

# Zapatismo and the Social Sciences

Friday 26 May 2006, by [HOLLOWAY John](#) (Date first published: March 2000).

Perhaps the saddest legacy that the twentieth century leaves us is disillusionment, loss of hope.

If we look back at the debates of a hundred years ago, what is striking about them is their optimism. Look, for example, at the debate between Rosa Luxemburg and Eduard Bernstein on the question of reform or revolution: both sides in the debate took it for granted that of course the world could be made a better place, that a society based on justice could be created. The only question was how this should be done.

And then came the slaughter of two world wars, then came Stalin and Auschwitz and Hiroshima, then came Pol Pot and then, the final blow for even the blindest of optimists, the collapse of the Soviet Union. Here in Latin America, the death of optimism has perhaps been even more bitter. All the enthusiasm of the revolutionary struggles of the 1960s and 1970s, where has it led? To a poor, isolated and bureaucratic state in Cuba, and in the rest of Latin America to tragedy, to the slaughter of thousands of enthusiastic militants and innocent victims. True, the military dictatorships have gone, but what is left is not much better: corruption, poverty and social inequality get worse all the time. All of that enthusiasm, for what? Why so many struggles? Why so many dead? We are here, of course, but what of our friends, what of the people we admired? For most Europeans of my generation, that is not part of our personal experience, fortunately, but for many Latin Americans it is. And for what?

For many, hope has evaporated from their lives, giving way to a bitter reconciliation with reality. It will not be possible to create the free and just society we hoped for, but at least we can vote for a centre or left-of-centre party, knowing quite well that it will not make any difference, but at least that way we will have some sort of outlet for our frustration.

We narrow our horizons, we reduce our expectations. Hope goes out of our lives, hope goes out our work, hope goes out of the way we think. Revolution, even emancipation, become ridiculous words. Well, of course: we are getting old. But that is not the problem. The problem is that the young too are old, many of them, sometimes even older than the old. The problem is that the world is getting old.

The bitterness of history: that is what we have to live with. Like a thin grey mist, it penetrates everywhere. As social scientists, or as academics in general, we are particularly affected. Disillusionment seeps into the core of the way we think, into the categories we use, the theories we espouse.

Foucault makes the point clearly in the first volume of his *History of Sexuality*, when he says that 'the fear of ridicule or the bitterness of history prevents most of us from bringing together revolution and happiness, ... or revolution and pleasure'. Michel Foucault, *La Volonté de Savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976) p. 13. And he makes fun of those who would speak of sex in terms of repression for constructing a discourse 'in which the ardour of knowledge, the will to change the law and the expected garden of delights are joined together'.

The bitterness of history and the fear of ridicule are two sides of the same process. Expectations are

scaled down. The bitterness of history teaches us that it is now ridiculous to maintain the grand narrative of human emancipation, the grand narrative of hope for a society based on human dignity. The best we can do is think in terms of particular narratives, the struggle of particular identities for better conditions; the struggle of women, of blacks, of gays, of the indigenous, but no longer the struggle of humanity for humanity. The fragmented world-view of post-modernism is a coming to terms with disillusionment.

Post-modernism is, of course, not the only way in which social scientists accept the bitterness of history. There are many other ways in which we accept a lowering of expectations, a closure of categories, a donning of conceptual blinkers. The conditions of academic life, the need to finish theses, the need to get jobs, the pressure to get grants: all push in the same direction. Everything tells us to focus on our own specialised fragment of knowledge, to forget the complexity of the world.

Complexity becomes the great alibi, both scientifically and morally. The world is so complex that we can think of it only in terms of fragmented narratives or, much more common in spite of the post-modernist fashion, in terms of positive and positivist case studies. The world is so complex that I cannot accept any moral responsibility for its development. Morality retracts: morality is about being good to the people around me, beyond that immediate circle the world is too complex, the relation between actions and consequences too complicated. When I stop my car at the traffic lights (for most academics in Mexico are of the car-driving class), I give (or do not give) a peso to the people begging there, but I do not ask what it is about the organisation of the world that creates more and more misery and how that organisation can be changed. That sort of question has become both morally and scientifically ridiculous. What is the point of asking it when we know that there is no answer?

The problem with this reduction of expectations, with this closure of categories, with this narrowing of the concept of scientific work, is not the quality of research. The research done may be very good, the results may even be 'correct' in a certain sense. But the problem of the social sciences is not correctness. The problem of the social sciences is complicity. Our research may be very good, but if we accept the fragmentation which arises from disillusionment, if we abandon in our work the exploration of the possibility of radical change in a world in which exploitation and misery become daily more intense, and in which the dynamic of exploitation goes far beyond any particular 'identities', do we not then become accomplices in the exploitation of person by person, accomplices in the destruction of humanity, accomplices ultimately in the deaths of our dead?

We are all accomplices of course. Just by living in this society, we play an active part in the destruction of humanity. There is no innocence. But there is a big question about how we relate to our guilt, about how we fight against our own complicity.

It is into this world of disillusionment that the zapatistas stepped on the 1<sup>st</sup> of January 1994. They came like prehistoric people emerging out of their caves, talking of dignity and humanity. Did they not see how ridiculous they were? Had they not learnt from the bitterness of history? Did they not know that the age of revolution was finished, that grand narratives were a thing of the past? Did they not know what had happened to all the Latin American revolutions? Had they not heard of the fall of the Soviet Union? Had they not heard of Pol Pot?

They had, of course, heard of all that. And even so, they decided to confront the fear of ridicule. They knew all about the bitterness of history, nobody better. And yet they reminded us that there are different ways of relating to that bitterness. Theodor Adorno, German, Jewish, communist, returned from exile at the end of the war saying, 'After Auschwitz one has to ask if it is possible to go on living.' T.W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (London: Routledge, 1973), pp. 362-363. Ernst Bloch,

German, Jewish, communist, returned from exile at the end of the war saying 'Now is the time to learn to hope.' Ernst Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1985, p.1) As if echoing the words of Bloch, the zapatistas rose up in the most ridiculous circumstances, when all good revolutionaries were either dead or resting in their beds, and said 'Now is the time to hope, now is the time to fight for humanity.' History is bitter, but the bitterness of history does not necessarily lead to disillusionment. It can also lead to rage and to hope and to dignity:

'Then that suffering that united us made us speak, and we recognised that in our words there was truth, we knew that not only pain and suffering lived in our tongue, we recognised that there is hope still in our hearts. We spoke with ourselves, we looked inside ourselves and we looked at our history: we saw our most ancient fathers suffering and struggling, we saw our grandfathers struggling, we saw our fathers with fury in their hands, we saw that not everything had been taken away from us, that we had the most valuable, that which made us live, that which made our step rise above plants and animals, that which made the stone be beneath our feet, and we saw, brothers, that all that we had was DIGNITY, and we saw that great was the shame of having forgotten it, and we saw that DIGNITY was good for men to be men again, and dignity returned to live in our hearts, and we were new again, and the dead, our dead, saw that we were new again and they called us again, to dignity, to struggle'. EZLN, *La Palabra de los Armados de Verdad y Fuego*, (México D.F.: Editorial Fuenteovejuna, 1994/ 1995), Tomo. 1, p. 122.

Dignity, a central category in the zapatista uprising, On the concept of dignity, see John Holloway, 'Dignity's Revolt', in J. Holloway, E. Peláez (eds), *Zapatista! Reinventing Revolution in Mexico*, Pluto Press, London, 1998 is the rejection of disillusionment: the rejection, therefore, of that which underlies the current development of the social sciences. It should be clear, then, that to speak of 'zapatismo and the social sciences' is not to constitute zapatismo as an object of the social sciences, but to see zapatismo rather as the subject of an attack on the mainstream development of the social sciences. To treat zapatismo as an object of social scientific inquiry would be to do violence to the zapatistas, to refuse to listen to them, to force them into categories that they are challenging, to impose upon them the disillusionment that they are rebelling against.

In other words, the zapatistas are not a 'they' but a 'we'. 'Detrás del pasamontañas estamos ustedes' 'Discurso inaugural de la mayor Ana María', Chiapas no. 3, p. 103. Roughly translated: 'behind the balaclava are the we that are you'. as Major Ana María said in her speech of welcome to the Intergalactic meeting of 1996. Or, to quote Antonio García de León, 'as more and more rebel communiqués were issued, we realised that in reality the revolt came from the depths of ourselves.' Antonio García de León in EZLN, *Documentos y Comunicados: 1º de enero / 8 de agosto de 1994* (México D.F.: Ediciones Era, 1994), p. 14 Although the EZLN is almost entirely indigenous in its composition, they have insisted from the beginning that their struggle is not just an indigenous struggle but a struggle for humanity: For Humanity and against Neo-Liberalism, as the slogan of the Intergalactic Meeting proclaims. From the beginning, and apparently at the insistence of those communities in which indigenous traditions are most strongly rooted, they have rejected the particular narrative of ethnic liberation and insisted (just as though they had never read Foucault or Lyotard or Derrida) on the grand narrative of human emancipation. 'Behind us we are you,... behind, we are the same simple and ordinary men and women who repeat themselves in every race, who paint themselves in every colour, who speak in every language and who live in every place.' 'Discurso inaugural de la mayor Ana María', Chiapas no. 3, p. 103. When we feel excited by the words of the zapatista communiqués, it is not they who excite us, it is ourselves. To be excited by the zapatistas is to be excited by our own refusal of disillusionment.

To reject disillusionment is not, however, to ignore the bitterness of history. It is not to pretend that Auschwitz never happened. It is not to ignore all the tragedy precipitated in the name of the struggle for communism. Zapatismo is the attempt to rescue revolution from the rubble of history, but the

concept of revolution that comes out of the rubble can have meaning only as something new. As Subcomandante Marcos puts it in a comment on the first year of the uprising, "Something broke in this year, not just the false image of modernity sold to us by neoliberalism, not just the falsity of government projects, of institutional alms, not just the unjust neglect by the country of its original inhabitants, but also the rigid schemes of a Left living in and from the past. In the midst of this navigating from pain to hope, political struggle finds itself naked, bereft of the rusty garb inherited from pain: it is hope which obliges it to look for new forms of struggle, that is, new ways of being political, of doing politics: a new politics, a new political morality, a new political ethic is not just a wish, it is the only way to go forward, to jump to the other side". Subcomandante Marcos - citado por Rosario Ibarra, La Jornada, 2 de mayo, 1995, p. 22.

What is it that is new about zapatismo? This is where we really have to confront the fear of ridicule, ridicule not only by mainstream social scientists but also by orthodox Marxists. The core of the newness of zapatismo is the project of changing the world without taking power. 'We want to change the world, but not by taking power, not to conquer the world, but to make it anew'. How absurd! Or rather, how absurd it would be if it were not for the fact that zapatismo articulates something that has been in the air for thirty years or more, a rejection of state-centred politics that has been characteristic of much of feminism and of many explorations on the left throughout the world, a rejection of power-focused politics that has received a new impulse in recent months, with the events of the UNAM, of Seattle, of Prague, of Quito.

Zapatismo moves us decisively beyond the state illusion. By the state illusion I mean the paradigm that has dominated left-wing thought for at least a century. The state illusion puts the state at the centre of the concept of radical change. The state illusion understands revolution as the winning of state power and the transformation of society through the state. The famous debate between Rosa Luxemburg and Eduard Bernstein a hundred years ago established clearly the terms that were to dominate thinking about revolution for most of the twentieth century. On the one hand reform, on the other side revolution. Reform was a gradual transition to socialism, to be achieved by winning elections and introducing change by parliamentary means; revolution was a much more rapid transition to be achieved by the taking of state power and the quick introduction of radical change by the new state. The intensity of the disagreements concealed a basic point of agreement: both approaches focussed on the winning of state power and saw the transition to socialism exclusively in those terms. Revolution and reformism are both state-centred approaches. Marxist debate was framed within a narrow dichotomy. Approaches that fell outside this dichotomy were stigmatised as being anarchist. Until recently, Marxist theoretical and political debate has been dominated by these three classifications: Revolutionary, Reformist, Anarchist.

The state illusion dominated the revolutionary experience throughout most of the twentieth century: not only the experience of the Soviet Union and China, but also the numerous national liberation and guerrilla movements of the 1960s and the 1970s. The focus on the state shaped the way in which left-wing organisation was conceived. The form of the party, whether vanguardist or parliamentary, presupposes an orientation towards the state and makes little sense without it. The party is in fact the form of disciplining class struggle, of subordinating the myriad forms of class struggle to the over-riding aim of gaining control of the state. The state illusion penetrates deep into the experience of struggle, privileging those struggles which appear to contribute to the winning of state power and allocating a secondary role or worse to those forms of struggle which do not.

If the state illusion was the vehicle of hope for much of the century, it became more and more the assassin of hope as the century progressed. The failure of revolution was in reality the historical failure of a particular concept of revolution, the concept that identified revolution with control of the state.

At the same time as the historical failure of the state-centred concept of revolution was becoming obvious, the development of capitalism itself was destroying the basis of the state illusion. The increasingly direct subordination of the state to capital (even more obvious in the case of social democratic governments than in the case of openly neo-liberal ones) has closed the door to the hopes of radical reformists. It has become increasingly clear that the relation between state and capital can be understood only as a relation between national state and global capital (and global society), and not as a relation between national state and national capital, and that therefore states are not the centres of power that the state-centred theory of both Luxemburg and Bernstein assumed them to be.

The great contribution of the zapatistas has been to break the connection between revolution and control of the state. While so many people throughout the world have concluded that because revolution through the state is not possible, revolution is not possible (and so we must conform), the zapatistas in effect have said: "If revolution through the state is not possible, then we must think of revolution in a different way. We must break the identification of revolution with the taking of state power, but we must not abandon the hope of revolution because that hope is life itself." This is not a quotation. I am putting words in their mouth.

The state illusion is, however, just part of a greater illusion, what one might call the power illusion. This is the idea that changing society is a matter of conquering positions of power, or at least of becoming powerful in some way. It seems to me that the sense of the zapatista project is quite different, not to become powerful, but to dissolve relations of power. This is surely the implication of their constant insistence on the principle of 'commanding obeying' 'Mandar obedeciendo' and on dignity not just as the aim of the struggle but as the organisational principle of the struggle.

The zapatistas take us beyond the state illusion and beyond the power illusion. But then what does this mean? What does a revolution look like that is not focussed on the taking of state power or on becoming powerful in some sense? Are we not in danger of falling into complete absurdity? Are they not leading us into insanity?

Here it becomes clear that it is a grave mistake to speak of the zapatistas as 'armed reformists', as some have done. What the zapatista uprising makes clear is that, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, after the murder of Che and the tragedy of the Latin American revolutions, the notion of revolution can be maintained only if the stakes are raised. The revolutions of the twentieth century failed because they aimed too low, not because they aimed too high. The conception of revolution was too limited. It is completely inadequate to think of revolution in terms of winning the state or conquering power. Something far more radical is needed, a much more profound rejection of capitalism. 'We walk', they say, 'we do not run, because we are going far'. But the path that they invite us to walk on is vertiginous indeed. They invite us to go on a dangerous, dizzying walk to who knows where. And we accept, because there is no alternative. We do not have to look far to see that humanity is destroying itself. We cannot give up hope and yet the only hope that is now imaginable is a hope that goes beyond the state illusion, beyond the illusion of power.

What, then, does revolution mean if it does not mean taking state power or even becoming powerful? The answer is simple: we do not know, we have to learn. "Revolution", as Comandante Tacho puts it, "is like going to take lessons in a school that has not even been built". Yvon Le Bot, *El Sueño Zapatista*, México D.F., Plaza & Janés, 1997, p. 191

In a school that has not been built yet, learning cannot be a question of repeating the lessons that teacher taught us. If we wish to share the excitement of such a school, then we are forced to be subjects. We are forced to construct our own path, with only the utopian star to guide us. In this, of course, we share in the experience of others who have tried to follow the same star, but the bitter

experience of history means that the star is no longer quite the same. What does revolution mean now? What can it mean to dissolve power relations? How can we take part in the struggle to dissolve power relations, not just in our teaching practices, not just in our everyday lives, but in the categories we use?

To think in the non-existing school of zapatismo is exciting but frightening. Gone are the certainties of the old revolutionaries. After Auschwitz, after Hiroshima, there can no longer be a concept of historical certainty. When humanity possesses the capacity to annihilate itself tomorrow, there can be no guarantee of a happy ending. As Adorno correctly stressed, we must reject the notion of a dialectic which reconciles everything in the end, we must think rather of the dialectic as a negative dialectic, a movement through negation with no guarantees, a negative movement of possibility.

It seems clear too that the concept of revolution can no longer be instrumental. Our traditional concept of revolution is as a means to achieve an end, and we know that in practice this has meant using people as a means to an end. If dignity is taken as a central principle, then people cannot be treated as means: the creation of a society based on dignity can only take place through the development of social practices based on the mutual recognition of that dignity. We walk, not in order to arrive at a promised land, but because the walking itself is the revolution. And if instrumentalism falls as a way of thinking, so too does the lineal time that is implicit in the traditional concept of revolution, the clear distinction between before and after. There is no question of first revolution, then dignity: dignity itself is the revolution.

We are into a very shaky world where there seems to be nothing very firm to hold on to. We are walking on a path in which we wish that we had at least the security of a tightrope under our feet. And gradually we realise that that firmness which we at first look for is the firmness of the power against which we are rebelling. Power is the establishment of laws, of definitions, of classifications. In one of the zapatista comunicados, Marcos puts words into the mouth of Power: Power says to the rebels: 'Be ye not awkward, refuse not to be classified. All that cannot be classified counts not, exists not, is not.' Communiqué of May 1996, La Jornada, 10 de junio de 1996. Define yourselves - that has been the devil's temptation to the zapatistas since the very beginning, the temptation that, up to now at least, they have been able to resist.

This does not mean that the laws, definitions, classifications do not exist. Of course they exist because power exists, but our struggle is against them. Our struggle is not so much undefined as anti-definitional, the struggle to liberate doing and thinking from the boxes in which capitalist Power holds them prisoner. Our struggle, in other words, is critical, anti-fetishistic.

Hope is uncertain and therefore frightening. Hope means a present that is open, filled with the possibility of dignity but also full of Auschwitz, Hiroshima and Acteal, not only as past monstrosities but as screaming auguries of a possible future. Not just Bloch but also Adorno. Disillusion, with its blinkered categories, its fragmentation of the world into secure units with walls, into neat topics that can be encapsulated in research projects: disillusion protects us against this insecurity. Disillusion shields us from the pain of the past and blots out the possibilities of the future. Disillusion locks us into the security of an absolute present, into the eternity of power. Disillusion sets our feet securely on the highway that leads towards the destruction of humanity.

To close your eyes to the bitterness of the past is to close your eyes to the possibility of the future. To close your eyes to the possibilities of the future is to dishonour the memory of the past, of our dead.

Fortunately for those of us who live in Puebla, we have an ever-present visual aid. We have in the volcano a constant reminder that a mountain is not a mountain, that the invisible has an explosive

force, that the unthinkable is always thinkable and that there is nothing less secure than security.

This talk, like any talk, is a question. Preguntando caminamos.

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**P.S.**

\* This is the text of a talk presented to the congress of SCOLAS (Southwest Council of Latin American Studies) in Puebla in March 2000.

\* From: <http://libcom.org/library/zapatismo-social-sciences-john-holloway>