

Zapatistas: The Costs of Autonomy

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Book Review

Bernard Duterme et al. *Zapatisme: la rébellion qui dure*. Alternatives du Sud. Paris: Centre Tricontinental and Éditions Syllepse, 2014. Chronology. Notes. Index. 205pp.

All of those who are interested in social movements, especially indigenous movements, in Latin America and in particular in the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) will want to read this important collection of essays published in French by experts and analysts from several countries: *Zapatisme: la rébellion qui dure* (*Zapatismo: the Rebellion that Lasts*). (Those who do not read French can, using the authors' names given below, find English or Spanish language versions of some of the essays in this collection on line at various sites.) This book is part of the excellent Alternatives du Sud (Alternatives of the South) series which publishes four titles each year dealing with issues and movements in the Global South. Other recent books (also all in French) are titled: *Narco-traffic: The "Drug War" in Question*; *The State of Resistances in the South: Peasant Movements*; *Social Welfare in the South: The Challenges of a New Impetus*; and, *Mining Industries: Extraction at any Price?*

Zapatisme is a reflection on the Zapatista movement on the twentieth anniversary of the Chiapas Rebellion which it led in 1994. The occasion for writing several of these essays was the authors' participation in one of the *Escuelita zapatista* (Zapatistas Little School) sessions held in August and December 2013 and in January 2014. In those *escuelitas* rank-and-file Zapatistas explained to those in attendance, many of whom were illustrious foreign intellectuals, the Zapatista movement's new perspectives. The authors of these accounts of the schools and the movement are people who place themselves on the side of the indigenous people in their struggle for social justice and wish to encourage others to do so as well. These essays, based not only on the authors' expertise but also on their observations of the movement, provide us not only with an update but also with a reflection on its past experience and its current status, and, therefore, allow us to form an opinion about its likely future.

I find this a tremendously informative book, though, in general, I am in fundamental disagreement with the authors' outlook. The editor, Bernard Duterme, and the authors—Gilberto López y Rivas, Neil Harvey, Alejandra Aquino Moreschi, Raúl Zibechi, Jérôme Baschet, Sylvia Marcos, Gustavo Esteva, Alicia Castellanos Guerrero, and Fernando Matamoros Ponce—tend to find in the Zapatista experience an admirable struggle for social justice and in some cases suggest it may represent some sort of model for other movements in other contexts. They largely ignore the important question of whether or not it represents a model for *revolutionary leadership and action*, which was the EZLN's starting point when it was founded in 1983. I recently published my more critical assessment of the Zapatista movement and can only say that information gleaned from this book only strengthens my doubts about the EZLN, its usefulness as a model for other movements, and especially its autonomist strategy. The most romantic accounts in this collection, however, also lead me to question the methods of some of the authors, who it seems to me, make bold assertions without any actual evidence to support their claims.

As often happens with a collection of this sort, there is almost inevitably a good deal of repetition as the authors recount the basic history of the Zapatista movement: the early origins of the group, the Chiapas Rebellion of 1994, the Mexican government's initial military response, the early negotiations under Bishop Samuel Ruiz's mediation, the San Andrés Accords of 1996, the Zapatistas

5,000 envoys who went throughout the country to demand respect for that treaty in 1999, the Zapatista speakers to the Mexican Congress in 2000, the “Other Campaign” during the election period of 2006 when Sub-Comandante Marcos and others toured the country to speak against capitalism, and most recently the Zapatistas’ Little Schools. The book was published just before Sub-Comandante Marcos announced what was either merely a name change or his stepping down from leadership of the group.

Several of the essays also recount the authors’ experience with the *Escuelita*: staying in the homes of the Mayan peasants and attending the school taught by indigenous teachers using a modest set of texts produced for the occasion. The authors who participated listened to the teachers’ explanation of how the Zapatistas are working to create autonomous communities and a broader autonomous society, that is, one that does not depend on the Mexican state and the political parties which have always treated the indigenous people poorly and have held them in contempt. Their autonomous communities also appear as an egalitarian and democratic alternative to capitalism. Some of the authors, rather than providing much analysis, spend most of their time simply sharing or expatiating on the teachers’ views and asserting their support and admiration for this project.

The most interesting essays, however, are those that deal with the difficulties and challenges that the Zapatistas have encountered and the ways they have responded to them. The mythic idea held by some in the first days of the rebellion that the indigenous people were united in their opposition to the Mexican government and capitalism was, of course, never true. Many indigenous people had other stronger identifications: to their tribal group, to Catholicism or Evangelical Christianity, to the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), or simply to the status quo, which, however bad, was “the devil they knew.” The Mexican PRI government in power at the time, as it deployed the army or mobilized party loyalists to harass the Zapatistas, played upon such divisions and worked to accentuate them. Indigenous communities became even more divided. To escape government attack, the Zapatistas fled to the mountain forests and established temporary villages there, even more poverty-stricken than their original homes. Some of the essays take up these problematic situations.

One fascinating chapter by Alejandra Aquino Moreschi, “The Trajectory of a Zapatista Militant: From Engagement to Disengagement,” traces the experience of Pedro and his wife Ana, explaining how they became involved in the movement and why they eventually left it. Pedro, who came from the village of Agua María, was born in 1971, married at about the age of 16, becoming an adult member of his community, and joined the movement at the age of 19. Four years later he participated in the Chiapas Rebellion and subsequently became a Zapatista militant, continually taking on greater responsibilities. When the Mexican Army invaded Zapatista territory in 1995, he and his wife and the rest of their community fled to the mountains to create a clandestine village, Agua Maria-in-Exile, living there for six years. Finally when in 2000 they returned to Agua Maria, they found that it had been totally destroyed. Meanwhile, new issues had developed: many Chiapanecos were migrating to the United States to work, and coming back with stories of greater opportunity en *el norte*. The political parties and government agents were offering resources to Zapatistas who would leave their organization, while at the same time there was the implicit threat of hostile neighbors. The long exhausting years of struggle, the destruction of their homes, and the growing divisions in the Zapatista community as people began to leave the movement, left them demoralized, and Pedro and Ana also quit. Still, they would not participate in any government program, as some former Zapatistas did, refusing, for example, government offers of materials to improve their housing. A chapter such as that one gives the reader enormous insights into the whole trajectory of the movement’s experience, into the admirable character of the Zapatista militants and the difficulties they faced, including what seemed to some the hardest challenge of all, deciding to leave the movement which had provided their political and personal identity for years.

The Central Question: What is Autonomy?

The central issue that this book presents to the reader is the Zapatista strategy of building autonomous communities. What is meant by “autonomy”? Several of the chapters describe how the Zapatistas answer this question. They define autonomy as the creation of villages and ideally regions that are entirely separate from the government. They refuse to join or work for any political party, arguing that the parties are all corrupt, and they will have nothing to do with government social welfare or development programs, not wanting to become politically beholden. One has to say that their view of the political institutions is certainly correct and their fear of political manipulation well founded. So they have decided that they will not send their children to the government schools, arguing that the mestizo teachers who live in urban areas and drive automobiles to the school look down on the indigenous communities and their students. They will not go to the government hospitals and health clinics, except in extreme cases, arguing that the doctors there do not treat them well or provide them decent care. They refuse government material aid for the improvement of their homes and villages, arguing that if they take it they are expected to work for the ruling political party. Unlike the historic parties of the left, they do not fight through social movements, coalitions, and political parties to take control of these institutions and force them to serve them fairly. They reject dependency on government institutions for the alternative of community self-sufficiency.

Alternatively, then, the Zapatistas build their own homes and villages, run their own schools, and maintain their own health program. Several of the authors suggest that this is a good policy because it empowers the indigenous people, and especially women, allowing them to create their own institutions and run them democratically. Yet, in general, the authors refuse to ask what this choice means for the indigenous people in these communities. Raúl Zibechi, for example, describes the health system, explaining how each group of eight families chooses a team of three health workers who have been trained by the community, usually mostly women: a woman who prepares cures from medicinal plants, an indigenous “osteopath,” and what is described as a “wise woman.” Zibechi suggests that because women are generally the health workers, by taking on this responsibility they develop as stronger and more equal members of the community. That may be. But one would like to know, does this do anything for community health? Do autonomous community health workers keep their communities healthy? Are they able to prevent illness? Can they cure disease? Are they improving community health overall? Where is the epidemiology? How do Zapatista autonomous communities compare with non-autonomous communities in areas of inoculations, prevalence of contagious disease, chronic disease, infant mortality, and longevity? It does not even occur to Zibechi to ask these questions, much less to answer them.

He similarly describes the education system whose teachers, similarly trained by the community, have been chosen to teach the children. The facilities, he admits, are pathetic, yet how much better this is, he writes, than the government schools with their mestizo teachers who drive to work from town. We know that these are communities with high levels of illiteracy, with low levels of educational achievement—sixth grade is a common level—and with few trained professionals. Yet Zibechi never asks, how well educated are these teachers? He never tells us how far the students get in school, though he does mention the lack of high schools. He never tells us if the students learn to read, write, do math and algebra, or learn something of chemistry and physics. But, of course, it may not be important, because as other writers in this collection mention, they are principally living in communities engaging in subsistence agriculture. With the education they are receiving, they may never have any alternative. Surely self-reliance and self-respect are important achievements, but any reasonable assessment has to look at the impact on health and education outcomes as well. Zibechi, in my view, does a disservice both to the Zapatistas and to those who want to better understand what is happening in the Zapatista communities by providing no hard information on the issues he take up.

What about autonomy for women? Sylvia Marcos’ essay “The Zapatistas’ Revolutionary Women’s

Law Twenty Years Later” is somewhat useful. The laws, first published in 1994, gave women the rights to full equality in the society and to the fulfillment of their basic needs. Marcos actually took key passages of the law and went among women in Zapatista communities to ask them how the law was being fulfilled and found that women had varying opinions about how well their society was living up to these laws. While Marcos’ survey is useful, one would still like to have some actual facts here. One of the historic problems of women in Chiapas and in Central America (and, of course, other societies as well), is that men get drunk and then beat up their wives. One would like to know to what degree the women’s laws have ameliorated these practices of domestic abuse. Or to take another example, the law says women have the right to determine how many children they will have, but do they have access to birth control information, to diaphragms and contraceptive jelly, intra-uterine devices or pills? And what about the right to abortion should birth control fail? And what about prenatal care if a woman decides to have a child? The team of village health workers clearly would not be able to provide any of these things, though the government health clinics can and do. One would have liked Marcos to ask these questions or present data from other researchers on these matters.

Reading these essays, one sees that the price of self-sufficiency is clearly very high, yet the value of the Zapatistas’ autonomy is not clear. The initial Chiapas Rebellion and the Zapatistas on-going struggles forced the country to recognize the poverty and oppression of the indigenous Mayan people and led the government to build more roads, to improve housing, to build hospitals and medical clinics, and more schools in Chiapas. There is also a large and powerful social movement, the dissidents of the teachers union, led by the National Coordinating Committee (la CNTE) of the Mexican Teachers Union (el SNTE), which is especially strong in the state of Chiapas fighting for the right of teachers and communities to control the schools. Yet the Zapatistas do not join the fight to make these potentially valuable, though flawed, social institutions respond to the people, including the indigenous people. One has to wonder whether or not their autonomist strategy represents the best path forward for the indigenous people. And equally important, is it a strategy for social change for Mexico?

Two other things in particular disturbed me about the Zapatista model as discussed in this book. First is the fact that only one of the authors, Jérôme Baschet in his essay “The Construction of Autonomy: The Lessons of the Zapatista Little School,” touches on the role of the Zapatista military command (CCRI) and its influence in the civilian communities. He quotes one of one of the members of the Council of Good Government as saying, “They are the ones who guide us.” The guerrillas, as Baschet acknowledges, have enormous prestige. Yet he has little more to say about the question. One wonders: Who is really in charge here? The guerrillas or the community leaders? Which is subordinate to the other? The question of the role of these armed men is one that is ignored by virtually all of the other contributors to the book.

The second issue of concern is what seems to be the Zapatista organization’s almost total control of the lives of its members as described by several of the essayists. Anthropologists have frequently noted the almost totalitarian character of traditional societies guided by hundreds of unwritten but absolutely determinant laws of behavior. And all cultures, including our own American consumerist society, have their myriad unwritten laws of comportment that guide people in their everyday interactions with others of different genders, classes, and ethnicities. As described by the authors of this volume, Zapatista militants were expected to undertake all sorts of responsibilities in their personal, village, and broader community lives as activist, leaders, or participants in the military organization. Their lives were full of their responsibilities to the Zapatista organization. Perhaps this is simply the collective consciousness and labor they value as opposed to our capitalist society’s individualism. Still, the descriptions, scattered throughout the book, reminded me of the life of various religious and political sects with their constant meetings and activities that separate their

members from the rest of society and immerse them in a world of their own.

The authors of this book are good people who place themselves on the side of the indigenous, the exploited and oppressed, but it is disappointing that most of them in doing so, hesitated to ask themselves and their Zapatista hosts more penetrating questions. So we have a book that is informative in its own way, almost in spite of itself, on might say, but useful as long as we the readers ask the hard questions.