

## **The Zapatista Effect** **The internet and the rise of an alternativa political fabric<sup>1</sup>**

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In recent years the future of foreign policy in the post-Cold War era has been widely and hotly debated. The debates have included discussion of the future of the nation-state, of the appropriate principles to guide foreign policy and of the implications for international relations of the rapid expansion of international informational infrastructures. For the most part these discussions have come to focus on how to renovate the foreign policy apparatus to make it more effective in the emerging new era. The focus derives from a defacto consensus that assumes that while there is an ongoing, gradual expansion in the responsibilities and powers of supranational institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) or the European Union (EU), and while sub-national actors such as state and even municipal governments or non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are playing a larger role on the international scene, the nation-state will continue to be the primary international actor and thus in need of "foreign" policy. Given the history of modern capitalist society, such expectations seem reasonable; they may, however, be increasingly disappointed.

Ever since the rise of capitalism as a social system, the nation-state has been the primary vehicle for the imposition and maintenance of political order. Even private property and the market, generally assumed to be the key institutions of capitalism, owe their modern existence and survival to the nation-state. Human society has been organized locally through individual nation-states and globally through the collaborations and conflicts among them. The necessary corollary of this situation has been the omnipresence co-existence of "domestic policy" and "foreign policy". In the

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Constitutional legal systems of most nation-states the national government has been accorded a monopoly over formal interactions with other nation-states. While individuals --via tourism, trade, immigration and investment-- may lawfully interact and contract with those in other countries, as a general rule such contacts are ultimately regulated by the institutions of the nation-state as the embodiment of national "sovereignty".

In recent years, however, the primacy of the nation-state has been repeatedly challenged. These challenges have come both from above and below. Above, the post World War II era saw such a rapid growth in the power and scope of supranational institutions such as multinational corporations, the United Nations and the IMF that many began to fear the usurpation of national sovereignty in both economic and political matters.<sup>3</sup> More recently, from below, the increasingly active role of regional and city governments in foreign trade, immigration and even political matters have challenged the Constitutional monopoly on foreign affairs of national governments.<sup>4</sup> In the same period, there has been a growing cross border networking of NGOs such as the hundreds which mobilized against the North American Free Trade Agreement. Such networks have not only outflanked national government policy makers but often worked directly against their policies.<sup>5</sup>

In the last few years concern with the ability of such non-governmental networks to undercut national governments and international agreements has grown. This concern has derived, in part, from the growing strength such networks have derived from the use of international computer communications. The extremely rapid spread of the computer "Net" around the world has suggested that such networks and their influence may grow apace.

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<sup>3</sup> It is interesting to note that fears of the impingement of national sovereignty seem to have proliferated on the Right of the political spectrum in the North (e.g., traditional conservative fears of a One-World government or contemporary anti-immigrant racism) and on the Left in the South (e.g., anti-imperialist, "national" liberation movements or more recent anti-IMF campaigns during the international debt crisis).

<sup>4</sup> See: Michael H. Shuman, "Dateline Mainstreet: Local Foreign Policies," *Foreign Policy*, 65 (Winter 1986-87).

<sup>5</sup> Cathryn L. Thorup, "The Politics of Free Trade and the Dynamics of Cross-border Coalitions in U.S.-Mexican Relations," *Columbia Journal of World Business*, XXVI, no. 11 (Summer 1991) pp. 12-26. Cathryn Thorup, "Redefining Governance in North America: The Impact of Cross-Border Networks and Coalitions on Mexican Immigration into the United States," RAND, DRU-219-FF, March 1993. Howard H. Frederick, "Computer Communications in Cross-Border Coalition-Building: North American NGO Networking Against NAFTA," *Gazette: The International Journal for Mass Communication Studies*, 50, nos. 2-3, 1992, pp. 217-241. Carlos A. Heredia, "NAFTA and Democratization in Mexico," *Journal of International Affairs*, 48, no. 1 (Summer 1994) pp. 13-38. For a recent assessment of the evolution of NGOs see: Ann Marie Clark, "Non-governmental Organizations and their Influence on International Society," *Journal of International Affairs*, 48, no. 2, (Winter 1995) pp. 507-525.

Surprisingly, no catalyst of that growth has been more important than the indigenous Zapatista rebellion in the southern Mexican state of Chiapas and the widespread political mobilization to which it has contributed. The computer networks supporting the rebellion have evolved from providing vehicles for the familiar, traditional work of solidarity (e.g., material aid and the defense of human rights against the policies of the Salinas and Zedillo administrations) into a kind of electronic fabric of opposition to much wider policies. Today those networks are providing the nerve system of increasingly global challenges to the dominant economic policies of this period and in the process undermining the distinction between domestic and foreign policy and even the present constitution of the nation-state. Whereas the anti-NAFTA coalition was merely North American in scope, the influence of the pro-Zapatista mobilization has reached across at least five continents and dozens of countries generating a much, much wider activism. This activism has spread so rapidly, to such a degree and in such a way as to call for the most careful scrutiny.

At first the Zapatista uprising appeared primarily to be a challenge to domestic policies in Mexico, those having to do with land and indigenous affairs. The EZLN did point to NAFTA as sounding a "death knell" for indigenous peoples, but their main orientation was towards gaining recognition and standing within the Mexican nation.

The state's initial response sought to isolate the Zapatistas through a variety of means. Militarily it sought to crush the rebellion if possible and at least confine it to Chiapas. Ideologically, its control of the mass media in Mexico was used to limit and distort news about the uprising. In part, the government attempted to portray the Zapatista movement as a threat to the political integrity of the Mexican nation.<sup>6</sup> The government conjured the threat of a pan-Mayan movement embracing both Southern Mexico and much of Central American. Evoking the horrors of the Balkans, the Mexican government equated indigenous autonomy with succession and the break-up of country. As the Zapatista movement succeeded in communicating to the rest of Mexico and the world that it sought indigenous autonomy within the framework of the Mexican nation, that ploy was rendered useless. Although the government stopped evoking Pan-Mayan phantasms, it has continued to pretend that national integrity must be defended

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<sup>6</sup> The government's first, and quickly aborted, effort to mobilize public sentiment against the Zapatista uprising was to portray it as the result of foreign subversive manipulation of the indigenous. Once it was forced to recognize that the source of the uprising was the indigenous themselves, it shifted to an argument that played on ignorance of the specificity of Zapatista demands --an ignorance which the government did its best to maintain.

against indigenous autonomy. Such autonomy, it claims, would rupture the political, juridical and cultural cohesiveness of the Mexican nation. Given the reiterated emphasis by the Zapatistas on autonomy within, not against, Mexican society --dramatically symbolized by the flying of giant Mexican flags at virtually all Zapatista gatherings-- this argument has been difficult to sustain in the current debates in Mexico.

But if changes demanded by the Zapatistas do not threaten the integrity of the Mexican nation, they certainly do threaten the integrity of the Mexican state as it is currently constituted. The basic thrust of their political demands, and one reason for their wide- spread popularity, has been for a recasting of democracy in ways which would break the power not only of the central government but of the political parties in Mexico. The demands for autonomy involve a relocation not only of authority but of resources to much more local levels. The search for wider citizen participation in public policy making involves not only more direct democracy at the local level, but a liberation of electoral politics from the grip of the parties from which all candidates must currently come. Such changes have been clearly perceived by the ruling party as a threat to its now fading hegemony but also by the oppositional parties as a threat to their recent advances in sharing power with the PRI.<sup>7</sup> Such radical ideas coupled with other demands for reform energized by the rebellion itself have caused a profound crisis of the Mexican political system.

Beyond plunging the political system into crisis in Mexico, the Zapatista struggle has inspired and stimulated a wide variety of grassroots political efforts in many other countries. For reasons I spell out below, it is perhaps not exaggerated to speak of a "Zapatista Effect" reverberating through social movements around the world -- homologous to, but ultimately much more threatening to the New World Order of neoliberalism than the "Tequila Effect" that rippled through emerging financial markets in the wake of the Peso Crisis of 1994. In the financial case, the danger was panic and rapid withdrawal of hot money from speculative investments that could collapse

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<sup>7</sup> There is a history of rejecting the subordination of indigenous struggles to political parties that long predates the Zapatista movement. See Charlene Floyd's description of the 1978 Representative Assembly of the Diocese of San Cristobal de las Casas in which offers by a political party of alliance were rejected. J. Charlene Floyd, "A Theology of Insurrection? Religion and Politics in Mexico," *Journal of International Affairs*, 50, no. 1 (Summer 1996,) pp. 159-160. In response to widespread rank and file enthusiasm for the Zapatista rebellion the left-of-center Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD) originally sought at least informal ties with the EZLN. But when one of its leaders Cuauhtemoc Cardenas visited with EZLN representatives in Chiapas, he was lectured by the Zapatistas on the undemocratic character of the party and their lack of interest in electoral politics. Since then even greater hostility between the PRD leadership and the EZLN has followed the refusal of the latter to support the electoral candidates of the former in elections in Chiapas.

markets. In the case of social movements and the activism which is their hallmark, the danger lies in the impetus given to the active rejection of current policies, to the rethinking of the institutions and functioning of democracy and to the development of alternatives to the status quo.

While it has become commonplace to discuss social movements and their activism in terms either of NGOs or of "civil society", these two terms are highly problematic and vague. They are often used in ways which include everything from groups of villagers who have organized themselves for some local purpose through the Rockefeller and Ford Foundations to multinational corporations. The term often includes corporate-spawned entities, truly autonomous organizations and those which have become inextricably tied to the state. In this essay, therefore, I use the term "grassroots" instead. It is also vague, but by it I mean all of those member-funded efforts at self-organization which remain autonomous of either the state or corporate sectors. Such organization often includes independent NGOs but is more broadly inclusive of various informal networks of activists and community organizations. The grassroots movements catalyzed by the Zapatistas include everything from human rights and environmental NGOs through local community governments to loose networks of political, media and labor activists who have linked other movements to those of the Zapatistas.

In what follows I sketch this mobilization, the role of computer communications has played in it, and then consider some possible implications for the future of the nation-state and foreign policy.

### **The Zapatista Rebellion**

The rebellion came to the world's attention on January 1, 1994, when the units of the Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional (EZLN, or the Zapatista National Liberation Army) came out of the jungle to take over a series of towns in the Southern Mexican state of Chiapas. The uprising aimed, first and foremost, at making indigenous voices heard at the national level in Mexico. For most of the last five hundred years, the voices of indigenous people have been either passively ignored or brutally silenced. Indigenous lands and resources have been repeatedly stolen and the people themselves exploited under some of the worse labor conditions in Mexico. The official policies of

the Mexican state have mostly been oriented toward assimilation with only lip service given to the value of the country's diverse ethnic, cultural and linguistic heritage. The result has been a long history of fierce resistance and recurrent rebellion, first to Spanish colonization and then to the dominant Ladino classes after independence. Since the consolidation of the modern Mexican state --a "party state" controlled by the ruling Partido Revolucionaria Institucionalizada (PRI)-- this resistance has been handled by both the mailed fist and the velvet glove. Overt rebellion has been crushed while from the time of the first land reforms of president Cardenas in the 1930s, the Mexican state has also distributed land to some indigenous communities while holding the same possibility out to others.

As a result, for several decades prior to the 1994 uprising, local communities in Chiapas largely confined their efforts to legally recognized vehicles of protest (demonstrations and marches --sometimes as far as Mexico City) and petitions (e.g., for access to lands stolen from them). To such efforts the Mexican state responded with some patronage (to create local instruments of its power) and endless delays (especially vis a vis land petitions). Under continuing pressure for land reform, but unwilling to undercut the power of local rural elites, the government opened uncultivated forests for colonization. As a result immigrants from various parts of Chiapas and elsewhere in Mexico carved new farmlands and new communities out of the forests. It was often in these new communities of land-starved campesinos, where the PRI was unable to install institutions of control, that peasant self-organization and sympathy for the Zapatista movement thrived in the late 1980s and early 1990s.<sup>8</sup>

Living miserably from hand to mouth, unable to obtain enough arable land and inputs for viable farming and facing oppressive exploitation in the agricultural labor market dominated by ranchers and plantation owners, some peasants began to join the EZLN in the mountains or participate in their work in the villages. Within the context of a highly patriarchal indigenous culture, young women also began to join up -- encouraged by an egalitarian ideology that allowed them both more control over their

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<sup>8</sup> On these sources of Zapatista support see the study by anthropologist George Collier, *Basta! Land and the Zapatista Rebellion in Chiapas*, Oakland: Institute for Food and Development Policy, 1994. Also, on the indigenous sources of self-definition and cultural practices which have nourished the Zapatista movement see Guillermo Bonfil, *Mexico Profundo: Una civilizacion negada*, Mexico: Grijalbo, 1994 (also available in English as Guillermo Bonfil Batalla, *Mexico Profundo: Reclaiming a Civilization*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996) and Gustavo Esteva, *Cronica del Fin de una Era: El Secreto del EZLN*, Mexico: Editorial Posada, 1994.

own lives and the opportunity for public responsibility.<sup>9</sup> Little by little, over a period of years, a guerrilla army was formed and a new fabric of cooperation among various ethnic groups was woven. When, in the pursuit of NAFTA and foreign investment, President Salinas de Gortari abrogated the last meaningful guarantees of community integrity by changing Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution to allow the privatization of communal land, the Zapatista communities ordered their army to take action as a last ditch effort to stave off what seemed like more or less imminent annihilation.

The overt military clashes of the rebellion lasted only a few days and were followed by three years of on and off political negotiations. These negotiations and the mobilization of political support in much of Mexico constituted a political victory for the Zapatistas and catalyzed a much wider assault on the ruling party's power. Grassroots movements have both attacked and withdrawn from the official institutions of the party-state, both national and local. The ruling PRI and the hitherto powerful presidency have come under unprecedented and repeated attack for human rights violations, media manipulation, corruption and the lack of real democracy. Disillusionment in the prospects for meaningful electoral reform has led many communities to withdraw entirely from the electoral process. In Chiapas local communities have burned ballot boxes, overthrown officials elected through fraud and created municipal governing bodies according to their own methods --which sometimes includes voting, and sometimes not.<sup>10</sup>

In response to its political failures at the negotiating table and in the forum of public opinion, and perhaps in response to pressures from foreign investors in the wake of the Peso Crisis in December 1994, the Mexican government unilaterally shifted in February of 1995 to politics "by other means" launching a military offensive (to which the Zapatistas responded by withdrawing into the mountains).<sup>11</sup> Massive protests in

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<sup>9</sup> These opportunities in the EZLN for young peasant women were partly achieved through their own efforts. Some of this remarkable evolution can be traced in Rosa Rojas ed, *Chiapas, y las Mujeres Que?*, Volumes I and II, 1994 and 1995. That the Zapatista communities became islands of relative liberation for women in the sea of Mexican machismo has been one important source of the movement's appeal among foreigners.

<sup>10</sup> The possibility of democracy without formal elections usually seems strange to those of us reared in modern Western traditions. Yet, in small communities which organize themselves collectively through endless discussion and consensus and "leaders" are those accorded responsibility informally because they have proved themselves competent through performance, decisions may be democratic in the sense that everyone has a voice and everyone's concerns are taken seriously into account.

<sup>11</sup> A report to emerging market investors by then Chase Manhattan specialist Riordan Roett calling for the Zedillo government to restore investor confidence by "eliminating the Zapatistas" was leaked to the press and subsequently widely publicized in the United States and Mexico. It not only led to protests at Chase offices from coast to coast, but convinced many to interpret the military offensive as not only a

Mexico and abroad forced a halt to that overt offensive but the Mexican government has continued its search for a solution by force through a covert low-intensity war using the military, various police forces and paramilitary terrorists.<sup>12</sup>

### **The Role of the Internet: from the Margins to the Center**

The role of the Internet in the international circulation of the indigenous rebellion in Chiapas developed quickly and has continued to evolve. Early on, the Internet provided a means for the rapid dissemination of information and organization through pre-existing circuits, such as those which had been created as part of the struggle to block NAFTA, or those concerned with Latin American or indigenous issues. These existed primarily at an international level and mostly in computer-rich North America and Western Europe. News reports on radio and television were complemented in cyberspace by first-hand reports of observers (who flooded into Chiapas in record numbers with hitherto unseen alacrity) and more analytical commentary by specialists who could voice their opinions and enter into debates more quickly and easily in cyberspace than in other media. These few circuits were rapidly complemented by the creation of new, specialized lists, conferences and web pages devoted specifically to Chiapas and what was soon being called the struggle for democracy in Mexico. The breadth of participation in these discussions and the posting of multiple sources of information has made possible a degree of verification unusual in the history of the media. Questionable information can be quickly checked and counter-information posted with a rapidity unknown in either print or radio-television. Instead of days or weeks for objections or corrections to be registered, the norm is minutes or hours.

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betrayal of the negotiations but as an offering to Wall Street to staunch the flight of hot money from the Mexican market in the wake of the Peso Crisis. The text of the report and postings on the subsequent protests and reactions is available on-line at URL: <http://www.eco.utexas.edu/faculty/Cleaver/chiapas95.html>

<sup>12</sup> Although this policy of low-intensity warfare (the current euphemism for counterinsurgency) has been repeatedly denied by the Mexican government it has been repeatedly documented on the Internet in a myriad field reports from local and international observers. One result has been the repeated protests by well known international human rights NGOs, like Amnesty International, over the abuses to which Chiapanecan peasants and activists have been subjected. See the archives of the Internet lists Chiapas95 and chiapas-l which can be accessed through URL: <http://www.eco.utexas.edu/faculty/Cleaver/zapsincyber.html>



In all of this the EZLN has played no direct role; these efforts were initiated by others to weave a network of support for the Zapatista movement. Although there is a myth that Zapatista spokesperson Subcommandante Marcos sits in the jungle uploading EZLN communiques to the world from his laptop, the reality has been that the EZLN and its communities have had a very mediated relationship to the Internet. The Zapatista communities are indigenous, poor and often cut-off from not only computer communications but from the electricity and telephone systems through which the former mostly operate. Under these conditions, EZLN materials were initially prepared as written communiques for the mass media and handed to reporters or to friends to give to reporters. Such materials then had to be typed or scanned into e-text for distribution on the Internet.

Today there are dozens of web pages with detailed information on the situation in Chiapas and Mexico more generally and several widely used news and discussion lists devoted to the daily circulation of information and its assessment. These various interventions operate from many countries in many languages. All of these efforts are the result of work by those sympathetic to the indigenous, to the Zapatistas or to the whole struggle for democracy in Mexico. Some of these efforts were launched in Mexico, e.g., the list chiapas-l is run through the UNAM computers in Mexico City and the Frente Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional (FZLN, or Zapatista National Liberation Front) operates both a list (fzln-l) and a series of voluminous multi-lingual web pages carrying news and documents generated through the negotiations in Chiapas and discussions in Mexico more widely. Many others have originated outside of Mexico, e.g., the first, unofficial EZLN web page was implemented through the Swathmore web server in Pennsylvania.<sup>13</sup>

More recently, as they have come to understand the effectiveness of this technology for making their voices heard and for communicating with supporters and making allies elsewhere, the Zapatistas have begun to craft their missives and adapt their interventions accordingly. Today through the intermediary of the FZLN or other friendly groups and individuals, Marcos and the EZLN regularly send messages to others around the world, e.g., to a European-wide demonstration in Amsterdam against Maastricht and unemployment, to an Italian gathering in Venice against regional

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<sup>13</sup> A report surveying and describing this network of Internet resources is available on-line. See "Zapatistas in Cyberspace: A Guide to Analysis & Resources" at URL: <http://www.eco.utexas.edu/faculty/Cleaver/zapsincyber.html>

separatism, to a conference of media activists in New York and so on. In these communications they make their position on various issues known and seek to create or strengthen ties with other, far-flung groups.

The Internet has also played a more and more central role in particular organizing efforts initiated by the EZLN. While its role was limited in the formation of the meetings of the National Democratic Convention in 1994 and 1995 which drew together a wide variety of groups from all over Mexico, it was much greater in the subsequent national and international plebiscite in which the Zapatistas sought feedback from their supporters about the direction of their political struggle. Participants in Mexico voted at booths set up throughout the country by Alianza Civica and some 80,000 from outside the country took part mostly via the Internet. Total participation is said to have been over one million persons.<sup>14</sup>

The most dramatic organizational efforts in which the Internet has played a central role have involved the joint cooperative efforts of the Zapatistas and those linked to them. These have been the organization of very large-scale meetings in response to a January 1996 Zapatista Call for continental and intercontinental "encounters" to discuss:

1. contemporary global capitalist policies (summed up by the term "neoliberalism" in Latin America),
2. ways of elaborating a global network of opposition to those policies and
3. ways of interconnecting various projects for elaborating alternatives.

The result of these organizing efforts included: a series of continental meetings in the Spring of 1996, an intercontinental meeting in Chiapas in the Summer of 1996 and a second intercontinental meeting in Spain in the Summer of 1997. Through extensive e-mail, and a small number of intermittent, face to face meetings, possible approaches to the organization of discussion were debated, agendas were hammered out and logistical arrangements were made. The results were stunning: thousands came to the continental meetings, 3,000 to the intercontinental in Chiapas and 4,000 to the intercontinental in Spain. The significance of these continental and intercontinental meetings includes the very fact of their existence.

When the Zapatistas initiated their Call, they did so with trepidation and even characterized it as a possible folly. Such gatherings are unusual even when initiated by governments. It is only recently, historically speaking, that they have become regular

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<sup>14</sup> Alianza Civica's final tabulation of the results of the plebesite can be found in the Chiapas95 Archives, folder for September 1995 at URL: <gopher://mundo.eco.utexas.edu:70/1m/mailling/chiapas95.archive/Chiapas95%20Archives%201995/1995.09%20%28September%29>

features of the activities of supranational state institutions such as the United Nations. Governments have the wherewithal to organize such gatherings, not poor villages of indigenous peoples. In recent years middle class activists and well funded non-governmental organizations have organized parallel meetings to those of governments, e.g., at the 1992 environmental meetings in Rio de Janeiro or the 1995 women's meetings in Beijing, but no such global meetings had ever been organized by virtually unfunded grassroots organizations. That they were held and on a scale that far exceeded anyone's expectations took the Zapatistas by surprise and warrants close attention by anyone interested in the evolution of international politics.

### **Beyond Solidarity: the Interlinking of Autonomous Movements *against* Neoliberalism**

These manifestations of an historically new organizational capability were moments in the rapid crystallization of networks of discussion and debate that range far beyond the Zapatistas and Mexican politics. While the continental meeting of North America was organized by the Zapatistas themselves and held in Chiapanecan villages, the others were organized by a wide array of individuals and groups whose primary concerns lay not in Mexico but in local opposition to global policies. The Zapatista Call to discuss "neoliberalism" --the pro-market (a euphemism for pro-business) economic policies currently embraced by corporations, investors, governments, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank-- and possible global responses evoked a resonance within hundreds of diverse grassroots groups which had previously been unable to find common points of reference or vehicles for collaboration.

Today, the global capacity for action that labor and social movements have sought for over a century is rapidly becoming a reality. In the European continental meeting in Berlin, for example, considerable effort went into discussion of whether or to what degree Latin American "Neoliberalism" finds its counterpart in not only the "Thatcherization" of the economy but also the more general move toward European Union embodied in the Maastricht Treaty, the Schengen Agreement and the plans for a common European currency. In the American continental meeting the connections, similarities and differences between Latin American austerity and structural adjustment programs and US-Canadian experiences with Reaganomic supply-side economics (the

attack on the welfare state and the deregulation of business investment) and central bank tight money policies were similarly evaluated. The result of such deliberations was not only a consensus about the global character of contemporary policy, but a commitment to collective and coordinated opposition to it.<sup>15</sup>

Because of the emergence of this consensus and commitment, these meetings have turned out to be more than singular events. They can already be seen (in near-term historical hindsight) as generative moments in the coalescence of more and more tightly knit global circuits of cyberspatial communication and organization that threaten traditional top-down monopolies of such activity. Two examples, connected to the pro-Zapatista circuits, but autonomous of them can illustrate this wider phenomenon: one at the level of nation-states, one at the level of the private sector.

First, an essential ingredient of the Maastricht Treaty and Schengen Agreement is the coordination of police forces within a Europe of fading borders and increasingly mobile populations.<sup>16</sup> To facilitate both the control of the resident population and restrictions on immigration from the outside of Europe police coordination has been organized --in part through interlinked computer networks (the Schengen Information System).<sup>17</sup> Yet, anti-Maastricht marches and an Alternative Summit in Amsterdam were organized and coordinated in June 1997 by grassroots groups from all over Europe using the Internet as one important means of collaboration.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, the take-over by Italian protesters of two trains for free transportation to that city led to dramatic confrontations with Swiss, German and Dutch police forces in a way that suggested a degree of grassroots communication and organization that equaled if not outstripped arrangements among the governments involved.<sup>19</sup> Reports of events reached the Internet

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<sup>15</sup> This consensus has had an impact on language. It is now increasingly commonplace within the grassroots networks in Europe and the United States for contemporary economic and political policies to be referred to as elements of neoliberalism --a Northern embrace of the Latin American term complete with its critical connotations.

<sup>16</sup> The Maastricht Treaty is now available on-line at URL:

<http://www.altairiv.demon.co.uk/maastricht/top.html>

<sup>17</sup> The 1990 Convention to implement the Schengen Agreement, which includes a description of the planned Information System, can be found at <http://www.altairiv.demon.co.uk/maastricht/schengen/index.html>

<sup>18</sup> Much of this effort can be traced in the on-line Newsletter *The Other Voices* published by the International Coalition for a Different Europe which can be accessed through <http://www.stud.uni-hanover.de/archiv/euromail/maillist.html#00049>

<sup>19</sup> The Italian activists were quite explicit that their demand for free public transportation to this European event included a democratic protest of the high transportation costs to grassroots participation in Europe-wide political "discussions". The conceding of two trains by the Italian government to that demand must have immensely annoyed the governments of Switzerland, Germany and Holland which subsequently did all they could to confine and isolate the protesters during their transit to and from the event.

via real-time, minute-by-minute communications from the protesters using cellular phones within the trains. Their reports and analysis of the unfolding conflict were relayed through the Italian "free" radio stations to the European Counter Network (of computer communications) and hence to the Internet at large through many of the lists and conferences managed by those who had participated in the Zapatista encounters. The steady flow of reports on the confrontations, arrests and police data gathering led to the immediate organization of protests (e.g., demonstrations at Embassies and Consulates) while the events were still unfolding. This capacity for complementary action at the international level undermined government efforts to isolate and repress the Italian protesters. Indeed the comprehensiveness of the reporting on Dutch police repression has led to continuing protests, from the grassroots to the parliaments of several European Community countries by activists and legislators worried that these police actions are only the opening shot in a more general effort by police to repress protest against official EU policies.<sup>20</sup>

Second, the superiority of multinational corporate communications over those of international labor has long been recognized but is now being challenged. In the past it has been extremely difficult for workers to coordinate multinational actions against common or interconnected employers during labor disputes. There have been movements of solidarity via boycotts, such as that which supported workers opposed to apartheid in South Africa in the 1980s but few effective international strikes. One example worth studying is the current internationalization of the struggles by Mersey dock workers in Liverpool, England to ports throughout the world. Coordinated strike actions have been taken in dozens of ports not only in symbolic solidarity but directly against ships carrying cargo to or from port facilities operated by Mersey Docks & Harbor Co. The sudden emergence of picket lines on ship arrivals has come in response to a very self-conscious effort on the part of dock workers to build a global system of Internet communication and to the support for them generated, once again, by the emerging coalition of anti-Neoliberal Internet operations which has proliferated in the wake of the Intercontinental meetings mentioned above.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> On the events and the subsequent protests see the articles by Nicholas Busch and Tord Bjoerk in *The Other Voices* #7, October 1997 as well as the special "extra" edition devoted to the issue at URL: <http://www.stud.uni-hannover.de/archiv/eurosmail/>

<sup>21</sup> See the Mersey Dock workers' web page "The World is Our Picket Line!" at URL: <http://www.gn.apc.org/labournet/docks/>

Although the dock worker actions just described appear as fairly traditional private sector conflicts, the content of the Internet messages circulating their efforts around the world connect them closely to such public policy oriented actions as those in Amsterdam. While a demand for the reinstatement of the Mersey dock workers figures centrally in all the protests, the arguments put forth about the urgency of a global response clearly situate this multinational strike within the broader framework of opposition to "neoliberalism." Both examples, therefore, must be understood as moments of a crystallizing network of opposition to such policies.

### **Beyond Solidarity: the Interlinking of Autonomous Movements *for* Alternatives**

Just as opposition to current institutions and policies has been increasingly interconnected, so too has discussion about the development of alternative approaches to public policy and social organization. As critique (e.g., of free trade, of the marginalization of immigrants) has been followed by reconceptualizations and experimentation with alternatives (e.g., fair trade, citizen rights for immigrants) the sharing of these new experiences via the Internet has accelerated their proliferation and development. Ultimately, it is this "positive" side to contemporary attacks on dominant public policies which may be the most telling. To the degree that alternatives are put forward which are not only more attractive but have been proved workable, opposition to current policies and calls for their replacement will grow more quickly.

### **Indigenous Networks**

The co-existence and interconnections among these two dimensions of Internet activity was obvious at the Zapatista-called meetings and continues to be discussed in cyberspace. Important in these discussions have been the experiences of indigenous peoples in seeking alternative ways to organize democratic spheres of political interaction among the diverse cultural, ethnic and linguistic communities without dissolving their differences through the formulation of universal rules codified in the kind of nation-state Constitutions common since the Enlightenment.

These indigenous experiences have had wider influence not only because the Zapatistas have brought them to others' notice --through their own efforts to articulate such politics-- but because these efforts have actually been successful at building networks among a diverse array of indigenous peoples. There is nothing like success to attract attention. The agreements reached by representatives of the Mexican government and the Zapatistas at San Andres Sacam Ch'en in February of 1996 spelled out the basic vision and principles of such a reorganization of democracy and the kinds of Constitutional changes the demands for autonomy imply. Despite the government's subsequent failure to implement the agreement which its negotiators had signed, those principles are currently the object of widespread debate among not only the indigenous but many others --including the new Mexican Congress, no longer controlled by the PRI.<sup>22</sup> Outside of Mexico the indigenous demands for autonomy have resonated within a wide variety of ethnic and linguistic communities.

The Zapatista call for the "democratization of democracy" based on its critique of the limits of the party-tied electoral regime in Mexico has struck sympathetic chords in other parts of the world where electoral politics, especially at the regional and national levels, have come to be seen as formalistic spectacles, arenas of professional politicians whose campaigns and policies are perceived as being bought by the highest bidders. Stories about the various forms of direct democracy reputedly practiced in Zapatista communities have stimulated many jaded social critics to abandon their cynicism in favor of new attempts at discovering how real democracy and meaningful pluralism can be crafted.

Such reconsideration of democratic institutions includes the potential offered by the Internet for dramatically widening not only participation in policy discussions but the sphere of direct democracy, i.e., of plebiscites and legally binding referendums. There are today a whole series of groups dedicated to the exploration and evaluation of such possibilities.<sup>23</sup> While most of this discussion has been focused on local or national political processes, the emergence of the kinds of global networks I have been describing will necessarily lead to a similar discussion at that level.

Environmental Networks

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<sup>22</sup> The San Andres Accords are available in Spanish on line at URL: <http://spin.com.mx/~floresu/FZLN/dialogo/home.html>

<sup>23</sup> One access point to such groups is the Teledemocracy Action News & Network web page at URL: <http://www.auburn.edu/tann/>

Another highly elaborated cyberspatial sphere for the sharing of innovative alternatives to current ways of doing things has emerged out of the communications which have linked the worlds' diverse environmental movements.<sup>24</sup> Those movements, it is well recognized, have not only protested current practices and policies concerning such things as pollution and global warming, but have generated a wide variety of alternative approaches to everything from energy generation (e.g., renewable resources) and conservation (e.g. solar architecture) to garbage and waste management (e.g., less packaging and more recycling).

At the same time serious attempts to rethink the interconnections between humans and their environment has led to considerable overlap with an array of cultural experiences and philosophies outside the Western traditions from which capitalism emerged. Amidst that array the practices and thinking of a variety of indigenous peoples have received considerable attention and many elements of their diverse approaches have received a surprising degrees of acceptance. One result has been a web of interconnections between the environmental networks of communication and indigenous, and pro-indigenous, ones. One manifestation of these interconnections have been the interventions of environmental activist groups, like Greenpeace, into the conflicts in Chiapas.

### **Women's Networks**

A third realm of international discussion that seeks the elaboration of positive alternatives to contemporary policy is that of feminism and the diverse array of women's movements. Although in the early years of the Internet concern was expressed that computers were proving to be "boy toys" and cyberspace a boy space, subsequent developments have shown that women and women's organizations have been quick to adapt the Internet as a vehicle for their self- organization and public policy interventions. As is well known by now, the "women's movement" has gone far beyond

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<sup>24</sup> There are even dedicated computer networks such as EcoNet --one part of the Association for Progressive Communications. A description and access to EcoNet can be found at URL: [http://www.lcv.org/lcv94/econet\\_info.html](http://www.lcv.org/lcv94/econet_info.html) The Association for Progressive Communications --a consortium of some 25 linked networks-- maintains a web site at URL: <http://www.apc.org/> For an analytical description see Howard Frederick, "Computer Networks and the Emergence of Global Civil Society, " in Linda M. Harasim, ed., *Global Networks: Computers and International Communication*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993).



preoccupation with what have traditionally been known as "women's issues" to take under consideration and intervene in virtually every sphere of public policy. As a result, "women's" lists, conferences and web pages take up a very substantial portion of political cyberspace and are interlinked with many other domains.<sup>25</sup>

The existence of a "Revolutionary Women's Law" in the Zapatista movement -- imagined, designed and drafted by indigenous women within a highly patriarchal culture-- attracted the attention of women activists from outside Chiapas and Mexico early on. As a result the women's networks of cyberspace have played an active role in circulating information about the Zapatista movement and have established connections directly with the indigenous women therein. Also as a result, such networks provide a means for the circulation of Chiapanecan women's discussions of both the revision of (patriarchal) traditions and the implications for democratic Constitutional reforms. Such revisions and reforms were written into the San Andres Accords mentioned above. Examples of the spheres of social activism and cyberspatial activity that are involved in both autonomous contestation of public policy and are interconnected with those above could easily be multiplied. The implications are only beginning to be perceived.

### **An Alternative Political Fabric?**

Clearly, as the story of the Zapatistas as well as the aforementioned studies suggest, the fabric of politics, of the public sphere where differences interact and negotiate, is being rewoven. That reweaving, moreover, is a contested one whose conflicts go to the heart of the existing political, social and economic order. On the bottom of the political spectrum, so to speak, at the level of the grassroots and many non-business NGOs, the Internet is being used for the reorganization of discussion, interconnections and struggles on a global level in ways that challenge and often bypass both the nation-state and its creations. On the other, high end of the spectrum, the traditional primary actors in international affairs --nation-states, supranational state institutions and multinational business corporations-- are using computer communications to construct new networks of interconnectivity in and between the

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<sup>25</sup> See, for example, the directories of women's resources available through the web page for WomensNet which, like EcoNet, is a component of the Association for Progressive Communications at URL: <http://www.igc.org/igc/womensnet/index.html>

public and private spheres. In between these poles lies what is shaping up as a rather traditional struggle between governments and business which would like to incorporate, instrumentalize or neutralize the creativity and energy of grassroots or autonomous NGO activity and the struggles of the later to retain their autonomy and create real alternatives.

What are we to make of this new phenomenon? While there is no doubt that the grassroots use of the Internet, or computer communications more generally, across borders has facilitated the imposition of real constraints on the ability of nation-states, their joint organizations and multinational corporations to pursue their own goals, just how significant are those constraints? And how much are they likely to proliferate and grow?

Within the context of the debate over the future of the nation-state and foreign policy consideration of such questions has most often appeared within the burgeoning literature on "information warfare" and sometimes are barely separated from worries over criminal, military or "terrorist" use of the Internet. In a recent article on terrorism and cyberspace by former CIA director John Deutch, for instance, the Zapatistas are viewed only as "insurgents" and "drawing the line", he says, "between terrorism and insurgency can be difficult."<sup>26</sup>

A more interesting effort by public policy analysts to reconceptualize the political ramifications of grassroots challenges to the nation-state via cyberspace has been that of John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt at RAND who have elaborated the concept of "netwar." In the kind of phenomenon that I have been analysing in this article, they have seen not only a threat but an innovation in organization to which the nation-state must respond positively or risk increasingly frequent defeat. They have argued for the urgent need to recast the organization of the nation-state from its traditional hierarchical lines to those of networks --thus adopting and adapting to the forces arrayed against them.<sup>27</sup> A similar line of argument has been made Bruce Berkowitz, a former CIA analyst, about the reorganization of US intelligence for the

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<sup>26</sup> John Deutch, "Terrorism", *Foreign Policy* #108, Fall 1997, p. 14.

<sup>27</sup> See: John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt, "Cyberwar is Coming!" *Comparative Strategy*, 12, no. 2, 1993, pp. 141-165, J. Arquilla & D. Ronfeldt, *The Advent of Netwar*, RAND's National Defense Research Institute, 1996 and J. Arquilla and D. Ronfeldt (eds) *In Athena's Camp: Preparing for Conflict in the Information Age*, RAND, 1997, available on-line at URL: <http://www.rand.org/publications/MR/MR880/index.html>

coming period.<sup>28</sup> Jessica Mathews, a Senior Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), on the basis of some ten case studies prepared for a CFR study group, points to a variety of instances in which governments and intergovernmental institutions have been gaining some of the flexibility and responsiveness of networks by working closely with NGOs in the international arena.<sup>29</sup>

Anne-Marie Slaughter, a professor of International Law at Harvard, argues that the kind of fundamental reorganization which Arquilla and Ronfeldt have called for has already begun. She points to instances in which the constituent parts of states, e.g., central bankers, jurists and regulatory agencies, are disaggregating and forming international networks in an increasingly effective new form of what she calls "transgovernmentalism."<sup>30</sup> Although she doesn't cite it, the Schengen Agreement and multinational collaboration among police agencies discussed above, also fits her model. All of this suggests that the state, at both the national and supranational level, is responding to the challenges from the grassroots networks not merely by resisting their influences but by adopting similar forms of organization in two fundamental ways: either by mutating its own structures or by co-opting and annexing those which challenge it.

In Mexico this struggle is being played out primarily between the Zapatistas and their grassroots supporters on the one hand, and the political parties on the other. While the PRI dominated executive wing of the government has responded in a rigid and repressive manner, the congressional opposition and political reformers have sought to draw the Zapatistas into the system. In response to the Zapatistas' demand for the recasting of Mexican political institutions, these forces have been trying to get the Zapatistas to "enter politics" in the traditional manner: by becoming one more political party. So far, they have refused. In the September 1997 founding convention of the Zapatista "Front" for National Liberation in Mexico City, they and those supporting them reinsisted on the need for the elaboration of new forms of politics rather than adaptation to the old. The conflict continues.

At the global level, some governments and some supranational institutions, such as the World Bank, are indeed developing methods of "incorporating" NGOs into

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<sup>28</sup> Bruce D. Berkowitz, "Information Age Intelligence", *Foreign Policy*, 103 (Summer 1996) pp. 35-50. For an analysis of the latter see Harry Cleaver, "Reforming the CIA in the Image of the Zapatistas?" on-line at URL: <http://www.eco.utexas.edu/faculty/Cleaver/hmconberk.html>

<sup>29</sup> Jessica T. Mathews, "Power Shift", *Foreign Affairs*, 76, no. 1 (January/February 1997)

<sup>30</sup> Anne-Marie Slaughter, "The Real New World Order," *Foreign Affairs*, 76, no. 5 (September/October 1997) pp. 183-197.

consultative processes, giving them voices at the table in exchange for, one imagines, voices in the street. Yet, with a long history of co-optation and neutralization as a guide, many grassroots groups are refusing what they view as collaboration and continue to organize and act autonomously from the state and business. At the same time they continue to elaborate networks of cooperation among like-minded organizations to broaden their capabilities for research, thinking, consulting and acting. Co-operation at the molecular level goes on constantly, while the kind of large-scale, cross-movement gatherings embodied in the Zapatista-called "encounters" or the counter-summit in Amsterdam seem to be continuing, and perhaps even proliferating.

While the capacity of such grassroots groups for collective protest action has been clearly demonstrated, their potential for taking over or usurping the functions of the nation-state and intergovernmental organizations will certainly turn on their capacity to elaborate and implement alternative modes of decision making and collective or complementary action to solve common or related problems. In some instances, such as the defense of human rights, ecological protection or the formulation of new constitutional frameworks for the protection of indigenous rights, this potential is already being realized.<sup>31</sup> The strongest argument for the continued primary roles of the nation state and private corporations has been their ability to get things done. It seems highly likely that the amount of political will to displace them will depend on the emergence of what are viewed as practical and more attractive alternatives. So far, grassroots alternatives have demonstrated that imagination, creativity and insight can generate different approaches and new solutions to solving widespread problems. To the degree that such new solutions proliferate and are perceived as effective, the possibilities of replacing state functions with non-state collaboration will continue to expand. At the same time, because such an expansion threatens the established interests of states and those who benefit from their support, state efforts at repression or co-optation of such alternatives will continue. The degree to which the autonomy of grassroots efforts will be maintained will not be a question of imagination or organizational ability alone, but of their political power to resist such efforts and displace governmental hegemony. For this reason, the scope for the positive elaboration

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<sup>31</sup> Jessica Mathews quotes Ibrahima Fall, the head of the U.N. Center for Human Rights: "We have less money and fewer resources than Amnesty International, and we are the arm of the U.N. for human rights. This is ridiculous." Mr. Fall is wrong, it is not ridiculous. It suggests that if grassroots groups demonstrate the capacity to research and take effective action on global problems, there is no a priori reason why they should not supplant intergovernmental organizations. Jessica T. Mathews, "Power Shift", *Foreign Affairs*, 76, no. 1 (January/February 1997), p. 53.

of grassroots initiatives at both local and global levels will depend entirely on their negative power to challenge existing policies and force concessions. In this drama we are barely into the opening act.