

VIRTUAL CHIAPAS: A REPLY TO PAULSON

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On reading Justin Paulson's thoughtful critique of my article I am struck by how much of what he says reinforces the case I have made. To be sure, the first section of the essay doesn't address my work at all, but rather offers Paulson's own interpretation of the nature of globalization, neoliberalism and the Zapatista response. But once he turns to my ideas, Paulson argues that I am mistaken in my assertion that the agrarista dream cannot be realized in the conflict zone in Eastern Chiapas because the situation is not a simple case of poor landless peasants facing off against traditional large landowners, i.e. haciendas. Yet the material he offers to refute my view, the aspects of agrarian history he says I neglected to detail, in fact provide further evidence for my reading of the situation which is that it is very complex, often pits one group of indigenous people against another, and frequently degenerates into a 'war of the poor' against one another.

Indeed, the particular case that he emphasizes, the displacement of 3,000 indigenous families of Chol and Tzetal settlers by a 1972 federal decree that reserved the land for the aboriginal people of the selva, the Lancandon Indians, is an excellent example of what I have argued. I assert that there is a problem with taking an essentialized view of Chiapanecan Indians in which all indigenous people are posed as living in harmony with nature and one another and that problems only arise with the intrusion of the 'bad guys', variously understood as the dominant society, neoliberal policy makers, the Mexican state, the Mexican military, the Chiapanecan state, the Chiapanecan bourgeoisie, public and private lumber companies, the landlords and their henchmen and so forth. In reality, much of the conflict in Chiapas plays out as territorial and religious

disputes within and between indigenous communities and between indigenous and poor mestizo peasant communities. If we don't understand these deep-seated conflicts and how they are reinforced and exploited by the array of outsiders listed above, then it becomes impossible to see any way out of the stalemate in Chiapas. Moreover, I stick by my assertion that there is nothing progressive about the seizure of the private land holdings that are minifundia (i.e., sub-family farms) or family farms—i.e., land sufficient to employ and sustain a single family—and that minifundismo and family farms constitute the forms of land tenure that predominate through almost all of the disputed area.

Moving on in his critique from the Land to the Indigenous Question, Paulson insists that 'indigenous autonomy is not, and never was, the singular goal of the Zapatista movement.' I have to point out that nowhere in my writings do I claim it was. Rather, I discuss the difference of opinion among progressive people working in Chiapas (Mexicans and foreigners, and above all, feminists) on whether gaining greater autonomy would represent a step forward for indigenous people. I, myself, do not know whether it would be, and it was neither out of coyness nor lack of conviction that I did not take a position on the issue in my article—let alone assert, as Paulson has me saying, that foreigners should take a stand against autonomy! Rather I offered the debate—or, more to the point—the lack of debate on the left as an example of the 'flattening' of information which has the effect of silencing diverse progressive opinion. This is particularly true with respect to some feminist opinion which argues that greater autonomy would not necessarily improve the condition of indigenous people in Chiapas and, in particular, would not improve women's condition.

Moreover, while Paulson expresses the fear that readers would 'come away [from my article] with the mistaken impression that the Zapatistas and their supporters are simply fighting for a weak form of autonomy', I never suggest anything of the kind. Rather, I pose the entire discussion of the autonomy issue as one example of the lack of full information available electronically. If, for example, one goes to Paulson's website, one finds more of what he has written here on the push for autonomy, the San Andrés accords, and the EZLN communiqués on the subject. One would never guess from a visit to that site that there are progressive people in Mexico—both indigenous and non-indigenous—who think that autonomy could turn out to be a dead end.

Alas, these are not the only words that Paulson puts in my mouth. Paulson has me claiming that the EZLN should subordinate itself to the PRD. Nowhere do I say this. Indeed I wouldn't think of sitting in Toronto and recommending anything to the EZLN. The whole idea is preposterous and comes out of a concept of distance politics in which I do not believe nor engage. Moreover, like almost any reader of *Socialist Register* who has closely followed the development of the PRD since the late 1980s, I harbour all the same doubts that socialists within the PRD do about the capacity of that party to offer a left alternative in Mexico.

Rather, what I argue is that the PRD is an important actor on the left and

that it would have been nice if those who rely on the Internet to stay informed about the situation in Chiapas had had available to them the arguments of people like Gilberto Gómez Maza who is not, as Paulson describes him, simply 'a single Chiapanecan PRD activist', but as I make clear, head of the PRD in the state of Chiapas. Moreover, he is someone who, in my view, has a legitimate claim on our attention as a consequence of his thirty years of political activism on the left and decades of work as the only paediatrician serving the indigenous people in Los Altos. If Paulson doesn't agree with my notion that 'foreign activists concerned with the future of Chiapas would at least want to think through and debate [Gómez Maza's] assertions' regarding the viability of the electoral option in Chiapas, he might choose not to join me in this activity. But it is quite another thing to claim that I am sitting around telling the Zapatistas what to do, or uncritically embracing the PRD's positions, let alone suggesting that everyone should engage in this discussion 'from the PRD's point of view'!

Indeed, the caricature that Paulson draws of someone like me who believes that there could be multiple and diverse points of view on the left regarding events in Chiapas or the efficacy of the electoral road says more than any picture I could sketch of the one-dimensional nature of the perspectives provided on websites like his.

Ironically, on 19 June 2000, just two weeks before the elections that ended the PRI's stranglehold on political power in Mexico, Marcos issued a new communiqué in which he observed that 'while the political left is broader than Cardenism and the PRD,...we believe that for millions of people elections represent a dignified and respectable space for struggle.' Thus the EZLN called for 'respect for this form of civil and peaceful struggle' and endorsed the participation of their own people in the process in any way they might choose. Sadly, the fact that the EZLN's articulation of a new, more tolerant position on voting and its dissemination by Chiapas web masters came only days before the elections had unfortunate consequences. When compared with the 1994 presidential contest, a striking aspect of the July 2000 election was the precipitous decline in the number of foreigners who registered to work as observers and the very modest presence of leftists among them. While foreigner poll watchers recruited by the PRI were thick on the ground, many on the left were caught flat-footed because the new EZLN position came too late for foreign Zapatistas to apply for observers' visas in time to travel to Mexico to witness or discourage electoral fraud.

Finally, readers of *Socialist Register 2000* can confirm for themselves that in the introduction to the article I ask—polemically, to be sure—if attachment to the Zapatista cause represents 'involvement with people's struggles elsewhere in place of participation and personal investment in the struggle at home' (p. 162) and I then go on to answer that question by emphasizing that, in fact, 'many foreign Zapatista solidarity groups are explicit on the need to support the effort in Chiapas by pursuing struggles closer to home.' (p. 163). Under the

circumstances, I am surprised to see Paulson attribute to me the view that ‘those who do act in solidarity thereby reflect a preference for embracing revolution elsewhere rather than struggling at home.’ I am particularly perplexed that he would make this claim when he, himself, acknowledges that foreign solidarity groups comprise a quite mixed lot and he says, ‘I won’t argue that there aren’t any foreign activists trying to “revolt vicariously” through the Zapatistas’. In this respect, I believe we are actually in substantial agreement.

I would love to be wrong in my assertions about the narrow range of progressive opinion available to those who can only follow events in Chiapas electronically. Justin Paulson cites ‘literally scores of webpages, dozens of mailing lists and archives’ that are available online. Inspired by these assurances, I have resumed my electronic quest for more varied perspectives on Chiapas. However, although I can’t exclude that my problem springs from the limits of my skills in surfing the web, what I find in July 2000 is, if anything, a narrower range of ideas than when I first sat down to write about this problem in December 1998.

This is particularly regrettable in light of the outcome of the recent Mexican election whose significance is such that it deserves a great deal of debate on the left, and not only in Mexico. A breakdown of the votes cast on 2 July indicates that the PRI—to be sure, only with the help of its customary fraudulent practices in the countryside—substantially held the base of support that it enjoyed in the 1997 elections. The avalanche of urban votes that carried the right-wing candidate, Vicente Fox, to the presidency and his party, the PAN, to its largest-ever representation in the legislature, appears to have come overwhelmingly from Mexicans who had previously supported Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas and the PRD. While the preference for PAN among the urban poor and working classes has been offered by conservative observers as evidence of popular support for Fox’s frankly neo-liberal program and his commitment to remove anti-clerical restraints on the Church, in reality, the shift of the anti-PRI vote from the PRD to the PAN more likely represents the pragmatic decision of millions of protest voters to go with the candidate who was most likely to wrest power from the official party. As the left attempts to analyze and rebound from the effects of the defection a significant portion of the Cardenista base to a right-wing candidate, the need for more open discussion about left alternatives in Mexico should be very clear.