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## Review/Reseña

Thomas Olesen, *International Zapatismo: The Construction of Solidarity in the Age of Globalization*. London & New York: Zed Books, 2005.

### **A World in Which Many Rebellions Fit**

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Much ink has been spilled over the Zapatista rebellion since the ski-masked indigenous rebels dramatically took over towns in Chiapas on New Year's Day, 1994. The international attention to what might have otherwise seemed an obscure and localized movement highlighted some of its distinctive characteristics, and the international networks spawned by the rebellion became one of its trademarks. There are, in effect, at least three Zapatismos: One is the

armed insurgency, which retained its clandestine military structures and ski masks (although fighting ended after only twelve days, when civil society mobilized to demand a negotiated ceasefire and the struggle largely shifted to the political plane). A second is the project of autonomous government being constructed in Zapatista “support base communities,” in the indigenous villages dotting the central highlands, northern zone, and eastern jungle regions of Chiapas stretching to the Guatemalan border. The third is the (national and) international network of solidarity inspired by Zapatista ideology and discourse. It is this “international Zapatismo” that is the subject of Thomas Olesen’s very interesting work, the most comprehensive study to date of that dimension of the movement.<sup>1</sup>

The author’s survey of the solidarity networks encompasses a variety of local NGOs (many based in San Cristóbal de Las Casas); international groups doing direct solidarity involving development aid, information, human rights observation, and fair trade; groups “practicing Zapatismo at home” with linked protests against neoliberalism on other fronts; and groups engaged in institutional politics to pressure governments (U.S., European, Mexican) and international organizations. Those doing direct solidarity work in Zapatista communities sometimes cringe at visits by the far-flung collection of spontaneous “international Zapatistas,” like the boisterous bands of Italians wearing “We Are The Indians of the World” t-shirts who managed to get themselves deported in droves. This heterogeneous assortment is loosely linked through a network infrastructure that includes listservs and face-to-face international “encounters,” some of them convened in the Lacandón Jungle of

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1. For other analyses of these networks, see Xóchitl Leyva, “De las Cañadas a Europa: Niveles, actores y discursos del Nuevo Movimiento Zapatista (NMZ), 1994-1997,” *Desacatos: Revista de Antropología Social*, 1 (Spring 1999): 56-87; Kara Ann Zugman, “Zapatismo and Urban Political Practice,” *Latin American Perspectives*, 32(4), July 2005: 133-147; and Alicia Swords, “Neo-Zapatista Network Politics: Transforming Democracy and Development,” *Latin American Perspectives*, Mar. 2007 (forthcoming).

Chiapas. Activists have been inspired by the creativity of the Zapatistas to stage their own “electronic civil disobedience” actions, and to organize Zapatista-style *encuentros* aimed at “creating space for critical discussions rather than directing them” (p. 89), a new approach for some organizers.<sup>2</sup>

One useful contribution of this book is its very clear survey of the main strands of social movement theory in general, and its specific focus on transnational social movements in the era of globalization. After a balanced outline of “political opportunity structure” and other contemporary theories, the author comes down on the side of social constructionist theory, highlighting the ideological constructs that generated a subjective appeal beyond borders, i.e. “transnational framing.” This work discusses in considerable detail the international resonance of Zapatista discourse, which has taken on a life of its own beyond the reality that gave rise to the original 1994 rebellion in the mountains of southeast Mexico.

To some extent, the divide between analyzing objective structural conditions and the subjective motivations and perceptions of social agents is an artificial dichotomy. Olesen notes appropriately that the Zapatista “issue framing” has resonated in a specific, concrete regional-international context of growing dissatisfaction with: 1) neoliberalism, or global capitalist restructuring since the 1980s; and 2) liberal democracy that offers procedural illusions without delivering substantive justice.<sup>3</sup> The movement has also

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2. For interesting interviews and commentary about how Chicanos/as in California and other activists around the world are being inspired by the Zapatista movement to develop their own forms of community-based self-determination, see the online *In Motion Magazine*, <http://www.inmotionmagazine.com/chiapas.html>

3. Other examples of the growing wave of social movement protest responding to these conditions in Latin America can be found in Richard Stahler-Sholk, Harry E. Vanden and Glen Kuecker, eds., “Globalizing Resistance: The New Politics of Social Movements in Latin America,” special issue, *Latin American Perspectives* (Mar. 2007), forthcoming; Teo Ballvé and Vijay Prashad, eds., *Dispatches from Latin America: Experiments Against Neoliberalism* (Boston:

coincided with an era when the focus of social change activism has shifted from revolutionary seizure of state power to bottom-up organizing within civil society, to models that are more inclusionary and participatory and emphasize community-building. This analysis of Zapatista discourse locates broad themes within a meta-discourse (e.g. democracy in its radical participatory variant). Given the centrality of discourse to the analysis of “issue framing,” there is surprisingly sparse reference to existing analysis of discursive Zapatismo.<sup>4</sup> The focus of this book is on the networking rather than the content of the discourse, so the reader is left to puzzle out the relation between the actual practices of on-the-ground Zapatismo in Chiapas and the issue framing (and reframing by international support networks).

In examining a wider Zapatismo beyond original Zapatistas, Olesen argues (136) that the EZLN emerged as an accidental “node of special influence” in the movement partly because the 1994 rebellion dovetailed with the start of a new cycle of global protest, also famously represented by the 1999 Seattle anti-WTO protest. So the study of “international Zapatismo” tells us at least as much about globalization as it does about Zapatismo. Capital is organizing on a global scale, but since there isn’t a global state, there can’t exactly be a global civil society. Given this organizing challenge, Olesen suggests that the gap may be bridged by transnational framing,

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South End Press, 2006); and Eric Hershberg and Fred Rosen, eds., *Latin America After Neoliberalism: Turning the Tide in the 21st Century?* (N.Y.: The New Press, 2006).

4. Other interesting analysis of the social and political symbolism of discursive Zapatismo can be found in José Rabasa, “Of Zapatismo: Reflections on the Folkloric and the Impossible in a Subaltern Insurrection,” 399-431 in Lisa Lowe and David Lloyd, eds., *The Politics of Culture in the Shadow of Capital* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997); José Johnston, “Pedagogical Guerrillas, Armed Democrats, and Revolutionary Counterpublics: Examining Paradox in the Zapatista Uprising in Chiapas, Mexico,” *Theory and Society*, 29(4), 2000: 463-505; María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo, *The Revolutionary Imagination in the Americas and the Age of Development* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); and Nicholas P. Higgins, *Understanding the Chiapas Rebellion: Modernist Visions and the Invisible Indian* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004).

facilitated by new kinds of social movement networking (including the internet). Parallels to this argument can be found in the concept of “cognitive communities” in liberal/idealist theories of international relations,<sup>5</sup> as well as the Gramscian concept of hegemony, and Laclau and Mouffe’s post-structuralist analysis. Olesen locates himself in the Gramscian part of this spectrum (p. 162), but this book never really develops an analysis of the relevant national and transnational class structures to fully differentiate a Gramscian argument from other strands of social constructionist theory. The theoretical survey offered here leans more toward inclusivity than debate.

The focus on transnational framing sheds light on some interesting aspects of international Zapatismo. For example, Olesen usefully debunks the romantic myth of Subcomandante Marcos tapping on a laptop deep in the jungle; this book explains the more prosaic reality of University of Pennsylvania student Justin Paulson and the Mexican newspaper *La Jornada* uploading and disseminating rebel communiqués. There is a somewhat delicate reference to divisions between anarchist-leaning and “traditional organizational and party-oriented” tendencies in the global justice and solidarity network (145). The reader also learns of splits in European support groups between the do-good bureaucratic aid organizations that are happy to work with the European Union and United Nations agencies, and the “mutual solidarity” approach that sees Zapatismo as a radically democratic challenge to the way all of us organize, North and South (123-4). A clearer analytical distinction between non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and grassroots organizations (GROs)/solidarity collectives would be useful here. Perhaps this ambiguity simply reflects the Zapatistas’ own tendency

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5. In their influential work *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink examine the way these cognitive communities operate

to refer to a wide range of interlocutors with the sweeping phrase, “national and international civil society.”

Students of the Zapatistas and solidarity activists will appreciate the comprehensive review of the diverse groups making up the Zapatista network, perhaps the most complete compilation available. One aspect of this movement that is striking for U.S. observers, but is not explored in this Danish political scientist’s book, is why there is such thin U.S. involvement compared to the overwhelmingly greater interest and presence of European solidarity, as Olesen accurately documents. The notable representation of Basques, Catalans, and Italians may reflect the historically strong currents of regional/ethnic autonomy and anarchism in those regions, leading some activists to read their own causes and ideologies into the Zapatista rebellion (an imperfect fit, as Marcos discovered to his chagrin when he tried to inject himself into Basque political debates). Longtime European backpacker fascination with the “Ruta Maya” may also account for greater awareness of the region—albeit tinged with the distorting effects of exoticization—compared to U.S. tourists less inclined to venture beyond the luxury hotels of Cancún. The U.S. public may also be more distracted by the hegemonic ideology that portrays Mexico as a pro-U.S.-free-trade-democracy (package deal); and perhaps also more uneasy about examining dark secrets of historical subjugation of indigenous peoples, and U.S. corporate and state ties to exploitation and repression in Mexico.

Olesen also skips over a significant misstep by the incipient U.S. solidarity network in the early years after the 1994 uprising. The National Commission for Democracy in Mexico (NCDM), mentioned only in passing here (72), failed in its attempt to coordinate a network of U.S.-based solidarity groups. Many criticized the NCDM

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through organized transnational networks.

for narrow Chicano nationalism and verticalism that seemed antithetical to the participatory/horizontal thrust of Zapatista ideology; and when NCDM leader Cecilia Rodríguez touted herself as the Zapatistas' exclusive representative in the United States, the EZLN issued no clarification. The point here is not simply to air dirty linen, but rather to examine social movement strategy self-critically to learn lessons for more effective organizing, a type of analysis that has been done very usefully for other social movements<sup>6</sup> and that is necessary for political learning across generations of activism.

The EZLN itself has been engaged for some time in a critical and self-critical reexamination of its relations with networks of international Zapatismo. A key moment in that process came in July 2003 when they announced the formation of five regional Caracoles, headquarters for a higher level of self-governance composed of rotating representatives from the autonomous municipalities to sit on regional Juntas de Buen Gobierno. That restructuring, as the Zapatistas announced when the Juntas were launched, was explicitly intended to shift power away from the military structures of the insurgency to the civilian support base communities, and also to regain local control over decisions that were often being usurped by hierarchies of national and international NGOs.<sup>7</sup> The ongoing problem of intermediaries setting themselves up as interpreters and

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6. See for example, Christian Smith, *Resisting Reagan: The U.S. Central America Peace Movement* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); and Cheryl Lynn Greenberg, *A Circle of Trust: Remembering SNCC* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998).

7. See Subcomandante Marcos, "Chiapas: La treceava estela," July 2003, <http://www.ezln.org/documentos/2003/200307-treceavaestela-a.es.htm> For further discussion of the dilemmas of autonomy, see Gustavo Esteva, "The Meaning and Scope of the Struggle for Autonomy," pp. 243-69 in Jan Rus, Rosalva Aída Hernández Castillo, and Shannan L. Mattiace, eds., *Mayan Lives, Mayan Utopias: The Indigenous Peoples of Chiapas and the Zapatista Rebellion* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003); Rosalva Aída Hernández Castillo, "The Indigenous Movement in Mexico: Between Electoral Politics and Local Resistance," *Latin American Perspectives*, 33(2), Mar.-Apr. 2006; and Neil Harvey, "Who Needs Zapatismo? State Interventions and Local Responses in Marqués de Comillas, Chiapas," *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 32(3-4), Jul./Oct. 2005: 629-50.

gatekeepers of the Zapatista movement was further reflected in the EZLN's decision in November 2005 to disband the kind of solidarity inner circle represented by the Frente Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (FZLN); and to eliminate the exclusive role of Enlace Civil as coordinator of NGO activities in the Zapatista-influenced communities in Chiapas, and of the *Revista Rebeldía* as the authorized outlet of Zapatista intellectuals. These struggles over who holds the Zapatista franchise or trademark and whether some can speak and decide for others, go to the core of the notion of autonomy; a concept that is fundamental to on-the-ground Zapatismo,<sup>8</sup> but is not highlighted in this study that focuses on the international "social construction" of Zapatismo. That complementary part of the picture is important for keeping international Zapatismo in perspective.

The linkage between "internal" and "external" Zapatismo clearly needs more critical examination, and this book is helpful in stimulating that discussion. Olesen notes a distinction between mutual solidarity and altruistic or "substitution solidarity," which "can lead to substitutionism (acting and speaking for the other), and it can permit the reproduction of existing inequalities" (108). The observations and actions of outsiders in Zapatista communities inevitably reflect power imbalances in the two worlds. When *La Jornada's* ace Chiapas correspondent Hermann Bellinghausen writes a poetically sympathetic account of events in Zapatista communities, is he empowering the communities by serving as cultural translator, or romanticizing and exoticizing them? Is Marcos himself just a patient listener who soaks up the lessons of the wise Old Antonio and explains them to an eager international public (114-15), or does that necessarily place him in a more protagonistic or substitutionist role?

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8. See Andrés Aubry, "Autonomy in the San Andrés Accords: Expression and Fulfillment of a New Federal Pact," 219-41 in Rus, Hernández Castillo, and Mattiace, eds., *Mayan Lives, Mayan Utopias*, op. cit.; and Richard Stahler-Sholk, "Resisting Neoliberal Homogenization: The Zapatista Autonomy Movement," *Latin American Perspectives*, Mar. 2007 (forthcoming).



Is the role of solidarity workers to respect and accept all decisions and actions made by the group that constitutes their “node of special influence,” or do they have a right or responsibility to engage with the issues independently and to act accordingly? To fully interpret international Zapatismo, we need more information about the Chiapas community-based movement around which it is constructing its networks, and readers will have to look elsewhere for that part of the story.<sup>9</sup>

These dilemmas of solidarity and agency are of course neither new nor unique to the Zapatista movement. Activist-scholars have been reflecting on the idea of “recentering” Latin American studies more generally, so that indigenous and other subaltern voices and perspectives can shape the agenda.<sup>10</sup> An earlier generation of Central American solidarity struggled with such questions as whether CISPES (Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador) should take direction from the FMLN in its U.S. solidarity strategy, or exercise their own judgment about the U.S. political context. In Chiapas, believers in “committed scholarship” struggle with how to transcend the kind of positivist pretense of objectivity-through-distance that long pervaded the anthropology industry, particularly the Harvard Project that doled out village “case studies” to a generation of U.S. graduate students and perpetuated the myth of the “closed corporate community.”<sup>11</sup> How can scholars and activists

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9. See, for example, Rus, Hernández Castillo, and Mattiace, eds., *Mayan Lives, Mayan Utopias*, op. cit.; and Maya Lorena Pérez Ruiz, ed., *Tejiendo historias: Tierra, género y poder en Chiapas* (Mexico City: INAH, 2004).

10. See, for example, Charles R. Hale, “Activist Research v. Cultural Critique: Indigenous Land Rights and the Contradictions of Politically Engaged Anthropology,” *Cultural Anthropology*, 21(1), Feb. 2006: 96-120; Arturo Escobar, “Revisioning Latin American and Caribbean Studies: A Geopolitics of Knowledge Approach,” *Latin American Studies Association, LASA Forum*, 37(2), Spring 2006: 11-14; and Jennifer Bickham Mendez, “Research as Social Justice Work: Reflections on Doing Politically Engaged Scholarship,” *LASA Forum*, 37(4), Fall 2006: 10-13.

11. Various critical perspectives on the historiography of Chiapas can be found in Juan Pedro Viqueira and Mario Humberto Ruz, eds., *Chiapas: Los rumbos de otra historia* (Mexico City: UNAM, 1998); and Andres Aubry, *Chiapas*

engage in a way that is explicitly cognizant of their own positionality, avoiding the pitfall of “international Zapatismo” becoming a kind of neocolonialism?

Some of these discussions have arisen in the context of international support for development projects that are conceived as part of an effort to create autonomous spaces to resist neoliberal globalization.<sup>12</sup> Frustrations and disenchantments are perhaps inevitable as “international Zapatismo” meets the very different rhythms and dynamics of decision-making in indigenous communities in Chiapas. An interesting example occurred in the spring of 2006 when a UNDP/UNESCO/WHO team turned up uninvited in the Zapatista autonomous Caracol of La Garrucha to offer development aid. The Zapatista authorities, who maintain an open-door policy for anyone willing to travel the dusty or muddy roads to seek them out and wait their turn patiently in the sun, heard them out and scheduled meetings to discuss what such a plan might look like. Some parts of the solidarity networks of international Zapatismo were appalled that the UN, an agent of neocolonial governments, could waltz into autonomous communities with their flip-charts and “development” bureaucratise. One group of disgruntled volunteers fired off an anonymous critique under the pseudonym “Brigada Los Nadie” to Indymedia, sparking a lively debate among the internacionalistas (without clarifying what, if any, conversations Los Nadie had had with the Zapatistas themselves about these and other concerns).<sup>13</sup> Were the critics driven by

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*a contrapelo: Una agenda de trabajo para su historia en perspectiva sistémica* (San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas: Editorial Contrahistorias/CIDECI, 2005).

12. See June C. Nash, *Mayan Visions: The Quest for Autonomy in an Age of Globalization* (N.Y.: Routledge, 2001); Duncan Earle and Jeanne Simonelli, *Uprising of Hope: Sharing the Zapatista Journey to Alternative Development* (Lanham, MD: Altamira Press, 2005); and Richard Stahler-Sholk, review of Earle and Simonelli in *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 12(2), June 2006: 490-2.

13. Brigada Los Nadie, “ONU, PNUD, ONGs y Zapatistas,” 3-part posting to Indymedia Chiapas website, Apr. 2006:

egotistical protection of turf and/or paternalism, or were they exercising a legitimate right as participants in mutual solidarity?

The Zapatistas dramatically opened a new dialogue between Chiapas-based Zapatismo and broader solidarity/left groups in June 2005 when they issued the Sixth Declaration of the Lacandón Jungle.<sup>14</sup> Trying to chart a new course between the potential isolation of Chiapas community-based Zapatismo and the chaotic politics of social and political groups in networked solidarity, the EZLN convened a series of meetings in the jungle for those different worlds to exchange ideas about movement-building. This book was published before those meetings, which were a prelude to the Zapatista national tour known as The Other Campaign (La Otra Campaña). Unlike the whistle-stop tour in March 2001 to build popular pressure for indigenous rights legislation, La Otra was conceived as more of a series of working meetings with serious activists—anyone “on the left and at the bottom.” We need a sequel to Olesen’s book to analyze the new phase inaugurated by La Otra. What is clear is that the Mexican “bottom left” is as fragmented and sectarian as its counterparts elsewhere, so the challenges of this kind of networking are great, but perhaps such boldness is the only way to stay relevant and hopeful.

*International Zapatismo* does not attempt a comprehensive analysis of this historic movement, but it offers a thorough examination of one important part of that movement. Olesen’s

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[http://chiapas.indymedia.org/display.php3?article\\_id=121284&keyword=onu&phrase=](http://chiapas.indymedia.org/display.php3?article_id=121284&keyword=onu&phrase=)  
[http://chiapas.indymedia.org/display.php3?article\\_id=121285&keyword=ongs&phrase=](http://chiapas.indymedia.org/display.php3?article_id=121285&keyword=ongs&phrase=)  
[http://chiapas.indymedia.org/display.php3?article\\_id=121461&keyword=ongs&phrase=](http://chiapas.indymedia.org/display.php3?article_id=121461&keyword=ongs&phrase=)

In the end, the arrogance of the UN “experts” and their resistance to community control stalled the project. For other critical reflections on Zapatismo and its international representation, see Chris Tilly & Marie Kennedy, “The Zapatistas’ New Fight,” *Against the Current*, 21(3), Jul.-Aug. 2006: 21-25.

14. See Neil Harvey, “Inclusion through Autonomy: Zapatistas and Dissent,” *NACLA Report on the Americas*, 39(2), Sept./Oct. 2005: 12-17.

valuable study is a thought-provoking invitation to scrutinize the other parts of the Zapatista movement, to reflect on how they fit together, and to consider the implications for social movement strategies in the era of globalization.