5
Rethinking Resistance: Contesting Neoliberal Globalisation and the Zapatistas as a Critical Social Movement

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Social unrest with globalisation is gathering pace. The Zapatistas in Chiapas, the 1995 revolts in France, the battles in Seattle, Davos, Prague and the annual May day protests in London all indicate growing concern with the social vicissitudes of the ideas and institutions of the free global market (Amoore, 2000a; Escobar and Alvarez, 1992; Haynes, 1997; Krishnan, 1995). Moreover the linking of local concerns to global structures is an intriguing paradox of a globalisation process causing discontent whilst simultaneously forging solidarities that may cut across traditional class, age, gender and ethnic differences. The globalisation of capital may be proving a prophetic Marx correct (Fukuyama, 1991) as protest groups coin phrases such as ‘we have to be as transnational as capital’ to indicate that if capitalism has entered a new global era, then counterforces to it must similarly adopt such strategic coordination (Sklair, 1998).¹

Critical IPE responses have tended to be understood and practised through the theory and practice of neo-Gramscian readings of social movements. Such readings argue that a transnational class is cultivating and orchestrating a project of interlocking ideas and institutions to generate a climate for accumulation in the present and future direction of the global political economy. In turn this has precipitated ‘post-modern’ responses to the ‘metanarrative’ of global struggle, which celebrate alternative localised and context-specific struggles. This chapter will challenge the conceptual and strategic rudiments of this debate by re-examining what it means to engage with and confront a politics of resistance to globalisation.² However, the chapter calls for an alternative politics of resistance beyond neo-Gramscian critical IPE that challenges the perceived understanding of post-modern resistance by focusing
upon the activity of critical social movements which rethink and reorientate the central themes of the Enlightenment. In elucidating their grievances, objectives and strategies these social movements refuse, through their actions, any kind of ideological/conceptual imposition of intellectual boundaries and activate within and across different political spaces and different political times. Such movements are critical in the sense that they not only challenge the authoritarian state ‘out there’ but they challenge the conceptual and strategic routines of what it means to confront power and to confront the political ‘in here’ (Walker, 1988).

The chapter shows how the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN) (Zapatista National Liberation Army) that mobilised in Mexico in 1994, responding to the vicissitudes of neoliberal modernisation, has articulated a distinctive form of political struggle that is not based upon near-utopian visions of a future. Instead the EZLN has cultivated an encouraging rethinking of the site and practices of Mexican sovereignty, the site and nature of Mexican modernisation, and the institutions and practices of democracy. The EZLN also cultivates a distinctive political resistance that problematises the site and meaning of ‘being political’. Using the work of Michel Foucault the chapter shows how critical social movements critically explore and redefine the meaning and nature of political protest, political community and political power (Rabinow, 1991; Patton, 1997). Such an input into critical IPE and a revisiting of ‘post-structuralism’ offers important conceptual and strategic insights for galvanising a truly critical IPE.

Reconnoitring post-modernism: themes and approaches

Neoliberalism and its maxim ‘there is no alternative’, coupled with the end of real existing socialism in 1989, seemed to have finished Marxism in theory and practice. Marxist revolutionary theories of development/underdevelopment were radical alternatives to the liberal ‘theories of growth model’ promoted by Western liberal capitalism. Marxist and neo-Marxist theory heralded a distinctive understanding of the relationship between theory and practice where organic intellectuals sought to advise and guide revolution. However, Marxist development theory was rooted in the very Enlightenment project inhabited by its main liberal adversaries. Leys notes:

the theory of social and economic development, in the original and most useful meaning of the term, is not in crisis. On the contrary the legacy of thinkers from Condorcet through Hegel and Marx,