10 Class Conflict in the Countryside: The Lessons of Chiapas

INTRODUCTION

There is a growing popular opposition to neoliberal politics throughout the world. In Latin America the guerrilla movement in Chiapas, the landless rural workers occupation of plantations in Brazil, the peasant-Indian mobilizations and strikes in Ecuador, Bolivia and Paraguay, the urban uprising in Santiago del Estero in Argentina, form part of a global pattern. They are different expressions of mass resistance to the same liberal system. These extra-parliamentary activities are attacking electoral regimes which utilize authoritarian methods to impose liberal policies.

Whatever their differences these movements have several general points in common. In the first place they argue that the electoral systems do not respond to demands of majorities, they are not effective vehicles for realizing social reforms and are losing credibility because they marginalize the mass of the people. Second, they argue that there is a growing gap between the political class and the social movements in civil society. It is this gap that has led to the de-legitimation of electoral politicians as a general phenomena in Mexico. The illegitimacy of the one-party state in Mexico is one of the key factors influencing the uprising in Chiapas but forms part of a global pattern.

The affirmation of the Right to rebellion is not only found among Chiapas Indians oppressed 500 years but has a transcendence that goes beyond a specific ethnic group in a specific region. The Zapatistas themselves have appealed to the population at large to join in a national movement directed against ten years of repressive neoliberal policies. They convoked a national convention during the first week of August 1994, which was attended by 5000 delegates from a vast array of peasant, urban and trade union organizations and which demanded a democratic transformation of the country and an end to neoliberal policies. Throughout Mexico, popular social movements are mobilized in solidarity with the Zapatista movement but also in favor of the same demands for their own regions. Zapatista movement is not simply a regionalist movement of
Indians – it is a movement oriented toward a change in the national politico-economic system.

The existence of a guerrilla movement in Chiapas represents a break with a myth circulating in Central America and throughout the Left that with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Eastern European regimes popular guerrilla movements are no longer viable. The rebellion in Chiapas is a challenge to the ideologists of the Western world and the ex-guerrilla leaders who claim that the anti-imperialist struggle is out of date. The Zapatista movement is a challenge for the left. Its capacity to confront the liberal system and not to adapt to it, is generating a practical alternative in everyday life, providing evidence that confrontation is viable and that revolutions are not products of competition between state systems. The Zapatistas have demonstrated that revolutions emerge from internal contradictions and advance because of local organization and the struggle of ten thousand peasants capable of sustaining themselves without external support and with their own instruments of struggle. *In a word, Chiapas is the most dramatic and coherent expression of world-wide reaction against neoliberalism.*

**Mexico: Liberalism and Revolution**

For many commentators and publicists the fact that the rebellion occurred in Mexico has been a great surprise. For some time the serious press around the world (*The New York Times, Toronto Globe and Mail, Le Monde*) wrote of the successes of President Salinas and, out of nowhere, it would seem, an armed Indian uprising exploded and ruined the celebration. What were the media celebrating? The North American Free Trade Agreement, the recovery of the Mexican economy (anaemic as it is), the jump in the stock market, and the large-scale influx of foreign capital and loans, these successes of the Salinas government make the uprising incomprehensible to Western observers.

There are two explanations circulating which are basically flawed. After the initial shock the Western media began to publish a series of articles by 'experts' and pundits who argued that the uprising is a response to very specific *regional* conditions; that the Indian communities have *historic* problems, inherited from the past; that there was an abusive governor in Chiapas; that the region was poor and not integrated in the free market. The pattern of argumentation was clear: to avoid any systematic discussion of contemporary structural adjustment policies imposed by the Salinas regime and its predecessor De la Madrid and supported by the IMF, the World Bank and the West as relevant causes of the conditions