who should grant it? Those who, for years and years, sat at a laden table and ate their fill while death sat with us, death, so everyday, so ours that we stopped being afraid of it? Those who filled our pockets and our souls with declarations and promises? Or the dead, our dead, so mortally dead of 'natural' death, of measles, whooping cough, cholera, typhoid, tetanus, pneumonia, paludism and other gastrointestinal and pulmonary delights? Our dead, so equally dead, so democratically dead of pain because nobody was doing anything, because all the dead, our dead, just went off like that, without anybody keeping the count, without anyone saying at last the 'Enough!' that would restore meaning to those deaths, without anyone asking those dead of always, our dead, to come back and die again, but now in order to live?... Who should ask for pardon and who should grant it?"

The dialogue between the zapatistas and the Commissioner for Peace appointed by the President took place in the Cathedral of San Cristobal from the

16th of February to the beginning of March. The government made certain proposals for meeting the zapatistas' demands, and the zapatistas said that they would need to consult their supporters in all the communities of their territories; since the decision to go to war had been taken communally - by all the members of the community, including the children - the decision to make peace could only taken by the same process.

It took more than three months for the zapatistas to complete their consultation, until all the communities had discussed the matter thoroughly and resolved their doubts. It was widely expected that they would accept the government's terms, but in fact they announced in June that they were rejecting them, principally because the government's response to their demands was an attempt to buy them off with concessions to improve conditions just in Chiapas, whereas they had made clear from the beginning that their demands related to conditions in the whole country, and were demands not just for better material conditions but for freedom, democracy and justice. Nevertheless, they said that they would not take up arms immediately. In view of the impending presidential election (to be held on 21st August), they would leave space for civil (as opposed to military) action. They convened a meeting of the left, to be held in Chiapas at the beginning of August, to be known as the National Democratic Convention. In order to prepare for the Convention, they built within their own territory an amphitheatre on the side of a hill to hold six thousand participants, together with all the necessary infrastructure of toilets, cooking facilities etc, in a place which they called Aguascalientes. Six thousand delegates went to Chiapas to the Convention, sent by virtually all the organisations of the Mexican left: the first two days were held in San Cristóbal, followed by a journey to the Lacandona Jungle and a final plenary session addressed by Marcos on behalf of the zapatistas. The Convention decided that it should form itself into a permanent organisation with a presidium, and that a second convention should be held some months later.

The Convention was followed some two weeks later by the election. Many on the left (and not just on the left) believed that the 65-year hold on power of the ruling party (the PRI) could be broken, but they had underestimated the strength of the web of corruption and of material and tradition ties that maintained the PRI in power. With the help of fraud, but above all because of the way in which they are ingrained in the power structures of Mexican society, the PRI won, with about 50% of the vote, and the left party (the Revolutionary Democratic Party) came third. The election result was a major blow to the morale of many on the Left, and seemed to close the possibilities of a non-violent advance. During the months that followed there was a gradual build-up of tension in Chiapas and elsewhere. The principal focus of tension became the election, on the same day as the Presidential election, of the Governor of Chiapas: here too the PRI won, but in elections that were much more obviously fraudulent than the Presidential election. Throughout September, October and November there was a considerable intensification both of struggles of

all kinds in Chiapas (and in the neighbouring state of Tabasco) and of military activity, as the government, while saying that it wanted peace, sent more and more troops into the area and increased the number of airforce flights over the Lacandona Jungle. At the end of November, the zapatistas announced that, in view of the intensification of military activity, they would no longer observe the ceasefire and that they were again preparing for armed conflict. At the beginning of December they called a press conference at which they took their leave of the journalists. In those days it looked very much as the outbreak of civil war was imminent, at least in Chiapas, but possibly extending to the whole of Mexico. The zapatistas then called another press conference in their territory for the early hours of the 19th December. Beginning at two o'clock in the morning, they made a series of announcements as reports came in of their military action. They had broken through the army cordon, surrounded the army, seized a number of town halls and blocked roads in a large part of the state of Chiapas. All without firing a shot, and without any direct confrontation with the army! Having broken through the cordon and shown what they could do, they disappeared again. The army was unable to track them down.

The devaluation of the peso and the financial crisis that continues to rock the world's markets followed immediately. In this context, the government reiterated that it wanted peace and sent the Home Secretary to the Lacandona Jungle to talk directly to Marcos. It also proposed a political pact to the opposition parties, which included the offer of a referendum to get rid of the governors in Chiapas and Tabasco and to call new elections. At this the PRI's own supporters in these two states rose up in protest and nothing happened. At the beginning of this week the opposition announced the stepping up of civil insurgency in the two states.

III.

That is a very skeletal outline of the development of the uprising over the last year. I hope it gives a general idea of what is happening, but it certainly does not convey the power, the drama and the reality of poverty, desperation, work and dreams that lie behind the uprising.

The uprising is often described as a peasant or an Indian uprising. That is true in the sense that virtually all the members of the zapatista army are peasants and Indians: they come from five different ethnic groups, speaking five different languages. There are about eighty thousand people living in the area controlled by the zapatistas, of whom probably about fifteen thousand are actually members of the army, with a core of about three thousand fully armed with modern weapons.

It is not simply an uprising of the people of the area, however. The other element is the presence of a small group of revolutionaries who went to the jungle, probably in 1983, with the simple idea, as they put it, of changing the world. These

