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“Everything for everyone!”

Cultural difference, social equality and the politics of the Zapatistas

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“The voice of the others will be heard in ours, those others who own nothing, who are condemned to silence and ignorance, who are driven from their homeland and deprived of their history by the arrogance of the powerful…We will demand what is right and right for everyone: freedom, justice, democracy, everything for everyone, and nothing for ourselves.” (CCRI-CG of the EZLN, 16 February 1994)1

Everything for everyone – this demand was already there at the start of the uprising by the Zapatista liberation movement, the EZLN, in Chiapas, Mexico’s southernmost federal state. It began on 1 January 1994, the day the North American free trade agreement between the USA, Canada and Mexico came into force, and since then the Zapatistas have led the struggle against neoliberalism, the exploitation of peasant farmers and the racist oppression of indigenous population on a number of levels. The demands of the cause espoused by the EZLN, symbolized by their

black and red flags, are already evident in the extract cited, demands that haven't always gone well together in the history of the Left: social equality and cultural difference.

Taking as their starting point, first of all, their situation as people who are marginalized and discriminated against, as the "others, who have nothing", they demand their share of society's wealth. In doing so, they are updating the history of workers' and farmers' movements, whose struggles were always concerned with redistribution and finding the (revolutionary, reformist, etc.) answer to the question of ownership of land and the means of production. The Zapatista uprising too begins not just with the demand for cultural autonomy and the capture of several towns and villages in Chiapas, but also with the occupation and expropriation of large estates. To this day, structures that strike one as feudal shape the rural regions of southern Mexico. The fact that the Zapatista demand for autonomy also targets these ownership structures is stressed time and time again by the Mexican employers' association, which is one of the key actors in preventing those demands from being realized in the law. Also, in 2001 when President Vicente Fox's government enacted an ineffective autonomy law, the employers' association issued a strong warning to the conservative government about further "concessions" vis-à-vis the indigenous population. The slogan also crops up within the context of these concerns about redistribution. Since the 1990s, it has spread outwards from the Zapatista regions to reach the banners and websites of various groups and movements in South and North America and in western Europe: everything for everyone. But this slogan wasn't invented by the Zapatistas. As early as 1912, it was formulated in the newspaper of the Mexican Liberal Party (PLM), *Regeneración* ("Regeneration"): "We liberals want everything to be available for everyone and producers to

consume, not according to their output, but in line with their needs" (*Regeneración*, No. 94, 15 June 1912).2 After the obvious failure of liberal ideas and political concepts under the dictatorship (1884-1911) of the ex-Liberal Porfirio Díaz, there was a radicalization within the Liberal Party. Unlike the neoliberals of a few decades later, the Mexican revivers radicalized liberalism but did so towards the left. There was a fundamental rejection of private ownership; the Liberals turned to anarchist and socialist ideas. Rubén Trejo describes this radicalization process in his history of the Magonist movement as a "theoretico-political revolution".3 Today, various collectives in Mexico also refer to Ricardo Flores Magón, after whom this radical wing of the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920) is named.4

Secondly, the Zapatistas declare the existence of a cultural difference, alongside the demand for social equality. Once again, they adopt the standpoint of those who are perceived – "culturally", this time – as "the Others"; of those who are made to feel or who feel themselves to be different, with their own traditions, customs and practices. As is the case with identity politics elsewhere, organizing within Zapatism occurs initially along such lines of exclusion and is aimed at inclusion. In this respect, a claim is made for the (re)conquest of their own history. The Zapatistas have been working for this (re)appropriation for as long as they have been in existence: on a symbolic level, for instance, with the reference to Emiliano Zapata (1873-1919), revered in Mexico as a revolutionary hero; and on the realpolitical level, with grassroots democratic structures harking back to indigenous traditions as much as to democratic models of the worker's councils (*Rätedemokratie*) and socialism, and which have been put into practice in over thirty autonomous communities. The names of most of these places changed after the uprising, and today the names are drawn from

the history of revolutionary Mexico or the transnational left: "*Che Guevara*", "*Emiliano Zapata*", "*Tierra y Libertad*", "*Moises Gandhi*", among others. Since 2003, the autonomous districts are governed by five administrative centres known as *caracoles* ("conches"), in which the *Juntas de Buen Gobierno* ("Good Government Committees"), equipped with an imperative mandate, manage the interests of the pro-Zapatista communities. A sign at the entrances to the *caracoles* already points to one of the principles of the Zapatista concept of politics: it is the people (*el pueblo*) who rule here, the sign says, and the government obeys. Alongside the grassroots democratic principle of "leading by obeying" (*mandar obedeciendo*), the idea of "asking we walk" (*preguntando caminamos*) is a second important principle, to be interpreted as a consequence of the dogmatically entrenched left-wing cadre politics of the 1970s and 1980s.

The sociologist Michel Wieviorka has also shown that the collective experience of discrimination can lead to the linking of social and cultural logics within social movements. He identifies diasporic Jews as well as Black Americans in the US as paradigmatic cases for sections of the population, who already voiced the demand for cultural recognition in their movements and quite often linked this with the social question. Within the Left, cultural difference was often regarded as a negligeable variable in the class struggle, one that would gradually become irrelevant in the drive towards progress. For this reason too, movements that emphasized cultural difference were constantly exposed to accusations that they were reactionary and divisive. And so the peasant farmers' movement within the Mexican Revolution was also perceived as reactionary by elements in the workers' movement – certainly in Marx's understanding of the term and above all in Engels'.[5] Yet during the sixties, movements that took the

experiences of cultural discrimination as the starting point of their struggle were able to establish themselves because they made the following statement seem convincing: ethnic, gender or sexual allegiances are never neutral, "but they function within the framework of the social hierarchy."6 The Zapatistas too are operating in the context of these movements and this struggle within the movements of the New Left.

According to Wieviorka, the influence of identity-politics movements – very strong since the 1960s – may be explained, among other things, by the social status that the question of the social production of differences currently possesses. Wieviorka puts forward the thesis that this production stands "today at the heart of societies' work on themselves"7, and is not some fading phenomenon on the fringes of these societies. For Wieviorka, processes of "collective self-assertion"8 are made possible by means of the complementary conditions of the existence of a power relationship on the one hand, and a positive principle of respect on the other. The first condition represents a reaction to the theoretical as well as the legal fact that society is not a homogeneous whole composed of free and equal individuals, but rather that rejection and disparagement (of groups by other groups) occur, and that a stand is being taken against this. The *Sociology of Difference*, as Wieviorka explicitly notes, is therefore "inevitably also a sociology of the social hierarchy, of power and of exclusion"9. The second condition means that the actors must also experience themselves as beings deserving of esteem. The production of identity therefore is not necessarily preceded by a victim status; it can also generally evolve from a collective search for meaning. So not just collective self-defence – it is well known that the full name of the *Black Panther Party* was the *Black Panther Party for Self-Defense –,* but also an obvious relish in the

production of meaning. This is in vogue anyway if we are to believe Wieviorka, because the linking of cultural and social ways of looking at the problem has not been an inevitable development, but rather a logical one. For, with the end of the Fordist era, the social question itself has also changed and can no longer be posed separately from the cultural context: "Exclusion and instability rather than exploitation and the conditions of production were now at the heart of the social question."[10]

The enormous international response provoked by Zapatism can definitely be traced back to these structural shifts within the social question for one thing. For another, however, it is undoubtedly due to the Zapatistas' own forms of politics, which triggered numerous reactions worldwide. The fact that they have also given a fillip to the anti-globalisation movement and fresh impetus to the formation of sociological theory and, furthermore, that they have left their mark on contemporary art and in pop music[11] cannot be explained by the accentuation of cultural difference, or the emphasis on indigenous identity alone. It is true that the recognition of indigenous cultures plays a key role in Zapatism and is still a central vehicle in the struggle against social demarcation and cultural exclusion. But by challenging patriarchal structures through the "Revolutionary Women's Law" (1993) on the one hand, and mobilizing civil society on the other, the Zapatistas have made clear that they are not (just) concerned with the preservation of indigenous traditions.[12] Luz Kerkeling quite rightly points out that, in its negotiations with the Mexican federal government, the EZLN was also not just concerned with "indigenous rights and culture". Rather it was the government who refused to negotiate on the Zapatistas' three further requests – "democracy and justice", "prosperity and development" and "women's rights". In this way, the government tried "to label the Zapatistas' liberation struggle as

a purely local phenomenon", according to Kerkeling.13 This tendency to fix Zapatism as a local phenomenon and an indigenous scheme for autonomy is supported not just by the government but also by elements within the Left, with positive as well as critical intent. For example, the Latin American specialist Leo Gabriel expresses clear praise for autonomy. Under the label of a "politics of independence", Gabriel discusses the Zapatist autonomy as one of various indigenous land schemes in Latin America and, among other things, puts forward the thesis that "the higher the degree of cultural identity, the stronger the political effectiveness of an autonomous system (process, subject)"14. In contrast, Albert Sterr considers the EZLN to be "blinkered in its strategy of defending the autonomy of resistant communities that are both geographically remote and isolated militarily"15. Indeed Sterr strongly criticizes here the EZLN's refusal to associate itself positively with Andrés Manuel López Obrador's campaign as the Democratic Revolutionary Party's (PRD) candidate for the presidency in 2006. A few years earlier, in his book co-authored with Dieter Boris, he had already decided that, with the exception of the autonomy issue, "Zapatism as a movement is incapable of intervention either from the point of view of content or from that of its organizational capacities"16.

As a counter to both of these positions, which reduce Zapatism to its politics of autonomy, the "strategic universalism" of Zapatism alongside its *strategic* use of identity politics should be stressed. Wieviorka attaches relatively little significance to the concept of an identity shaped by power in the sense that it is assigned by a dominant social or state-administered power, a process also implied in the categorization of people as "indigenous". Moreover, he pays scant attention to the issues raised by the internal standardizations implicit in the construction of identity, a phenomenon criticized by

feminists. And yet these structural effects of the fixation of identities are the point of departure for John Holloway's thinking. For the neo-Marxist theorist Holloway, a politics based on identity is inseparable from the "fetishization of thought"17. He interprets the Zapatistas' strategic use of identity politics unequivocally as a struggle against the classification of state politics, ultimately as a "negation of identity"18. Even if Holloway's observations themselves lead to a highly problematic "we" (as a struggling subject),19 he deserves credit for having shifted the focus of attention, in view of the reception of Zapatism, away from those struggling for their collective rights as indigenous peoples and towards their universal demands. In this context in particular, Kerkeling demonstrates that the development of the slogan "Everything for everyone!" – in connection with the negotiations between the EZLN and the Mexican government in 1996 – is a strategic tactic, designed to prevent the movement from being perceived as one limited to indigenous rights. Accordingly, as Kerkeling shows, it also declares the fundamental goal of a "heterogeneous social emancipation from below"20. So the early emergence of the slogan in Magonism is by no means just a reference to some domestic Mexican tradition. It picks up on the anti-hierarchical and anti-institutional history of anarchism. Holloway too implicitly follows anarchistic traditions and contents in his programmatically titled *Change The World Without Taking Power* (2002), since the anarchist Erich Mühsam had already stressed that social struggles were not about a takeover of power. In his paper *"Die Befreiung der Gesellschaft vom Staat"*,* written in 1932, Mühsam (who was murdered by the Nazis in 1934) writes that the slogan "All Power to the Workers' Councils" might be open to misinterpretation, even though, by then, it was only used by Socialists hostile to authority anyway, (and no longer by the Communists). Mühsam suggests therefore that it would be

“advisable, so as to rule out any confusing interpretations, for the anarchists to agree on the slogan ‘All Rights to the Workers’ Councils’ – or Everything to the Workers’ Councils, everything through the councils, or else ‘Everything for everyone through everyone’, which amounts to the same thing”21.

In contrast to hegemonic, chauvinistic (particularly with regard to prosperity) or racist identity politics, which are voiced in slogans like “Austria first” or “Germany for the Germans”, the Zapatist motto is not aimed at the exclusion of others. “Everything for everyone, and nothing for ourselves” may be interpreted, rather, as a confirmation of universal and universalistic demands. In the end, the issue is not “ourselves” or the identitarian community. It’s about the common– that is, everyone. It is as if the Zapatistas were recalling the ancient Greek meaning of the word *koinonia* or “community”, a term that derives from *koinos*, meaning “common”. To this extent, the Zapatistas pursue a politics that could be described as “strategic universalism” 22, a phrase used by Paul Gilroy. Gilroy also explores the African-American civil-rights movements in the US, mentioned by Wieviorka. Given the experience of National Socialism and the cultural legacy of its “race politics”, however, he is categorically opposed to political organization along the lines of skin colour or ethnic identity. Gilroy’s alternative, the vague vision of a “planetary humanism”, is nourished by a political belief in the possibility of overcoming essentialist concepts of politics and by the emancipatory effects of US popular culture. Taking liberation fantasies that are time and again transposed into the future and outer space as his starting point, Gilroy maintains that the challenge is to find more powerful concepts of a future planetary humanism in the past, in order to link them with the political imaginary of the present.23 In this sense – but then Gilroy’s book had not yet been written – the

Zapatistas had organized both “intergalactic gatherings against neoliberalism and for humanity” in Chiapas (1996) and Spain (1997). In this, certainly, one can see a successful attempt to transform the paradise of ideas into something more worldly: to earth it, as it were, i.e. make it compatible with the mud of the Lakandon jungle in the rainy season. That is the one aspect of reconciliation resulting from Zapatista practice – and its significance goes far beyond what peasant farmers in southern Mexico are doing. In the same way that this one, suspended between visionary firmament and grass-roots politics, is perhaps more of an overlap or a toning down, the other reconciliatory aspect is that which exists between particularism and universalism. What is more, Zapatism is a very good model – though certainly not the only one – for social movements in which cultural difference and social equality, particularist and universalist demands are by no means as incompatible as the corresponding concepts are often treated in academic discourse.

The demand for “strategic universalism”, however, doesn’t say very much about the concrete possibilities of alliance politics. In any case, the Zapatistas kept their distance from the left-wing democratic mass movement against electoral fraud, after the presidential election in the summer of 2006. They stood by their own mobilization in the “Other Campaign”, which had pre-dated those events. Their position was not always met with understanding. “It was a grave error by the Zapatistas and by the anti-capitalist, anti-institutional ‘Other Campaign’ (*La Otra*) that came in their wake”, writes Albert Sterr, “not to strongly align themselves and their own ideological content with this movement, […]”.24 It is certainly debatable whether a “strategic universalism” should also involve a tactical change of direction towards pragmatic goals within the context of a statehood that is democratic purely in

form: for example, when the issue, as in this case, is the break with the conservative hegemony caused by the election for a further six years of Felipe Calderón of the conservative-clerical National Action Party (PAN). But the view of parliamentary conditions scarcely does justice to the fundamental claims of the Zapatista conception of politics. The Mexican journalist Luis Hernández Navarro takes a different view from Sterr of the Zapatistas' current politics. He welcomes the independence of the "Other Campaign" and stresses the enormous significance that should be attached to the creation, through this campaign, of a public sphere free of any state involvement.25 In this way, he draws attention quite rightly to an important libertarian dimension of Zapatista politics. It is important *and* justifiable precisely because this type of constituent or instituent public sphere beyond the state *and* the market – not least in the context of the adoption of neoliberal pragmatics through international social democracy in the 1990s – has all but been erased from the horizons of democratic socialization.

It is not just the "ourselves" and the associated strategic use of identity at best that should be stressed in the irritating second part of the slogan: "and nothing for ourselves". The "nothing" too is worth emphasizing because, in an era when the social net is being rationalized, even anarcho-communist slogans such as these are liable to be appropriated for other purposes. So the home page at www.alles-fuer-alle.de, for example, promotes a huge shopping centre in the Spessart in Germany, rather than the abolition of capitalism. It is precisely because the slogan resonates not just with left-wing artists working in the documentary and conceptual fields, or rebels in Argentina, or student protesters in Berlin and Paris that the anti-capitalism – based on cultural difference *as* exclusion and aimed at radical social equality – should be stressed. The Zapatista slogan, this time with "nothing" as the operative word, is

aimed at a fundamental change in society and articulates anti-capitalist demands that are difficult to bring into line with a social-democratic mission. The Zapatistas' action in reclaiming the slogan "Everything for everyone!" in the fight against neoliberal capitalism's conditions of exploitation must also be interpreted as a reminder of the utopian potential of anti-capitalist struggles and as a reappropriation of this potential.

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1 Cited in Poniatowska, Elena 1997, "Vorwort: Das Morgen im Gestern", in: *Subcomandante Marcos: Geschichten vom Alten Antonio*, Hamburg: Verlag Libertäre Assoziation, pp. 9-24, p. 16.

2 Cited in Trejo, Rubén 2006, *Magonismus: Utopie und Praxis in der Mexikanischen Revolution 1910-1913*, Lich/Hessen: Verlag Edition AV, p. 205.

3 Trejo 2006, p. 204.

4 Cf Gruppe B.A.S.T.A. (Hg.) 2005, *Ricardo Flores Magón. Tierra y Libertad*, Münster: Unrast Verlag.

5 In the vision of a history that moves purposefully and progressively forward, popular movements organized by indigenous or other non-state concerns were considered to be reactionary and counter-revolutionary. Friedrich Engels described them as "ethnic trash" (cited in Hierlmeier, Josef Moe 2002, *Internationalismus. Eine Einführung in die Ideengeschichte des Internationalismus von Vietnam bis Genua*, Stuttgart: Schmetterling Verlag, p. 16).

6 Wieviorka, Michel 2003, *Kulturelle Differenz und kollektive Identitäten*, Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, p. 40.

7 ibid., p. 144.

8 ibid., p. 144.

9 ibid., p. 144.

10 ibid., p. 47.

11 Relevant cultural references include, for example, Allan Sekula's use of analyses and extracts by the Zapatistas' spokesperson, Subcomandante Marcos, in his Documenta11 work *Fish Story*; the mention of Zapatista struggles in the World Monitoring Atlas by the Bureau d'Etude (2003); Marcos's appearance in Eske Schlüter's Video *Límite Meanwhile* (2005); or the portrayal of Zapatist autonomy in the project *Alternative Economics, Alternative Societies* by Oliver Ressler (in cooperation with Tom Waibel). For Zapatista influences in pop culture, cf Kastner, Jens 2005, "'¡Vivan las Americas!' Neozapatismus und Popkultur", in: *Testcard. Beiträge zur Popgeschichte,* Mainz, Volume 14, Spring 2005, pp.72-78.

12 On the subject of the Zapatistas' mobilisation of civil society, cf Kastner, Jens 2004, "Zapatismus und Transnationalisierung. Analyses of the relevance of Zapatista politics for research into social movements", in: Kaltmeier, Olaf, Jens Kastner and Elisabeth Tuider (Ed.), *Neoliberalismus – Autonomie – Widerstand. Soziale Bewegungen in Lateinamerika*, Münster: Verlag Westfälisches Dampfboot, pp. 251-275. On Zapatism generally cf the outstanding global study by Kerkeling, Luz 2006, *La Lucha Sigue! Der Kampf geht weiter! EZLN – Ursachen und Entwicklungen des zapatistischen Aufstands*, Münster: Unrast Verlag, 2nd & current editions.

13 Kerkeling 2006, p. 193.

14 Gabriel, Leo 2005, “Die Einheit in der Vielfalt. Hypothesen für eine neue Demokratie”, in: L. G. and LATAUTONOMY (eds.), *Politik der Eigenständigkeit. Lateinamerikanische Vorschläge für eine neue Demokratie*, Wien: Mandelbaum Verlag, pp. 228-293, p. 253.

15 Sterr, Albert 2007: “Die Linke in Mexiko. Massenwirksame Bewegungen und Parteien – ein Überblick”, in: *analyse & kritik. Zeitung für linke Debatte und Praxis*, Hamburg, No. 514, 16.02.2007, pp. 26-27, p. 26ff.

16 Boris, Dieter and Albert Sterr 2002: *FOXtrott in Mexiko.Demokratisierung oder Neopopulismus?* Köln (Neuer ISP Verlag), p. 161. In view of the various Zapatista initiatives with resonances throughout Mexico as well as transnational effects, the question arises as to which form of capacity to intervene the authors have in mind. The fact that the authors have been applying very similar criticism to different events for years attests to the durability of the Zapatista strategy. Already, six months after their greatest mobilization success, nothing much remains of the mass movement gathered around López Obrador for his election victory, which the Zapatistas should have joined, according to Sterr.

17 Holloway, John 2002: *Die Welt verändern, ohne die Macht zu übernehmen*, Münster (Verlag Westfälisches Dampfboot),

p. 90. [Title in English: *Change The World Without Taking Power*, London, Pluto Press].

18 Holloway 2002, p. 89.

19 Cf Kastner, Jens 2006, “Rebellion, Revolte und Revolution überdenken. Kritische Einführung in die zapatistisch inspirierte Theorie John Holloways”, in: Holloway, John, *Die zwei Zeiten der Revolution. Würde, Macht und die Politik der Zapatistas*, Wien:

Verlag Turia + Kant, pp. 7-35, p. 23ff. [Title in English *Zapatista!: Reinventing Revolution in Mexico*, London, Pluto Press, 1998].

20 Kerkeling 2006, p. 264.

* Translator's Note: *"The liberation of society from the state"*.

21 Mühsam, Erich o. J.: *Die Befreiung der Gesellschaft vom Staat. Was ist kommunistischer Anarchismus?*, Berlin: Karin Kramer Verlag, p. 104.

22 Gilroy, Paul 2001, *Against Race. Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line*, Cambridge, MA.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, p. 327.

23 Cf Gilroy 2001, p. 356.

24 Sterr 2007, p. 26.

25 Hernández Navarro, Luis 2006, "El romper de la ola" in: *Subcomandante Marcos and the Zapatistas: The Other Campaign/La Otra Campaña*, San Francisco: City Lights, pp. 6-58, p. 48.