Anarch@-Zapatismo: Anti-Capitalism, Anti-Power, and the Insurgent Imagination

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Abstract

Zapatismo—the political imagination and practice of the Zapatista movement—has had powerful and unanticipated effects far beyond the Indigenous communities of Chiapas, Mexico from which it has emerged. In this paper I explore the novel political landscape fashioned through the encounter between Zapatismo as a hybridized but fundamentally Indigenous political phenomenon and diverse communities of radical activists in the north of the Americas, many of whose commitments could be characterized as “anarchistic” in nature. This is the terrain inhabited by an emergent insurgent political imagination that I term “anarch@-Zapatismo”. Drawing upon research conducted between September 2003 and October 2004 with alter-globalization, anti-capitalist, and social justice activists in Canada, the United States, and Mexico I explore two specific manifestations of “anarch@-Zapatismo” in order to illuminate a powerful political imagination that has come to animate some of the most interesting and provocative radical political interventions over the last decade.

Introduction

If the uprising of January 1, 1994 was possible because of the conspiratorial complicity of tens of thousands of Indigenous, the building of autonomy in rebel lands is possible because of the complicity of hundreds of thousands of persons of different colors, different nationalities, different cultures, different languages – in short, of different worlds. – Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos

January 1, 1994: welcome to the Fourth World War. As political and economic elites in Canada, the United States, and Mexico celebrate the coming into force of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), those for whom neoliberalism promises not capitalist utopia but the culmination of a 500 year old trajectory toward oblivion prepare to remind the world that history is far from over. In the early hours of the new year, in the far southeast of Mexico, an insurgent army of some 3000 Indigenous Mayan campesinos emerges from the highlands and jungle of the state of Chiapas and declares war on the federal

executive and the army. This insurgent force is el Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation) and it is the product of 10 years of clandestine organizing in some of the poorest, most repressed, and most remote communities in Mexico. This rebellion will shake not only the political and economic foundations of Mexico but prove to be a powerful and unexpected catalyst for the generation of a new kind of anti-capitalist, radically democratic, and direct action struggle far beyond the borders of Mexico.

It is the profound resonance the Zapatista struggle achieved amongst activists across national borders that serves as the primary point of focus for this paper. As I have argued elsewhere\(^4\) Zapatsismo—the political imagination and practice of the Zapatista movement—has had powerful and unanticipated effects far beyond the Indigenous communities from which it has emerged. The reasons for and consequences of this resonance have been as profound as they have been unpredictable but it is not my intention to rehash this analysis here. Instead, my intention is to explore the novel political landscape fashioned through the encounter between Zapatsismo as a hybridized but fundamentally Indigenous political phenomenon and diverse communities of radical activists in the north of the Americas, many of whose commitments could be characterized as anarchistic\(^5\) in nature. This is the terrain inhabited by what I term “anarch@-Zapatsismo”\(^6\), an emergent insurgent political imagination that has come to animate some of the most interesting and provocative radical political interventions over the last decade.

This analysis draws upon a year of interviews, fieldwork, and targeted participant observation between September 2003 and September 2004 with alter-globalization, anti-capitalist, and social justice activists in Canada, the United States, and Mexico. These activists have all experienced what I have referred to elsewhere as the resonance of Zapatsismo. Rather than simply importing the model of the Zapatistas’ struggle, activists in other places in the north of the Americas have sought to translate this resonance in ways that make sense within their own contexts. The analysis I present here focuses upon some of the most radical, rather than reformist, manifestations of this resonance. In taking up this point of focus, I aim to explicitly consider the significance of the intersection of the Zapatistas’ Indigenous insurgency with the struggles of primarily non-Indigenous activists working toward radical social change. While this intersection has been produced in part by physical encounters between these different groups, more frequently it has been constituted through and engagement with Zapatsismo as an insurgent political imagination communicated via the writings of EZLN spokesperson Subcomandante Marcos, “reality tours” and solidarity caravans to Zapatista territory, activist websites, DVDs, CDs, as well as more conventional media.
My conceptualization of the “political imagination” shares an affinity with critical theorist Susan Buck-Morss’ use of the “political imaginary”. Buck-Morss explains that rather than referring merely to “the logic of a discourse, or world view” the political imaginary is a “topographical concept...not a political logic but a political landscape, a concrete visual field in which political actors are positioned”. Imagination is a terrain of possibility but it is also a space of encounter between diverse groups who do not need to share an identity in order to articulate affinity. While the connection between politics and the imagination has a rich history in political theory I refer to political imaginations as “insurgent” in order to draw attention to a particular articulation of the imagination that has come to characterize important segments of contemporary radical activism. Political imaginations are “insurgent” when their landscape is marked by four key elements: first, they orbit around a radical understanding of socio-political action as a project which must be directed from below rather than imposed from above; second, these imaginations embrace a notion of socio-political change as multi-layered and dynamic rather than being dominated by ideological dogmatism; third, these imaginations envision a political horizon of radical social, cultural, economic, and political transformation rather than piecemeal reform; fourth, these imaginations are not fully formed projects or political blueprints, they are provocations which offer glimpses of many possible futures that do not rely upon the logic of hegemony to inspire action. In this sense, anarch®-Zapatismo is a particular manifestation of an insurgent political imagination that has achieved transnational resonance.

From the roots of rebellion to transnational insurgent imaginations

How and why did Zapatismo come to animate new attempts to reimagine radical political action and the terrain of political possibility on a transnational scale? In order to understand this, something of the roots of the Zapatista movement need to be understood. While this is meant only to be a cursory review, my intention here is to identify some of the key political nodes that would provoke not only solidarity but an affirmation of affinity amongst a diversity of others engaged in their own struggles outside the borders of Mexico.

While the Zapatista uprising came as a surprise to many, histories of the EZLN testify to the depth of the process that had gone into organizing the insurgency and to the unique political praxis which would emerge from the movement. The EZLN and the Zapatista movement lie at the intersection of two very different vectors: the first being the Indigenous Mayan communities in the canyons and Lacandón Jungle of Chiapas; the second being the urban, Marxist revolutionary cadres who arrived in the jungles of Chiapas in the early 1980s to prepare the peasantry for a revolution. By all accounts, the intersection of these two vectors resulted not in the “revolutionizing” of the Indigenous communities but rather in
the “defeat” of Marxist dogma at the hands of these Indigenous realities. It would be this defeat that would ultimately allow for the emergence of the Zapatista struggle itself.

Formed only decades earlier by Chol, Tzeltal, Tzotzil, and Tojolabal migrants who were forced to leave their established communities in the highlands of Chiapas in search of land and opportunity, new communities in the Lacandón Jungle had become products and practitioners of a very different kind of politics than that which was practiced in highland communities. Separated from the highland political context based on ranks of honour and established channels of privilege and power, the new communities developed systems of politics based on the communal assembly and consensus-based decision making. In this setting the community ruled their authorities in a relationship that would become the cornerstone to the Zapatista democratic notion of “commanding obeying” as all authority and legitimacy in this case resides in the community and in the assembly rather than military strongmen or political bosses.

In the early 1980s, cadres from the Fuerzas de Liberación Nacional (FLN, Forces of National Liberation), an urban and Marxist-inspired guerrilla organization, arrived in Chiapas in hopes of fomenting revolution. Indeed, it is this element of the genesis of the EZLN that is responsible for invoking the legacy of Mexican revolutionary hero Emiliano Zapata (hence, “Zapatista”) as the most appropriate symbol for this struggle. In the statutes of the FLN, written fourteen years before the Zapatistas of Chiapas would initiate their rebellion, the choice of Emiliano Zapata as the icon for the revolution is attributed to the fact that “Emiliano Zapata is the hero who best symbolizes the traditions of revolutionary struggle of the Mexican people”. While Zapata was one of the greatest, and most uncompromised, heroes of the Mexican Revolution of 1910-1917, he was not particularly well known in Chiapas until relatively recently. By laying claim to Zapata’s legacy, the Zapatistas sought to reclaim the radical, popular, and national dimensions of the Mexican Revolution and to extend their struggle beyond the borders of Chiapas and the Indigenous base communities of the emerging EZLN.

Arriving from the city with their ideological discourse deeply inflected by Marxism and their worldviews shaped by the rationalistic and scientific legacy of the European Enlightenment, Subcomandante Marcos and other urban guerrilleros found themselves confronted by realities with which they were ill-equipped to deal. Aside from the physical challenges of guerrilla life, the urban revolutionaries encountered Indigenous communities who grounded their existence upon very different understandings of the world. Indeed, the rugged mountainous terrain where Marcos and the other guerrillas first lived upon their arrival in Chiapas was not merely a location well-suited to concealing the nascent EZLN, more importantly, for the Mayan communities living there, it was
“a respected and feared place of stories, myths, and ghosts”. Furthermore, Marcos and the other urban revolutionary cadres quickly began to realize that Indigenous notions of time, history, and reality were fundamentally different from what they had been taught to believe. As Neil Harvey explains, for these urban guerrillas, “[l]earning the Indigenous languages and understanding their own interpretations of their history and culture led to an appreciation of the political importance of patience”. This lesson in patience would come to characterize Zapatismo as a political imagination and practice and would also provide a powerful model for those struggling in other contexts.

The encounter between the urban revolutionaries and the Indigenous communities in Chiapas had a profound effect not only upon the mestizo (mixed heritage) Zapatistas but proved vital to the formation of the EZLN itself. “Instead of arriving directly from the city or the university, the EZLN emerged out of la montaña, that magical world inhabited by the whole of Mayan history, by the spirits of ancestors, and by Zapata himself”. While Marcos had come to teach la palabra política—the political word—to the Indigenous of Chiapas, he quickly discovered that this history and way of teaching, laden with its own implicit epistemological history, made no sense to the communities. The emergent politics of this encounter thus required a new language, one that was born of the Zapatistas’ critical reading of Mexican history and current economic and political context combined with the communities’ own histories of genocide, racism, suffering, and exclusion. The inversion of the traditional vanguard-masses relationship that occurred during the formation of the EZLN provided a distinctive model of popular, grassroots, and radically democratic organization.

This relationship and its consequences are powerfully exemplified by the way Zapatista base communities arrived at the decision to initiate their rebellion. In mid-1992, Zapatista communities had made the decision to go to war “to coincide with 500 years of resistance” but when measured against the prevailing socio-political context geopolitically the Zapatista uprising seemed almost anachronistic. In interviews and communiqués published since the uprising, Marcos and other Zapatista leaders have repeatedly asserted the divergence between the leadership of the EZLN and the communities with respect to the potential for armed rebellion. In order to understand the Zapatista movement as well as how it has resonated so profoundly with others and provoked the insurgent imagination of anarch@-Zapatismo it is essential to appreciate the political significance of this divergence. Adolfo Gilly’s comments with respect to this fundamental difference in perception of the potentials and timing of armed rebellion bear quoting at length:

The channels through which communities, on one side, and the leadership of the EZLN (or for that matter any other left-wing
organization), on the other, get their perceptions of the surrounding society are not the same; nor are the filters and the codes according to which they are interpreted. This difference, invisible to all in “normal” times when the capital decision—insurrection—is not in play, comes to light at the moment of making that decision. For that reason, while some see in the “disappearance of the Soviet Union” a negative factor, others who are distant from that interpretation of an upheaval, regarding which they are not concerned, measure by other methods—against the arc of their own lives—the maturation of conditions for rebellion.21

Thus, in place of theoretical orthodoxy or a distanced evaluation of larger socio-political forces which could amplify or nullify the rebellion, Indigenous communities in Chiapas relied upon measuring the conditions and necessity for rebellion “against the arc of their own lives”, a philosophy which would deeply infuse Zapatismo and its resonance transnationally in the years following the uprising.

In “The First Declaration of the Lacandón Jungle”, the Zapatista declaration of war, the General Command of the EZLN names the history from which the insurgency emerges, stating that “we are a product of five hundred years of struggle”.22 This history is a narrative of struggle not only of Indigenous peoples against Spanish invaders, but of the people of Mexico against invasion, dictatorship, poverty, and repression.23 While asserting their goal to advance on the Mexican capital and depose the federal executive in order to allow “the people liberated to elect, freely and democratically, their own administrative authorities”, the Zapatistas also outline the central goals of their struggle, namely: “work, land, housing, food, health care, education, independence, freedom, democracy, justice, and peace”.24 These demands evoke not only the concrete concerns of peasants living in the far southeast of Mexico today, but also echo the demands of Mexican revolutionaries for almost three hundred years.

While the Mexican military succeeded in driving the EZLN back into the jungles of Chiapas in the aftermath of the new year’s day uprising, the counter-insurgency would ultimately prove much more difficult than anyone could have predicted. With no significant channels of communication established with actors outside of their movement nationally or internationally, in the days following the uprising people from across Mexico and around the world mobilized massively in an effort to bring an end to the conflict and to compel the Mexican government to negotiate with the insurgents. While part of this mobilization can be attributed to pre-existing networks of communication and information distribution organized around Latin American solidarity and human
rights, a much more compelling basis for this response lay in the moral force of this Indigenous rebellion. Carried via news media throughout Mexico, the symbolic gesture of columns of armed and masked but clearly Indigenous men and women taking control of the colonial plaza of San Cristóbal de las Casas had tremendous impact. In the words of Adolfo Gilly, this evoked “the historical memory of the country, the memory transmitted in families or studied in school. Indians, those about whom the urban society bore an ancient and unconfessed guilt, had organized themselves and risen up with weapons in their hands” and through these images and their transmission “In a single blow the rebellion had legitimated itself before Mexicans.”

Twelve days after the rebellion began and due to the sheer force and scale of national and international mobilizations against a military solution to the Zapatista rebellion, the Mexican government was compelled to declare a unilateral ceasefire and to invite the EZLN to a dialogue aimed at reconciling the situation. At the same time, discussions over pardoning the insurgents began to surface. The response of the Zapatistas to suggestions of pardon, penned by Zapatista spokesperson and military strategist Subcomandante Marcos, says much both about the roots of the Zapatista uprising as well as the moral force of Zapatismo as a political imagination:

Why do we need to be pardoned? What are they going to pardon us for? For not dying of hunger? For not accepting our misery in silence? For not accepting humbly the historic burden of disdain and abandonment? For having risen up in arms when we found all other paths closed? For not heeding the Chiapas penal code, one of the most absurd and repressive in history? For showing the rest of the country and the whole world that human dignity still exists even among the world’s poorest peoples? For having made careful preparations before we began our uprising? For bringing guns to battle instead of bows and arrows? For being Mexicans? For being mainly Indigenous? For calling on the Mexican people to fight by whatever means possible for what belongs to them? For fighting for liberty, democracy, and justice? For not following the example of previous guerrilla armies? For refusing to surrender? For refusing to sell ourselves out?

Who should ask for pardon, and who can grant it? Those who for many years glutted themselves at a table of plenty while we sat with death so often, we finally stopped fearing it? Those who filled our pockets and our souls with empty promises and words?
Or should we ask pardon from the dead, our dead, who died “natural” deaths of “natural causes” like measles, whooping cough, breakbone fever, cholera, typhus, mononucleosis, tetanus, pneumonia, malaria and other lovely gastrointestinal and pulmonary diseases? Our dead, so very dead, so democratically dead from sorrow because no one did anything, because the dead, our dead, went just like that, with no one keeping count, with no one saying, “ENOUGH!” which would at least have granted some meaning to their deaths, a meaning no one ever sought for them, the dead of all times, who are now dying once again, but now in order to live?

Should we ask for pardon from those who deny us the right and capacity to govern ourselves? From those who don’t respect our customs or our culture and who ask us for identification papers and obedience to a law whose existence and moral basis we don’t accept? From those who oppress us, torture us, assassinate us, disappear us for the grave “crime” of wanting a piece of land, not too big and not too small, but just a simple piece of land on which we can grow something to fill our stomachs?

Who should ask for pardon, and who can grant it?27

In this early communiqué, Marcos articulates the Indigenous struggle for autonomy, dignity, and justice that lies at the heart of the Zapatista struggle. As several observers have remarked, since its public appearance on January 1, 1994, the Zapatista movement has brought unprecedented national attention to the “Indian Question” in Mexico, raising debate about the conditions of life and socio-political and cultural aspirations of Indigenous peoples living within the Mexican state and making these issues among the most important with respect to the national political agenda.28 If this was all the Zapatista movement had accomplished it would be a tremendously significant outcome in and of itself, however, in addition to this the Zapatistas have also succeeded in galvanizing a broad range of democratic movements in Mexico and throughout the world through new and innovative political projects and encounters. In the words of Luis Hernández Navarro, “among the most important consequences of the Zapatista movement in our times is that it has stimulated dreams of social change, and resisted the idea that all emancipatory projects must be sacrificed to global integration” and it did so through “the symbolic force of the image of armed revolution that still holds sway for many parts of the population” and “the moral force that Indigenous struggles have acquired”; furthermore, once “the cult of the rifles” had worn off what remained and what sustained the Zapatista resonance was the very fact that they continued to articulate and build a new political project.29
The issues of power, autonomy, and dignity are central to the Zapatista struggle and to the political imagination of Zapatismo more broadly. As John Holloway asserts with respect to radical social struggle today, “What is at issue is not who exercises power, but how to create a world based on the mutual recognition of human dignity, on the formation of social relations which are not power relations...This, then, is the revolutionary challenge at the beginning of the twenty-first century: to change the world without taking power. This is the challenge that has been formulated most clearly by the Zapatista uprising in the south-east of Mexico”. In 2001, Subcomandante Marcos would reflect:

our army is very different from others, because its proposal is to cease being an army. A soldier is an absurd person who has to resort to arms in order to convince others, and in that sense the movement has no future if its future is military. If the EZLN perpetuates itself as an armed military structure, it is headed for failure. Failure as an alternative set of ideas, an alternative attitude to the world....You cannot reconstruct the world or society, or rebuild national states now in ruins, on the basis of a quarrel over who will impose their hegemony on society.

Marcos has elaborated on this point by noting that “The EZLN has reached a point where it has been overtaken by Zapatismo”, establishing the distance between Zapatismo and the EZLN. While the EZLN is the army which exists to defend the Zapatista communities in Chiapas, Zapatismo is, in the words of Manuel Callahan, “a political strategy, an ethos, a set of commitments claimed by those who claim a political identity”. It is in this sense that Zapatismo can be said to embody an approach to politics based on the pursuit of “democracy, liberty, and justice”--the banners of the Zapatista struggle from the moment of its public emergence--for all. What each of these terms mean of course differs depending upon the space and place within which people find themselves. Even within each specific context these meanings can never be fixed because such an assertion would be to claim a singular and transcendent truth, a notion which the Zapatistas reject. This refusal to claim a “power-over” and simultaneously the affirmation of a collective “power-to” create a world rooted in dignity, democracy, justice, and liberty forms an essential component of what has facilitated the transnationalization of Zapatismo beyond the borders of Mexico. While notions such as “justice,” “democracy,” and “freedom” have and continue to be used by a wide variety of political and economic power holders what distinguishes the discourse of Zapatismo from them is precisely its radical critique of power. For those activists who have been most receptive to Zapatismo as an insurgent political imagination, concepts such as “democracy,” “liberty,” and “justice” are not limited to their liberal democratic interpretations, rather, they are markers for a radical transnationalized political
practice aimed at contesting and moving beyond the systemic nature of marginalization, violence, and exploitation.

Anarch@-Zapatismo

From this brief survey of the political landscape of Zapatismo it should not be difficult to appreciate why the Zapatista struggle and its insurgent political imagination resonated so strongly with others both within and outside the borders of Mexico. In a political moment heralded by neoliberal ideologues as “the end of history” the radical expression of resistance, hope, and dignity offered by the Zapatistas lit a new fuse of political possibility on a global scale. In the words of one of my research partners, “we were all waiting for them...we were waiting to hear a word like this...[on] the day that NAFTA became law, at the southern tip of the North American Free Trade Area, at the darkest moment for movements in the Americas...it was a word we were waiting to hear”.

Writing that has emerged from the ranks of the alter-globalization movement stands as a testament—albeit a rhetorical one—to the profound significance of Zapatismo in relation to new forms of struggle. In the words of Paul Kingsnorth, “The Zapatistas would become the unwitting, but not unwilling, forgers of a truly global insurgency against history’s first truly global system”. Or, as Manuel Callahan asserts, “In many respects the Zapatista uprising is the moment when the movement against globalization found its global audience, and it is perhaps the place where the tactics of that movement began”. Naomi Klein considers what she labels “the Zapatista effect” by asking, “what are the ideas that proved so powerful that thousands have taken it on themselves to disseminate them around the world?” and answers “They have to do with power – and new ways of imagining it”. While Klein discusses the centrality of “democracy, liberty and justice” to the Zapatista struggle in addition to their disavowal of the desire to seize state power as fundamental aspects of their global appeal, she also acknowledges some of the less tangible dimensions of Zapatismo’s resonance. In concluding her article, Klein notes, “This is the essence of Zapatismo, and explains much of its appeal: a global call to revolution that tells you not to wait for the revolution, only to start where you stand, to fight with your own weapon”. The significance of Zapatismo with respect to the global anti-capitalist movement is perhaps most powerfully captured by the editorial collective Notes From Nowhere. In the first entry of their timeline of global anti-capitalism entitled “The Restless Margins: Moments of Resistance and Rebellion” the editorial collective writes of January 1, 1994, “The EZLN...declares war against Mexico, bringing its inspirational struggle for life and humanity to the forefront of political imaginations across the planet”.

If Zapatismo has provided a unique model of radically democratic and Indigenously-grounded struggle and it has achieved an undeniable resonance

Alex Khasnabish
amongst diverse communities engaged in their own struggles around the world what does this mean for my claim that this has given rise to an insurgent political imagination circulating transnationally that could be called “anarch@-Zapatismo”? First, it is important to acknowledge that neither the Zapatistas themselves nor many of those who have experienced the resonance of their struggle transnationally identify as anarchists. Indeed, the Zapatistas have been absolutely clear about the fact that they are a product of their own unique socio-cultural and political context. Politically, the Mexican Revolution and its radical legacy serve as perhaps the most significant frames of reference for Zapatismo in addition to the Indigenous traditions of resistance and struggle which inhabit the far southeast of Mexico. Nevertheless, there are clearly elements of Zapatismo that share a strong affinity with anarchism--particularly the emphasis upon direct action, direct democracy, and a disavowal of the desire to seize power or to fetishize the state as the locus of social change. These elements could also be said to be very much present within many communities of activists concerned with alter-globalization, anti-capitalist, and global social justice struggles without these communities necessarily self-identifying as “anarchist”. Rather than explicitly “anarchist” both Zapatismo and the practices of many alter-globalization, anti-capitalist, and direct action activist collectives could, in this sense, be considered “anarchistic”. This move toward a political terrain marked by anti-authoritarianism, direct action, direct democracy, and an acknowledgement of the irreducible significance of a multiplicity of struggles rather than their subsumption beneath the banner of a single party line marks a new logic of radical struggle that Richard J.F. Day has termed an “affinity for affinity” rather than one based on the pursuit of hegemony. As an insurgent political imagination, anarch@-Zapatismo has coalesced transnationally through the resonance of Zapatismo and the Zapatista struggle amongst diverse communities of activists engaged in a new kind of radical socio-political struggle that is fundamentally anti-capitalist, anti-authoritarian, and which seeks to build bridges of affinity amongst a multiplicity of others engaged in struggle without imagining that there is--or ought to be--a single, totalizing, revolutionary moment to be arrived at.

From September 2003 until October 2004, I worked with a diverse range of activists in the north of the Americas who had experienced the resonance of Zapatismo and had sought to materialize it in specific ways within their own realities. Their reflections on the significance of Zapatismo and their reactions to it illuminate the landscape of the insurgent imagination I have named “anarch@-Zapatismo”. In what follows, I engage two particularly compelling examples of the possibilities animated by this insurgent political imagination: Peoples’ Global Action and Big Noise Tactical.

Peoples’ Global Action
On July 27, 1996, over 3000 activists from more than 40 countries converged on Zapatista territory in rebellion in Chiapas, Mexico to attend the Zapatista-convoked “First Intercontinental Encuentro for Humanity and Against Neoliberalism”. In the words of Paul Kingsnorth, “The Encuentro sent Zapatismo global. The 3000 delegates returned to their countries with new ideas, new ways of thinking about the future, and above all, new links”. As Fiona Jeffries, activist, writer, academic, and participant in the First Intercontinental Encuentro noted during our conversation in Vancouver in the winter of 2004:

the Encuentro was just the most amazing experience politically. That level of organization, totally outside of the state, and this amazing mobilization of people from around the world who organized this event and the people I met there [were] just so inspiring [as was] the level of debate, the level of discussion about politics. We really felt actually that some big change was going to happen, people from everywhere talking about this world as it is in so many different ways and on so many different levels and this incredible inclusion, this level of pluralism that I’ve never experienced before on the left. So then we came back here and we started [an] organizing process what we were calling an “International of Hope” because at the end [of the Encuentro] the Zapatistas said “okay, this is what we need you to do, we need solidarity but because we’re in a crisis what’s real solidarity for us is to go back to where you are and organize around anti-neoliberal stuff, we’re doing our thing here, you gotta do your thing here, we all gotta do our thing and hopefully that will coalesce in powerful ways.”

The model and inspiration of the Zapatista Encuentro in 1996 provided the spark for people from all over the world who then went home and tried to infuse their own spaces and practices with the same joy of rebellion and hope for another world.

At the end of the first Encuentro, the General Command of the EZLN issued the “Second Declaration of La Realidad for Humanity and Against Neoliberalism”, calling for the creation of a “collective network of all our particular struggles and resistances, an intercontinental network of resistance against neoliberalism, an intercontinental network of resistance for humanity”. Specifying that this network would not be “an organizing structure”, that it would have “no central head or decision maker”, “no central command or hierarchies”, the EZLN called for the formation of a network that would provide channels of communication and support for the diverse struggles “for humanity and against neoliberalism” around the world. Peoples’ Global Action (PGA) would be the network emerging from this call. The Zapatistas had also called for another

Alex Khasnabish
Intercontinental Encuentro which was held one year after the first, this time in Spain, drawing 3000 activists from 50 countries.\(^{47}\) It would be at the Second Encuentro that the idea for PGA would be born out of a “need to create something more tangible than the encuentros”.\(^{48}\) PGA would be officially born at a meeting in Geneva in February 1998 with 300 activists from 71 countries present.\(^{49}\) Since its founding PGA has been one of the most important networks for coordination and communication amongst groups and individuals committed to anti-capitalist action, coordinating Global Days of Action against the WTO, G8, and the World Bank as well as a variety of conferences, caravans, and workshops around the world.\(^{50}\)

Dave Bleakney is a member of the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW) and another activist involved in the founding of Peoples’ Global Action and its manifestation in North America. CUPW actually served as the regional convenor for Peoples’ Global Action in North America from 1998-1999, a role taken over by the Montreal-based Anti-Capitalist Convergence (CLAC) after 1999. During our conversation in the winter of 2004, Dave expressed the profound value of the lessons offered by Zapatismo to Canadian and US activists since 1994. For Dave, the resonance of Zapatismo conveyed powerful lessons regarding the character and contours of struggle as well as challenging dominant liberal notions of how politics is done and what other possibilities might look like:

[the] struggle [of the Zapatistas] and others have taught me that we have more to learn from movements like that than they have from us. [We] need to learn from the south as opposed to [believing that] we have the answers, that’s a real struggle and it gets disheartening sometimes because I think it’s a real hard one to cross over. I know within the labour movement, people call it solidarity but in fact you look at it [and] it’s like charity. Labour movements [in the north] have come to maintain the order. If you look at global bodies like the WTO there’s a constant clamour to get a seat at the table as if somehow being present at your own execution, surrounded by executioners, is [an] achievement. It’s a really crucial juncture because--let’s face it--the unions in Canada are going to be a lot more excited about going to Geneva to meet with the WTO then they are going to live off rice and beans in Chiapas for 3 weeks and not have any running water but it’s clear to me that the greatest lessons to be learned are from the Zapatistas but also the piqueteros in Argentina who occupy factories and the MST who occupy land in Brazil. Another thing that the Zapatistas teach us is to be resourceful and self-reliant, to not think that there’s somebody that’s going to take care of us. I think the Zapatistas open up a whole other area of relations around the importance of honesty, that you don’t need to spin anything.\(^{51}\)
The concept of the Zapatistas as teachers to political movements and activists in the north is an interesting and provocative one. As Dave notes, ever since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the proclamation of “the end of history” political elites have heralded liberal democracy as the pinnacle of political expression. What the Zapatistas have accomplished is a powerful questioning of that conclusion as well as a complete delegitimization of the notion that “there is no alternative”. As Dave Bleakney affirmed in this regard:

> the Zapatistas have helped us to question the nature of things, the norms that we’ve just come to accept without laying out some kind of dogma. I think in many ways the Zapatistas have put a mirror up to us and whether that happened by accident or was clearly constructed the fact is the mirror is up and the questions are asked.\(^{52}\)

The metaphor of the mirror that Dave invokes here alludes to the vital role that new political imaginations play in relation to new forms of radical political action. Notions of deliberation, seriousness, honesty, anti-vanguardism, self-reflexiveness, horizontalism, and a commitment to reclaiming and making use of our own collective “power-to” weave their way through the reflections offered by Dave Bleakney and Fiona Jeffries. This is the imaginary of anarch@-Zapatismo at work while it is materialized in the form of Peoples’ Global Action’s transnational anti-capitalist network.

PGA embodies the assertion at the heart of anarch@-Zapatismo affirming the relevance of a diversity of life projects bound together by an affinity for decentralizing power, radical democratic practice, a militantly anti-capitalist stance, and to many rather than one vision of revolution. In the words of Mexican scholar Gustavo Esteva, the “one no” directed at global neoliberal capitalism and its politico-military apparatuses and “many yeses” representing the many alternatives being envisioned and articulated by people everywhere is the spirit of affinity animating the insurgent imagination of anarch@-Zapatismo and the multiplicity of projects that have emerged in relation to it. Fiona Jeffries elaborated on this point during our conversation:

> I think it’s interesting that it’s not even necessarily that people are conscious of the connection between the Zapatistas. No One is Illegal for instance, the first time I saw that slogan was at the [First Intercontinental] Encuentro or the emphasis on the discourse of dignity that I think is very strong in the World Social Forum discourse but that’s also very strong in Indigenous movements in the Americas in general too. It’s a demand for a recognition of existence or

Alex Khasnabish
personage, you are an active subject in the world, that’s what the term dignity implies, [it’s] not something that’s given either, we’re not demanding human rights and we’re not demanding you give us this or you concede this to us, we are asserting our humanity and our personage.53

“Personage” and “dignity” are place-holders here for a diversity of alternative socio-political visions rooted in irreducible diversity and mutual recognition and respect. In this sense, anarch@-Zapatismo has functioned to liberate the terrain of the possible from the hegemony of any single dominating conception of “revolution” or “struggle”, it has renewed a spirit of agency that resides in humanity itself rather than in the projects, institutions, or systems which are always only the products of this creative capacity.

**Big Noise Tactical**

Peoples’ Global Action represents a compelling and complex instance of the materialization of anarch@-Zapatismo’s insurgent imagination. On a transnational terrain PGA has worked to build powerful and militant manifestations of anti-capitalist struggle out of the resonance of Zapatismo and the Zapatista-inspired Encuentros. But in addition to this example of anti-capitalist networking and mobilizing, the insurgent imagination of anarch@-Zapatismo has also had considerable and unanticipated effects at the intersection of culture and politics. Big Noise Tactical, a radical film making collective based in New York City, is perhaps one of the most interesting examples of the unanticipated consequences of this insurgent imagination. Big Noise produced *Zapatista*, their first film, in 1998. This would be followed by a number of other feature documentaries including *This is What Democracy Looks Like* (2000), and *The Fourth World War* (2003), in addition to a host of “tactical media” pieces produced in collaboration with other artists/activists focusing on a diverse set of events and issues relating to the global anti-capitalist/global justice movement. Big Noise Tactical was also a part of the first Independent Media Centre video team at the WTO protests in Seattle in 1999, providing unprecedented independent media coverage of the “Battle of Seattle”. Big Noise Tactical, very explicitly, do not situate themselves as “documentary-makers”, “artists”, or “filmmakers”, indeed, as they assert:

> We are not filmmakers producing and distributing our work. We are rebels, crystallizing radical community and weaving a network of skin and images, of dreams and bone, of solidarity and connection against the isolation, alienation and cynicism of capitalist decomposition.

> We are tactical because our media is a part of movements, imbedded in a history of struggle. Tactical because we are
provisional, plural, polyvocal. Tactical because it would be the worst kind of arrogance to believe that our media had some ahistorical power to change the world - its only life is inside of movements - and they will hang our images on the walls of their banks if our movements do not tear their banks down.\textsuperscript{54}

This radical perspective inspires the powerful films of Big Noise Tactical. These pieces seek not to simply document events but to participate in the formation of new subjectivities, new ways of understanding the worlds which make up the world, and to facilitate the emergence of new possibilities of connection and of struggle.

The origins of Big Noise Tactical are intimately connected to Zapatismo. Rick Rowley, one of the founding members of this collective, found himself in Mexico in 1995 just as the Zapatista uprising, and the Mexican state's repression of it, were once more shaking the country. The uprising and what it represented constituted a moment of radical change for Rick. Reflecting upon the connections between this and the formation of Big Noise Tactical, Rick explained the impact Zapatismo had upon himself and the other members of the collective:

we all accepted that invitation to become Zapatistas and we returned to the United States as Zapatistas looking for what that might mean in the north and trying to learn from their example of struggle, you know take it seriously, not just as an inspiration but to learn from their tactics and their strategy. One of the things that was most resonant to us at that moment was the famous Zapatista line “our word is our weapon”, armed with our word and sticks against this machine we’re winning, and so we thought about what our word would look like in the north and we didn’t think that communiqués and children’s stories and poems in the left wing papers in the States was the move that would make sense, we thought video made sense as a language that could circulate through these circuits of American culture. None of us had ever held video cameras before [or] had any film training but we got credit cards and we bought cameras and went down and started to shoot Zapatista and so that was the beginning of Big Noise, that was the beginning of the work that followed, the work that I’ve done since then. We’ve never thought of ourselves as film makers but as Zapatistas looking for forms of struggle that make sense in the north.\textsuperscript{55}
Rick and others at Big Noise Films have found ways to not simply “import” Zapatismo to the US but to find in its resonance meaning for struggles here. Through their encounter with the Zapatista struggle, Big Noise Tactical has engaged in the innovative process of interpreting and materializing the insurgent imagination of anarch@-Zapatismo in ways that are capable of moving powerfully and dynamically through the “circuits of American culture”.

Jacquie Cohen of Big Noise Tactical reflected upon her own encounter with Zapatismo and its consequences for herself and for her involvement in Big Noise during our conversation in the fall of 2004. Building upon Rick's comments about the search for weapons that would make sense within struggles in the north, Jacquie elaborated upon the connections between politics, culture, and media and their intersection with the insurgent imagination of anarch@-Zapatismo from the vantage point of her own experience:

[I heard] about [the Zapatista struggle] and [I was] just amazed that you could take that inspiration, the idea of victory, the idea of standing up for something and fighting and winning. You knew that the demos didn’t work, you knew that it had to be something else, beyond identity politics, and taking possession of a history that was both your own and expanded beyond [the] identity boundaries that were clearly marked for you inside a world of individualistic capitalism. I went down for the second half of that shoot, [I hadn’t] even thought about making films, that's not what I’d ever trained to do or even thought about doing, but when we [finished] Zapatista we started thinking about this and imagining this, how is our word our weapon? It was when we finally started screening the film that it began to make sense as a weapon and became something that we decided to keep doing as long as it made sense because you’d go places and you weren’t talking to people who had, for the most part, ever even heard of Zapatismo or for the most part they weren’t politically active...[but] people were so moved by it...we came to realize that it was our weapon that we could use and something we could give over to a larger movement....It’s arrogant to believe that any film or any piece of work like that is ever going to change things by itself ‘cause that’s not how it functions, all of these things function inside of movements. [Zapatista] came out and we were working in tune with a whole bunch of people who were being inspired by the Zapatistas because it was so different and new and because it was a victory that was something that people were winning.56
These powerful reflections offered by Rick and Jacquie of Big Noise Tactical illuminate some of the most interesting and unpredictable contours of the insurgent imagination of anarch@-Zapatismo. While much conventional solidarity activism has either disappeared or turned its attention to other issues in the years since the uprising, Zapatismo has also inspired activists to search for new ways of practicing politics in their own spaces. The engagement of these activists with Zapatismo and the creativity, innovation, and commitments they bring to it have built what I have termed the insurgent imagination of anarch@-Zapatismo.

**Toward a world made of many worlds**

Across arbitrary political borders, across geographic space and time, across cultural distance, Zapatismo’s resonance has built bridges of understanding, connection, and political practice. As much imaginative as material, this encounter between Zapatismo and diverse communities of radical activists has produced an insurgent political imagination that I have termed anarch@-Zapatismo. Beyond this, these experiences and this consciousness are beginning to materialize the possibility for the articulation of a new political terrain and a new political practice rooted in a mutual recognition of dignity and humanity, an affirmation of diversity, and the reclamation of the capacity to build a world capable of holding many worlds precisely because we are the only subjects truly capable of bringing it into being. This imagination is insurgent because: it conceives of socio-political action as a grassroots rather than vanguardist project; it embraces a multi-layered and dynamic understanding of socio-political change rather than as something dominated by ideological dogmatism; its political horizon is marked by radical social, cultural, economic, and political transformation rather than reformism; it is not a vision of radical social change cut from whole cloth, rather, it is a provocation offering glimpses of a multitude of possible futures without retreating to the logic of hegemony to make sense out of them. Inspired by Zapatismo and the Zapatista struggle, this insurgent imagination that I have sought to explore here through two of its manifestations is anarchistic without being explicitly anarchist. As with so many of the most radical currents within the landscape of alter-globalization/global anti-capitalism, the insurgent imagination of anarch@-Zapatismo is marked by deep commitments to horizontality, direct democracy, a logic of affinity, an abandonment of the fetish of the state, and a foundational belief in direct action. It also represents what Richard J.F. Day has identified as a politics of “infinite responsibility” operating on a terrain of “groundless solidarity”. Blowing apart traditional conceptualizations of solidarity as a principle operating within particular identity boundaries and in particular ways, these concepts call into being a political ethic rooted in one’s unending responsibility to live a politics of the act that is always grounded in the necessary mutual recognition of dignity. What I have attempted to provide here is only a glimpse of the possibility of this
terrain seen through the lens of the insurgent imagination of anarch@-Zapatismo. Anarch@-Zapatismo is not the only political imagination inhabiting this terrain, nor is it necessarily the most potentially liberatory one. Nevertheless, it has given rise to powerful manifestations of a new politics rooted in affinity rather than hegemony and which offer at least the hope, as the Zapatistas say, not of conquering the world but of making it anew.
Endnotes

1 Alex Khasnabish works as an Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Mount Saint Vincent University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada. Khasnabish sees his academic work as an extension of his political commitments to an anarchist-inspired anti-capitalist, anti-racist, and anti-patriarchal practice. His doctoral research, which he has turned into a book entitled Zapatismo Beyond Borders: New Imaginations of Political Possibility (2008, University of Toronto Press), focused on the reasons for and consequences of the transnational resonance of Zapatismo and the links between radical political imaginings and global anti-capitalism. He is also the author of Zapatistas: Rebellion from the Grassroots to the Global (2010, Zed Books and Fernwood Publishing), and his work has been published in ephemera, AmeriQuests, Anthropologica, Critique of Anthropology, the Globalization and Autonomy Working Paper Series, and Politics and Culture.


3 According to the Zapatistas, the time we are living through now is that of “the Fourth World War”. While the Third World War – more commonly known as the “Cold War” - ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the ascendancy of neoliberal capitalism, the Fourth World War is “a new world war”, a war of neoliberal capitalism against humanity; see Marcos, Subcomandante Insurgente. (2004). The Seven Loose Pieces of the Global Jigsaw Puzzle (Neoliberalism as a Puzzle). In Vodovnik, Žiga (Ed.) ¡Ya Basta!: Ten Years of the Zapatista Uprising. Oakland: AK Press (p. 257).


5 See Day, Richard J. F. (2005) Gramsci is Dead: Anarchist Currents in the Newest Social Movements. Toronto: Between the Lines. I use the term “anarchistic” in the same way that Richard Day employs it to refer to “implicitly anarchist elements in a group or tactic” as opposed to “anarchist” which is reserved “for situations where there is an explicit self-identification” (Ibid., p. 20).

6 Spanish-speaking activists make use of the “@” symbol to subvert the gender identification of nouns as either masculine or feminine, a process particularly
important when referring to groups of people where the masculine form is used even if the group is primarily constituted by women (i.e. comapñeros becomes compañer@s). I use it here for similar purposes. While “anarcho-” would be implicitly masculine, “anarch@-” is meant to be radically inclusive and neither masculine nor feminine in identity.

15 Ibid., (p. 165).
16 Ibid., (p. 166).
17 Ibid., (p. 166).
18 Ibid., (p. 166).
19 Ibid., (p. 166).
20 Ibid., (p. 198).
23 Ibid., (p. 13).
24 Ibid., (p. 14).
32 Ibid., (p. 5).
36 Ibid., (p. 12).
38 Ibid., (pp. 220-221).
46 Ibid., (p. 125).
48 Ibid., (p. 96).
52 Ibid.

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Anarch@-Zapatismo


