Weaving the Global Culture: Social and Electronic Networks in the Zapatista Movement

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Abstract

A particular case of intercultural communication is displayed in the social movement known as "Zapatismo," an indigenous-peasant armed revolt that began in Chiapas, México, in 1994. From its beginning, online communication practices carried out by Zapatista partisans allowed for the diffusion of information regarding this movement. A network supported by communication means was made up of organizations, associations and collectives with different political orientations and geographic locations. This study examines these complex communication practices, the role played by the use of the Internet, as well as the role of several other social agents, such as universities, NGO's and the communication media. The results of this research indicate that democracy is still the central point of agreement and affinity among socially, culturally and politically heterogeneous groups, even in a world defined by cultural differences and a broad array of values.

When the failures of the social movements called "revolutionary" in Latin America seemed to have undermined our capacity to collectively imagine a social project, when the collective social action throughout the world was focused on atomized struggles only to vindicate precise issues of civil society's "grammar of ways of life," a social movement arose. This emerging group was capable of recomposing the pieces of collective mobilization and of recovering the sense of emancipation struggles in modern democracies. This is the so-called "Zapatista" movement, or "Zapatismo", launched by the Zapatista Army (EZLN).

The rebellion of the EZLN broke out during the first hours of January 1, 1994, not coincidentally, the same day the first and broadest free-trade agreement in the world came into effect–The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Roughly 3000 hooded indigenous and mestizo[1] peasants, most of them armed with powerful weapons, but some with fake wooden guns, rose up under the battle-cry "It's Enough!" taking eight villages in the highlands of Chiapas, Mexico. This very particular armed group, born from a unique combination of a conventional left-wing rural guerrilla group and grass-roots peasant organizations, declared war on the Mexican State. That same day, the EZLN made its demands and objectives public through the "First Declaration of the Selva Lacandona". Commander Felipe addressed the "Mexican people" and the legislative and judicial powers to demand the restitution of legality and stability in the country.

The rebel army demanded the removal of the "dictator", the President of the Republic, commander-in-chief of the Mexican Army. Under the principles of the Vienna Treaty, the EZLN commanded its armed bases to advance on Mexico City. For the EZLN,

[1] Persons of mixed Spanish and Indian descent

war was the answer to the despoiling and misery caused by the political party in power for over 70 years. The rebels were mostly Indians of diverse ethnic groups; they identified themselves as part of the Mexican people, and as poor people who had never had access to elemental human rights. The Zapatistas declared that their struggle was for land, work, shelter, nourishment, health, education, independence, liberty, democracy, justice and peace.

They did not claim vindication on ethnic grounds; on the contrary, according to the declarations of its spokesman, Subcomandante Marcos, while the revolt was being planned, even those natives who identified most strongly with indigenous culture were strongly opposed to a struggle that could be construed as an ethnic movement.[2] However, after a short while, its initial intentions to seize power changed radically. Zapatismo was transformed into a peaceful movement, oriented toward the defense of indigenous culture and autonomy:

> ... the EZLN confirms its commitment to "rule by obeying." We demonstrate our sincerity and our true engagement in the search for a political solution to the war, and call for a new national dialogue among the democratic forces of the country.[3]

This transition between such contrasting political orientations is one of the most significant dimensions of Zapatismo. It resulted from an intense communication process established among heterogeneous social actors located in different countries and with different social-resistance traditions. The dialogue of the EZLN with Mexican and foreign interlocutors started even at the moment when the armed combat was taking place. All the communication media participated in this process; however, Internet was a crucial means of communication that permitted contact between the rebels, hidden in the mountains of Southeast Mexico, and the rest of the world.[4]

These achievements were not solely a product of the EZLN, but of the synergy of the social networks that joined the Zapatista movement. These networks were organized to a great extent by the electronic networks. The Zapatista movement brought together a heterogeneous universe of individuals, groups and nongovernmental organizations (NGO's) under its cause. As a result of this diversity, the EZLN broadened its sphere of influence and modified the political orientation of its movement, which was originally military.

The repercussions of this movement have been felt around the world: the coordinated work between the EZLN and solidarity groups, the intercultural communication and cooperation, gave rise to shared know-how in the popular-resistance field, which inspired later mobilizations that attained a worldwide scope, one example being the anti-globalization movement.

Internet, Culture and Communication

The foregoing discussion raises a number of questions regarding the emergence of such social phenomena. For example, is it possible to consider this type of social phenomenon, this coming together around a small group of indigenous peasants, a part of the Global Culture? Which meanings of Zapatismo are truly shared among such different participants? Is information, as Lash (2002) states, the main vector of cultural organization nowadays?

The success of Zapatismo is often attributed to the influence that information has on international public opinion. It has also been considered an opportunistic movement that

[2] Cfr. Le Bot (1997[a])
[3] EZLN. Communiqué. June 1995.
[4] Baschet (2002).

managed to interpret the signs of the times, changing its strategies from the seizure of the means of production to the seizure of the communication media. This is how the contrast between the ambiguity of the Zapatista political project and its high social visibility can be explained.[5]

It is well known that propaganda is an essential part of every social movement; communication technologies have been widely used by groups that have been mobilized to the degree to which social society has become an "audience" (Minc, 1995; Postman, 1986). From this perspective, the use of the Internet would not contribute anything new, only a faster and more open form of information diffusion and propaganda; its scope, however, is smaller.

The virtuality produced by the technological mediation of the Internet is also highlighted by Hellman (2000), when she states that the information about Zapatismo that circulates on the Network tends to simplify its historical and cultural complexity. The Internet reflects a flat image of what is really happening in Chiapas, a sort of "virtual Chiapas" as opposed to the real Chiapas. We find here a current version of the reduction of politics for the sake of making a show that different authors have denounced (Debord, 1967; Baudrillard, 1970; 1978; 1993; Virilio, 1996; 1998).

Other authors attribute the innovation that the Internet represents to its communication differential, by combining efficient and rapid information transmission and social connectivity into a network. In this line of reflection, Castells (1998b, 2001) states that in the era of information, where the communication media continue to be the space for politics based on rumor and scandals, the Internet participates in "informational politics" by deconstructing the traditional mechanisms of social control and by modifying the forms of political representation based on culture, history and territory.

This author considers Zapatismo, which he names "the first informational guerrilla", a movement that properly belongs to a *Network Society*, since it constitutes an answer to the bipolar disassociation that is established between the local culture and the global information flows. Along with other authors such as Appadurai (1993; 2001) and Bauman (2001), Castells considers that the space of information currents tends to substitute the space of places; thus, he interprets the Zapatista movement as the expression of a community of resistance that defends its space and the preservation of the traditional values against "the no-place logic of the spaces of flows" (Castells, 1998a: 399).

The use of the Internet in Zapatismo is understood by Stratton (2000) as a broadened public sphere,[6] modeled by the communication media since the 18th century. The mediated space is the place of meeting and common knowledge for members of modern societies. Following the notion of "imagined communities" proposed by Anderson (1999), Stratton emphasizes the construction of imaginary and collective identities that the Zapatistas generated through their communicational exchanges on the Internet.

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[5] De la Grange and Rico (1997); Levario (1999).

[6] According to the concept coined by Habermas (1993), the public sphere is a rational-critical debate through consensus building via communicative practice; it emerged when public opinion went out to the private spaces, in order to create a participatory democracy. The core of the public sphere took its current shape in the mass communication media; then, the debate among citizens was replaced progressively by leisure, advertising and private interests.

Zapatismo, according to Arquilla and Rondfeldt (1993, 1996, 1998, and 2001) implies the construction of a collective identity of transnational scope, with risks for the stability of the Nation State. They also point out that electronic networks allow otherwise powerless groups a greater degree of autonomy to influence public opinion and to get organized into networks. Thus, the Internet allows people to strike in a united, yet decentralized manner. This would be a *netwar*, which consists of the subversive infiltration of small groups into the new communication media, in order to provoke actions of dissidence and opposition. For this reason, Zapatismo is considered a *social netwar*.[7]

An alternative to analyzing online communication is to try to understand the complex interrelationships that exist between the online and offline environments. From this perspective, Cleaver (1995; 1998; 2000) considers that the use of the Internet in Zapatismo is a political practice that uses cyberspace as an *electronic fabric of struggle*. He stresses that the participants in solidarity networks are generally linked to other social struggles in their own contexts; therefore, their aim is not the simple adhesion to the movement.

The discussion relating to the role of the media in the global culture is mostly associated with the information flows that can be transmitted throughout space without restrictions or boundaries. However, no direct correlation can be posited between the amount and speed of the information that goes out, and the influence that this information has on specific social groups. Otherwise, the global culture would be condemned to dissolve into a planet-wide horizon of sameness. Communication comes out of the social mediation that allows the linkage of local and global cultures. Inda and Rosaldo highlight this issue:

> Global culture never simply loses its sense of territory. It also always becomes a territory. We are not dealing, in other words, with two separate processes. Rather, they occur simultaneously. We would like to capture this double movement with the neologism de/territorialization. The term captures at once the lifting of cultural subjects and objects from fixed special locations and their relocation into new cultural settings. It refers to a process that simultaneously transcends territorial boundaries and has territorial significance (2002:12).

As a result, research on Internet communication must consider the inseparable relationship between communication and culture. Among the many ways Internet communication has been analyzed, Jones (1999, 2001) identifies three main lines of investigation, which in a way carry on the tradition of decades of mass media research. First there are studies that set out to analyze the Internet as a technology that has an impact on different social processes; another line of research looks mainly at the evolution of these experiences and their relationship with a much wider array of manifestations of contemporary culture; finally there are studies whose aim is to examine the cultural processes that arise out of the experiences of communicating on communication networks.

This study fits into the third perspective. The research process that was carried out focused on identifying the ways in which Internet communication creates social ties among users. It is true that the Internet is a technology that enables users to communicate instantly all

[7] A *netwar* is an offensive action carried out by criminal associations, such as Terrorist Groups, Guerrilla Warriors, and Drug Dealers. In Zapatismo, it is considered to be a Social *Netwar*, because it was exercised by non-criminal groups.

over the world, and yet the users who set up web pages, mailing lists and discussion forums about Zapatismo are subjects that form part of specific social groups, with a precise geographical location. One cannot help but wonder what factors came together, within this context of social and cultural diversity, to unite these users behind Zapatismo. On this basis, the research attempts to analyze the cultural processes that have been described as "global" in the so-called "information" or "communication" society.

Method

Participants

Participants in the research project were Internet users who either set up or visited web pages, mailing lists or discussion forums on the Zapatista movement. Our objective was to account for the ways in which users got involved in this communicative process and the meaning that these users gave to their investment of time and effort in circulating information on Zapatismo over the Internet.

Procedure

Data were collected by following the communications on 147 web pages, and 11 mailing lists and discussion forums devoted *exclusively* to Zapatismo, for two years, from 2000 to 2002, in order to identify the type of information that was being circulated. In addition, 49 in-depth interviews were conducted with four types of users: (a) NGO members; (b) members of civil associations, groups and collectives; (c) EZLN civil structures; (d) people who subscribed to online mailing lists and discussion forums on Zapatismo, in order to find out what their expectations were regarding these on-line communication activities. The interviews were carried out by different media: 18 by telephone, 10 by e-mail and 21 in person.

Results

The first online information about the Zapatista revolt came out of the highlands of Chiapas via e-mail between individuals and ONG networks; over time, these communication practices became more open and collective: users took advantage of the array of possibilities offered by Internet, creating web pages, mailing lists and discussion forums. Thus, real, alternative information agencies were established.

The information displayed on line included: EZLN declarations and communiqués; denunciation by the indigenous communities of the highlands of Chiapas regarding abuse of authority; data generated by NGO's about the socioeconomic conditions of Chiapas; news articles, reviews, and notes published in the main newspapers of Mexico, the United States and Europe; as well as information about the most relevant events on world political activism.

The electronic networks were also used to coordinate meetings in Chiapas as well as in Europe, called *Encounters for Humanity and against Neoliberalism*; to organize manifestations in favor of the movement; to promote direct solidarity with the rebel communities; and to carry out actions of electronic sabotage or "sit-ins" against the web sites of the Mexican government and financial institutions.

The information that was initially available online was provided by NGO's established in the highlands of Chiapas, which had very accurate data about this region.[8] Among these NGO's were *La Neta*, whose main objective was the development of electronic communication with other NGOs, *Chiltak* and *the Center for Human Rights Fray Bartolomé de las Casas.* These three organizations, along with the *Center for Economic and Social Research,* were, at that time (1994), the only entities that had access to Internet.

Later on, the electronic networks were fed mostly by support and solidarity groups and committees. These associations are different from NGO's because they have a clear activist orientation and work with funds provided by their own members; their members have more freedom of action. These groups are commonly made up of a reduced number of people who administer their own electronic mailing lists, or participate by sending information to other electronic mailing lists that belong to other groups or to NGO's. Their involvement goes further than the use of Internet; these collectives mobilize locally, carrying out manifestations, raising funds for the Zapatista communities, and lobbying in parliaments and political parties in their own countries.

Some members of these groups travel to the highlands of Chiapas to meet with the social bases of EZLN and with other people who gather there to participate in a closer way with the movement, or to support the affected population *in situ*. Hernandez (2001) states that, in Europe alone, 79 permanent solidarity committees for the Zapatista struggle were created in Spain, France, Italy, Switzerland, Germany, Ireland, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Finland, Greece, and the Czech Republic.

As for the web pages devoted exclusively to the Zapatista movement, they were set up by users in 18 different countries, although three quarters of these pages were created in just four countries: the United States (59 pages, which comes out to 40.14%), Mexico (33 pages, or 22.45%), Italy, (14 pages, or 9.52%) and Spain, (10 pages, or 6.80%.).

The rest of the Zapatista web pages were set up in Brazil (5 pages), Switzerland (4 pages), Canada (4 pages), France (3 pages), Germany (3 pages), Ireland, England, Australia, Croatia, Iran, Japan, the Netherlands, Sweden and the Czech Republic (one page each). It must be pointed out that the Zapatista movement was presented on the web pages from different perspectives: 39% of the pages were created to circulate information on Zapatismo; 21% to fight neo-liberalism; 10% to defend the rights of indigenous peoples; 9% to promote pacifism; 7% to focus on Human Rights; 6% to make proposals for the social development of marginalized groups; 4% to promote anarchism; and 4% of the pages linked Zapatismo to other unusual topics, such as religion, fascism, or esoterica.

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[8] San Cristobal de las Casas was the city where a great number of NGO's converged; among the most prominent are *Center for Human Rights Fray Pedro de la Nada, Kinal Ansetik, Melel Xojobal, Center for Economic and Political Research of Communitarian Action, Communitarian Attorney for the Human Rights, Economic and Social Development of the Indigenous Mexican, Global Exchange, International Service for Peace, Civic Alliance, Doctors of the World, Peace Action, SEVA Foundation, One World, Cultural Survival, Center of Investigation for Peace, Voluntary Independent Engagement Non-Profit, Independent Media Chiapas. Several of these NGO's had already been working in Chiapas for years before the Zapatista rebellion even began.*

Online Activism

All this information on the Internet was much more than a mere blackboard. During the military occupation, the online communication about the Zapatista movement tore down the information barriers imposed by the Mexican army on the rebels and the civil population of that region. Only then was it possible to provide alternative information from sources other than the government and official agencies. The communiqués of the EZLN crossed the line of fire, to appear in the communication media, even on the same day that they were signed.

During the days of the armed conflict, neither the central command of the EZLN nor its social bases were connected to the Internet. This situation changed when a civil structure of the EZLN was formed, the NGO named *Enlace Civil.* In the same way, the indigenous communities began participating in this information system, albeit in an indirect manner. Although few villages in the highlands of Chiapas have the necessary infrastructure, their inhabitants send messages to the mailing lists through intermediaries who do have access to the Internet, such as the *Diocese of San Cristobal de las Casas, the Center for Human Rights Fray Bartolomé de las Casas*, and *Melel Xojobal.*

The Zapatista uprising and the expansion of the World Wide Web took place in the same year,[9] which definitely favored the use of this technology by the movement; nevertheless, Zapatismo took advantage of other forms of online communication that were already in use. As a matter of fact, the first place where these collective exchanges occurred, were discussion forums already operating in *Usenet*, particularly in the list *soc.culture.mexico,*[10] an informal discussion room where miscellaneous topics were discussed. The news regarding the Zapatista conflict appeared alongside other news about tourism, gastronomic recipes, song lyrics, and so on. To debate definite topics, it was necessary to create specialized forums and mailing lists.

The first Mexican mailing list, called *Mexico94*, was current for a short while and transformed into the mailing list *Mexico 2000*, administered by a Mexican citizen who was interested in exchanging and sharing information about economy and politics in Mexico. He invited other *Usenet* users, as well as scholars and researchers who were specialists in the subject, not only in Mexico, but also in the United States.

The Internet was also a place for convergence of other interests. Cleaver (1995) reports that discussion forums created at the beginning of the negotiations of NAFTA, where labor unions, academic scholars, and social activists of the United States and Canada met to discuss the repercussions of this agreement, were a precedent for the discussion forums about Zapatismo. The discussions established among the prior groups were reactivated when the Zapatistas labeled NAFTA "the death sentence of natives and peasants."[11]

Other important precedents were, undoubtedly, the organizations created at the beginning of the 90s for the purpose of integrating NGO networks throughout the world in order to improve their fields of action. Among these networks is *Peacenet,*[12] dedicated to the defense of human rights; *La Neta*, as a member of *Peacenet*, played a key role in providing

[9] Castells, Manuel (2001).
[10] It means "Society and Culture in Mexico".
[11] EZLN. First Declaration of the Selva Lacandona. January 1994.
[12] *Peacenet* is, at the same time, a part of the Association for Progressive Communications (APC).

and facilitating Internet access in Chiapas during the early period of the rebellion. Due to this communication network, *La Neta* could replicate the information about Chiapas on a world-wide level.

Regarding the *Mexico 2000* mailing list, the administrators had not considered at the beginning that these discussions were a kind of activist practice. With time, they realized the wide scope of this information exchange actually had a significant effect on the dynamics of the Zapatista movement. Their primary goals were to expedite the transmission of online data and news, as well as to access sources of information that would otherwise be impossible to reach. This matter was crucial when the written press in Mexico was under iron-clad control of the State. Information about sensitive topics (such as corruption, drug trafficking, and projections about the devaluation of the Mexican peso) appeared in some North American newspapers, or was produced by other agencies or research centers of that country, but was not available in Mexico.

After the uprising, the *Mexico 2000* list became saturated with an overwhelming number of messages containing information regarding the conflict; for this reason, the administrators decided to open a specific list to discuss the Chiapas conflict. This is how the first Chiapas forum, dedicated exclusively to Zapatismo, was born. It was called *Chiapas-L.* Toward the end of 1994, the *Chiapas 95* list was created due to the initiative of a professor and some students from the University of Texas. This list became the most active and complete one; several sub-lists in different languages were generated. The creation of the EZLN page this same year (www.ezln.org), created by an American student, constituted a turning point for online Zapatismo. It became the 'pseudo official' webpage of the EZLN, a necessary point of reference that led to other participating organizations and members of the movement.

Activism carried out through the Internet was the result of the convergence of diverse initiatives; however, it was rapidly transformed into daily work that depended on the solidarity and the cooperation of volunteers. A much broader universe was created when the NGOs and the solidarity committees created their own web pages, forums and discussions. This communication platform was created when the use of the Internet was just beginning in the world, and what more than anything made it possible was the existence of Internet provider companies such as *Geocities*, *Yahoo* and *Hotmail*, as well as what some European NGO's created to offer Internet access to progressive activists, as well as American universities, where Zapatistas were able to have e-mail accounts, websites, lists and forums.

In contrast, Mexican universities, which along with the NGO's were the rare entities that had access to the Internet at that time, displayed a very averse attitude towards the civic culture that was being displayed on line. When *Chiapas-L was* created, the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Mexico (UNAM), which had hosted this list and the *Mexico 2000 List*, stopped supporting them. Both lists had to be transferred; *Chiapas –L* went to the University of California at San Diego server, and subsequently had to migrate from there some years later.

In this context and in spite of the overwhelming defeat that the EZLN suffered on the battlefield, it was able to amplify its movement on a transnational level, especially in North America and Western Europe. The transformation displayed in the orientation of the EZLN movement is not surprising. Furthermore, as Harvey (2000) notes, Zapatismo rapidly surpassed the EZLN.

In April 1995, the Foreign Affairs Secretary of Mexico tried to minimize the Chiapas conflict, declaring that it had been a war of ink, of written words, a war of Internet.[13] The disdain demonstrated by this public official towards this form of social mobilization nonetheless highlighted the fact that its strength resided precisely in the synergy created throughout the world. The declaration of the then President of Mexico, depicting the Chiapas conflict as restricted to a few municipalities of the highlands of Chiapas, became absurd. Meanwhile, in Chiapas, blood was still being shed. After the military combat that lasted only 11 days, a low-intensity war took place by means of military occupation and assassination by paramilitary groups.

In different ways, all of the interviewed users declared the ideal of rebuilding democracy, as it is experienced in the contemporary world. Thus, are these on line communication practices a new culture in the field of activism? It has been said that this kind of militancy only implies a distant, individual, and weak engagement, and an atomization of collective action that takes place in conditions of physical proximity (Ollitrault,1999; Hellman, 2000). This does not seem to be the case of the Zapatista movement, since both types of activism are not mutually exclusive. Certainly for the participants of online activism, those who support the cause in a sustained manner over time are the ones who carry out local activism. In this way, the use of the Internet to support the Zapatista movement not only created a collective, open, and censorship-free space for information and interaction among citizens, but also broke the media's attempt to provide only non-contextualized and limited information.

Moreover, the *digital divide* was creatively bridged. Some groups and NGO's selected the most relevant information in order to edit bulletins, summaries or flyers, and they distributed them by posting this printed information on the church doors of the indigenous communities in Chiapas, as well as in bars or in great European cities. This material was also handed out in political meetings, and used as material for radio programs and even as didactic material to teach Spanish in some schools of the United States.

Zapatismo adapted the characteristics of what some authors call "new social movements," which privilege the expression and ways of life of certain groups that represent very diverse social and cultural segments of civil society. Among those groups are squatters, religious groups, scholars, politicians, anarchists, union members, pacifists, associations for human rights, organizations for the preservation of indigenous cultures, and groups supporting free access to information and technology.

In this scenario, the EZLN defines Zapatismo as a social movement that is exempt from a specific content or ideology. It is a "bridge", as stated by its spokesman, for those who pursue a better world, "a world where many worlds fit in". Zapatismo, however, outgrew its strictly cultural orientation to propose the establishment of an *International of Hope* that implied interconnection among all struggles:

> We are addressing the people of Mexico, the different independent social organizations, the opposition political parties, the citizens' organizations, the non-governmental organizations, the unions, the students, the squatters, the workers in the field and cities, the indigenous Mexicans, the housewives, the intellectuals and

[13] This declaration was made in front of entrepreneurs from 37 nations; it was published in all the newspapers of Mexico (April 26, 1995).

> artists, the religious community, the elderly, the women, the men and the children. And we also call on those solidarity committees in the international community, our brothers and sisters of North America, of Europe, of Asia and of South America. We address ourselves to all our brothers and sisters and propose a national and international plebiscite to determine the steps we should take and the direction we should follow at this historic moment.[14]

Given the success of online communication to support the Zapatista movement, an initiative to create an "Intercontinental Network of Alternative Communication" emerged during the First Meeting for Humanity and Against Neoliberalism, held in Chiapas in June 1996. This network of organizations and groups connected by the Internet would create a common front of social resistance. The EZLN opened the meeting in the following way:

> An intercontinental resistance network will analyze the awareness of differences, and the knowledge of similarities, to find other forms of resistance in the world. This intercontinental resistance network will be the means by which the different forms of resistance support each other. This intercontinental resistance network does not have a director or a decision-making center, does not have a central government, nor does it have hierarchies. This intercontinental resistance is not an organizational structure. We, who speak to each other and listen to each other, we, who resist, are the network.[15]

This Intercontinental Network of Alternative Communication had its climax during the periods in which the EZLN and the Zapatista communities suffered the greatest repression. Once the army withdrew and the low-intensity war decreased, the online information about Zapatismo also decreased considerably; however, the communication on the Internet continues after eleven years.

This Network has diversified during this time and has recovered its vitality each time that the EZLN issues a communiqué. This network has recently become an important source for organizing meetings and creating mailing lists to support anti-globalization and alter-globalization movements such as the *PGA Net, Global IRL Net, and Caravan99.*

It would be too much to say that these forms of network activism will displace or substitute other forms of social mobilization, but they do diversify the possibilities and offer a longer reach in both time and space. But the Internet does not promise a radical transformation of activist practice. Other mobilizations and guerrilla movements in Mexico and in other Latin American countries have tried to initiate forms of online activism, spreading their communiqués through web pages and e-mails, but they have had no success.[16]

New possibilities do exist, however, for social groups to form solidarity networks without physical contact, without a formal organization, and without well-defined, shared objectives. In fact, anti-globalization movements and/or movements espousing an "alternative" form of globalization are based mainly on these constellations of networks that stretch throughout the world to offer resistance to certain forms of power, although it must be

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[14] EZLN Communiqué. June 1995.

[15] EZLN, *Second Declaration at La Realidad for Humanity and against Liberalism*. August, 1996.

[16] Among these are the Ejército Popular Revolucionario (EPR), Ejército Villista Revolucionario del Pueblo (EVRP), the Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo (ERPI) in Mexico, the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) in Colombia.

noted that they tend to break up when the concrete social expressions that brought them about, begin to lose their urgency. These are new ways of establishing social ties that do not depend on the homogeneity of the population that is establishing them.

Conclusion: The Cultural Reconstruction of Democracy

We can return to our research questions. To what extent does the use of the Internet create a shared culture? A review of Zapatista websites, mailing lists and discussion forums shows that far from a unique and uniform vision of the movement, multiple interpretations are expressed that are not mutually exclusive. So, we can ask what this polyphony of senses means.

Even if a complete explanation is not possible, this study provides two clues; both of them are related to the central issue that we would like to highlight here: global culture is constructed to a large extent upon the relationship between communication and democracy. First, the case of Zapatismo shows that information and communication in social mobilization do not only obey a strategy to spread symbols and representations intended to influence public opinion. Even if the battle to participate in the communication media is a strategy used by all kinds of social movements, the use of Internet for the participants acquired a shared meaning in the measure that these practices were meant to transform the public sphere into a more open and participative place, less subject to the control of the forces of power, be they state or market. For this reason, this Zapatista communication space built on the Internet is also an ideal of the expression and defense of diversity and plurality.

Second, we have to consider the significance that cultural difference acquires in emerging meanings of democracy. The current model of democracy in modern societies that Zapatismo tries to overcome is based on the difference understood as position: between social classes, between the state and civil society, between oppressed and oppressors, between the secular and the religious, between the social and the economic realms, and between the cultural and the political fields. The challenge to rebuild the existing order requires distinguishing between diversity and difference (Wiewiorka, 2001) to recognize what is common to all. Consensus means to find the ways, as Touraine (1997; 2000) suggests, for the same and the different to live together.

In a globalized world, characterized by an increase in the speed of the flow of information, of people, merchandise and capital, as well as social exclusion and distrust of the communication media and of the political organization, the Zapatista movement shows that the cultural reconstruction of democracy is a permanent and always unfinished task. There, communication between different groups plays an essential role, because democracy is not a destination, but a meeting point; it cannot be a monologue, but a collective dialogue that becomes ever more expanded and global.

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