

**The Persistent Return of the Wretched of the Earth:  
Neo-Zapatismo and Revolutionary Theory**

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*Frantz Fanon observó claramente el declive de la izquierda europea: la escandalosa opulencia en las metrópolis ha sido construida sobre las espaldas de los esclavos, se ha alimentado de la sangre y del suelo colonizados. El bienestar y el progreso de los países colonizadores –diríase ahora su globalización imperial – han sido y siguen siendo construidos con el sudor y los cadavers de los negros, los árabes, los indios y amarillos. Fanon replica así a esta realidad lacerante: “Hemos decidido no olvidarlo.”*

*A treinta años de 1968, también podemos decir: hemos decidido no olvidar a los condenados de la tierra. Y habrá que entender entonces que hoy el centro de la rebeldía es la insurgencia de los Zapatistas.*

Francisco Pineda  
“Frantz Fanon: *Los condenados de la tierra* y el 68”  
Chiapas 7, 1998

Like that of Frantz Fanon before them, the distinctive discourse of the Zapatistas has challenged the orthodoxies of revolutionary theory and thereby invited characterization as a complete rupture with that theory. How then do we understand the relationship of neo-Zapatismo, the distinctive political outlook of the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN), to the broader body of revolutionary theory produced by revolutionary movements over the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries? In statements on the role of civil society, political parties and the state, the Zapatistas have clearly departed from important orthodoxies of the various strands of Leninism that dominated revolutionary theory for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In this light, several theorists rooted in the tradition of autonomist Marxism (Cleaver 1994, 1998; Holloway 1997, 2005; and Hardt and Negri 2004) have advanced a characterization of neo-Zapatismo as constituting

a complete rupture with the main body of revolutionary theory as it had developed prior to the 1994 Zapatista uprising.

I believe that this characterization is mistaken and rests on an oversimplification of both the history of revolutionary theory and of the genesis of neo-Zapatismo itself. There are several components to this larger argument. In this paper I will confine myself chiefly to presenting, in brief, an alternative account of the development of revolutionary theory, and the relations between its various and sometimes antagonistic strands, that is intended to problematize what has become the prevailing view of the relationship of neo-Zapatismo to that history. I will locate the distinctive discourse and practice of the EZLN within a century and a half of theoretical disputes over questions of leadership, democracy, revolutionary organization, and the relationship between struggles informed by ethnic and national particularities and the universalism inherent in any politics that understands the capitalist world system as its nemesis.

I will seek to show that the development of revolutionary theory is best understood as a dialectical process through which successive revolutionary movements have grappled with several very difficult contradictions that lay at the heart of the larger social revolutionary project. Stated as simply as possible, these contradictions revolve around, first the identification of a prospective revolutionary subject, and second the role of leadership and various organizational forms (the party, the revolutionary army, the state) in the realization of that subject's revolutionary potential. These contradictions have haunted revolutionary movements since the battles between Marx and the anarchist in the First International, creating a persistent temptation to view the history of revolutionary theory as a running battle between two distinct and essentially stable

trends: one anti-authoritarian, anti-statist, decentralist, and “from below” and the other authoritarian, statist, centralist and “from above.” This is the view implicit in the works of Holloway and the other autonomist Marxists which, I believe, obscures both the difficulties posed by the underlying contradictions and flattens out the rich variety of the attempts to deal with them within revolutionary theory.

Every generation is compelled to reinvent its own body of revolutionary theory and in the course of this process repeats in new forms disputes that on first glance seem to have already been fought out several times. I hold that this compulsion is not, as is often suggested, some sort of pathology, but rather an expression of a protracted process by which the excluded majority of humanity, the very real wretched of the earth, in each iteration advances their capacity to know and rule the world, each time to be thrown back but then to return again even stronger. Neo-Zapatismo, then, is best understood not as the result of a simple rupture with the exhausted perspectives of the past, but rather as the product of a continuous and ongoing transformation of revolutionary theory.

Frantz Fanon is a particularly important figure here precisely because by understanding first the continuities and discontinuities between his emphasis on the psychological processes of decolonization through revolutionary action and the role of culture within those processes and the dominant approach of the revolutionary left in his day, and then the continuities between Fanon’s conceptual vocabulary and the notions of dignity and indigenous autonomy in neo-Zapatismo we are able to locate neo-Zapatismo within a larger picture of revolutionary theory as a living and developing body of theory rather than as standing in simple opposition to exhausted orthodoxies.

Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* was not only a challenge to the racism and colonialism of France and the other imperialist powers, it was also a challenge to the orthodoxies of Marxist revolutionary theory embraced not only by the Communist Parties of the industrialized countries, but also by many of the main parties and organizations engaged in the fight against imperialism in its colonial and neo-colonial forms in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Fanon's attention to the psychological and cultural dimensions of the struggles of colonized peoples fundamentally challenged central notions of revolutionary consciousness and agency developed within the Socialist and Communist movements and initiated critical consideration of the implicit eurocentrism of Marxism in its several forms. With this in mind I will argue that an account of the genesis of neo-Zapatismo that only considers it in relationship to the most doctrinaire readings of Marx, Lenin, Mao and/or Ché without taking into account the influence of Fanon's central insights can only be a caricature.

#### ORIGINS OF NEO-ZAPATISMO

The EZLN emerged into public view in 1994 as the product of three decades of intense social struggle on the part of the indigenous communities of eastern Chiapas, particularly those located in the remote canyons (*las cañadas*) of the Lacandon Jungle. While the roots of the Zapatista revolt arguably go back to the Spanish conquest (Viqueira and Ruz 1995:13), the distinctive politics of neo-Zapatismo are of more recent origin. The EZLN itself was founded in 1983 in the heart of the Lacandon Jungle where it subsequently secured broad support from many of the communities established there over several decades of intensive settlement beginning in the 1930s. (De Vos 2002:135-180)

The founding nucleus of the EZLN were themselves already members of the Forces of National Liberation (FLN), a clandestine politico-military organization, itself founded in 1969 and originally inspired by the example of the Cuban Revolution and Ernesto “Ché” Guevara’s strategy of *foquismo*. (Tello Diaz 2000; LeBot 1997:123-141; Guevara 1998)

The FLN built on a substantial legacy of political education and organizational capacity building in the Lacandon Jungle, from 1974 to 1983, on the part of two Maoist organizations, Unión del Pueblo and Política Popular, that assisted in the organization of several militant and independent unions of *ejidos*. (Legoretta Diaz 1998; Rubio Lopez 2002)

The work of the Maoists in turn built on the earlier work of the Diocese of San Cristobal, training indigenous catechists in Liberation Theology, (Meyer 2000) and a broader revival of land struggles and the appearance of several independent campesino organizations under the leadership of various left-wing organizations. (Harvey 1998)

This brief outline of the historical origins of the Zapatistas is not seriously questioned by anyone. What is hotly disputed, however, is the content and the meanings of the ideological transformations that occurred and therefore how we understand the present orientation of the Zapatistas. Subcomandante Marcos himself has promoted a narrative in which the doctrinaire guerrilla cadres of the FLN, including himself, were ideologically “defeated” by the indigenous communities and compelled to abandon one-by-one the orthodoxies of revolutionary Marxism in favor of a the distinctively indigenous synthesis now known as neo-Zapatismo. (LeBot)

The Maoists, who were effectively expelled from the indigenous communities by 1983, are represented simply as examples of the failure of orthodox Marxism to take into account the indigenous character of the communities. This is the narrative that Holloway et. al. have taken as the

basis of their account. Marcos is a talented storyteller and this creation story is a seductive example of his talents. It is undoubtedly true in important ways. But it also raises as many questions as it answers and encourages the reader to project their own wishes onto the Zapatistas, which is what I believe Holloway et. al. have done.

By contrast, Tello Diaz, largely reflecting the views of the political and military authorities of the Mexican state that gave him access to their documents and contacts, and in a manner that Marcos would compare with a detective novel (before he wrote his own), emphasizes the less seemly events in the history of the FLN and its supposed foreign contacts (with Cuba and Nicaragua), to portray the EZLN as yet another orthodox Marxist guerrilla organization and to suggest that its supposedly distinctive discourse was just putting old wine into new bottles.

Legoretta Diaz echoes some of Tello Diaz's analysis, but in her account the Zapatistas, with the connivance of the Diocese, effectively destroy the great experiment in participatory democracy in the indigenous communities that had been nurtured into existence by the Maoists in the form of the ejidal unions. Hers is a sort of mirror-image of Holloway's account in which the Maoists are the real anti-authoritarians and the Zapatistas are the authoritarians rather than the other way around. I believe this strange contrast suggests a fundamental flaw in both of these accounts, a failure of dialectical imagination that cannot abide by the shifting and interpenetrating character of these aspects in every vital movement.

In opposition to all of these accounts I argue that the supposedly most libertarian practices of the Zapatistas (which Tello Diaz and Legoretta Diaz view as fraudulent) are strongly anticipated in the participatory democratic ethos of the decidedly non-orthodox

Maoism of Unión del Pueblo and Política Popular (despite the subsequent trajectories of some of their leaders and members) and the mass campesino organizations they built in the 1970s, but that those practices were not sustainable in the face of intensified state repression beginning in the early 1980s. It was precisely for this reason that the communities were won to the necessity of a more militarized organization advanced by the cadres of the FLN in the form of the EZLN. A closer examination of the FLN I believe will also show that it does not conform to the caricature of it implied by the autonomist Marxist reading of this history. Rather the politics of the FLN evolved in response to the experiences of it and other Mexican guerrilla groups in the 1970s in ways that enabled them to productively fuse with the communities that had initially experienced mass radicalization under the leadership of the Diocese and the Maoists.

#### REVOLUTIONARY TRANSFORMATIONS IN REVOLUTIONARY THEORY

Revolutionary theory, as a broad but distinct tradition of thought emerges in the nineteenth century. According to Wolin, this tradition

“includes more than Marxism. It begins with such writers as Henri de Saint-Simone, Charles Fourier, and Robert Owen and goes on to include Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, Louis Blanc, Michael Bakunin and many others. Eventually it was dominated by Marxism, or more accurately, it was Karl Marx who, in a sense created the tradition.” (347)

Marx’s role in the creation of the tradition and the dominance of the tradition by Marxism are no accident of course. For it is Marx’s recognition of the historic mission of the European proletariat that enables him to identify what was valuable in the works of his predecessors and contemporaries and to synthesize them into a coherent outlook that then itself became constitutive of the proletariat as a revolutionary class. Marxism armed

the European proletariat of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries not just with a critical analysis of capitalism but with an understanding of their own collective capacity and responsibility to overthrow capitalism. I would argue that it is this constitutive effect that distinguishes revolutionary theory from that which simply desires to be revolutionary.

In his early writings, Marx advances the notion of communism as the realization of humanity's "species being" (Marx 1975) which refers to the self-recognition of humanity as a species able to transform itself by means of conscious social activity. The realization of our species being in Marx is the concrete negation of our alienated existence and the achievement on a world scale of a new stage of human society in which we no longer face each other as atomized individuals, but as collaborators in the collective, indeed global, project of making our world.

In retrospect we can see in his Eurocentrism, in his contempt for the peasantry, and so on, the limitations of Marx's vision of a revolutionary subject. But before embarking on such criticism it is important to understand how revolutionary Marx's location of revolutionary agency in the proletariat really was. The European proletariat of 1848 and 1871 were not the comparably comfortable and well-fed workers of postwar Western Europe. They were very much, in fact, "the wretched of the earth." While their formal legal condition as free laborers was undoubtedly preferable to that of the slaves and peons working in the colonial hinterlands, their material deprivation was certainly comparable. (Engels 2000) Unlike the slave-master who paid for labor by the lifetime rather than by the hour or by the piece, the factory owner had little reason to care if his workers starved when the market for their goods was slack. In any event the unparalleled concentration of wealth in the hands of the European bourgeoisie cast the wretched state

of the European proletariat in particularly sharp contrast. And it was this proximity to the hoarded wealth of the world that also ostensibly qualified the European proletariat not simply to break its own chains but to liberate the whole of humanity

After Marx's death a more determinist reading of Marx's theory of revolution would come to dominate the thinking of the Second or Socialist International. In this reading, the very processes of capitalist development themselves would ensure the ultimate victory of the socialist revolution. Accordingly there was more and more emphasis on the tasks of building up the apparatuses of the unions and the party and less and less attention to developing the consciousness of the workers beyond the sort of catechism needed to be a proper member of one organization or another. Thus a determinist reading of Marx fostered what Lenin would come refer to as "economism," the belief that the revolutionary consciousness needed by the proletariat would arise organically out of its economic struggles with capital.

#### LENIN AND THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION

It is Lenin (1975; Zizek 2004) who strikes at the determinism and economism of the Second International. Lenin grasped that economic struggles alone, even when they erupted into fierce strikes, would not produce in the working class the consciousness necessary to take hold of society. This required rather, revolutionary agitation and education around all the political questions of the day, in particular around questions of war and peace. Participation in parliamentary politics might or might not provide a useful arena for this work depending on circumstances, but under no circumstances was this political work to be confined to the parliamentary arena.

Lenin's famous comment that "workers left exclusively to their own strength can cultivate only a trade union consciousness" and that revolutionary consciousness must be brought to them by members of the intelligentsia is frequently cited as an example of Lenin's supposed elitist contempt for the intellectual capacities of ordinary workers, but the truth is something else. Lenin is actually arguing here with other socialist intellectuals about their responsibilities to take the consciousness of the workers more seriously and that it was rather in fetishizing the workers spontaneous consciousness that condescension was really shown for the workers capacity to grapple with the great political questions that they would need to fully understand if they were to run the world.

While Lenin's theory of the vanguard party has been commonly linked with the conspiratorial traditions of the Jacobins, Blanquists and Narodniks as reflecting an elitist vision of "revolution from above" it would be more accurate to say it reflected a dialectical understanding of the relationship between political leadership "from above" and the emergent revolutionary subjectivity of the proletariat "from below." The vanguard party, by Lenin's lights, enables the proletariat to realize its revolutionary subjectivity not in some automatic way via participation in economic struggles but rather as a result of its development through conscious political struggle.

The Russian Revolution challenged not only the determinism and economism of the Second International, but also the privileged place of the mature industrial proletariat of the advanced capitalist countries. The first proletarian revolution in Europe was not made by the English or German workers who had built up such an impressive array of working class organizations and experiences over several decades, who had supposedly matured through their participation in parliamentary politics. On the contrary it was made

by the very recently proletarianized peasants of Russia herded into newly minted giant factories and acting in concert with their peasant sisters and brothers in the countryside and the armed forces, a proletariat closer in its profile to the participants in the Revolutions of 1848 and the Paris Commune than the well-fed and disciplined German trade unionists of 1914.

Lenin's theory of imperialism provided an explanation for why it was the Russian and not the German proletariat that took the lead in making revolution. The super-profits of imperialism constituted the material basis of opportunism within the European workers movement. By various means, including the influence of a "labor aristocracy" the European proletariat had come under the ideological domination of its respective national bourgeoisies. The economic backwardness and brutality of Russia meant that Russian proletariat was the "weak link" in this system and therefore the first to rise to the challenge of making a proletarian revolution.

While Lenin's repudiation of the determinism and economism of the Second International and his recognition of the primacy of the political struggle for the consciousness of the working class represented a real theoretical leap of universal significance, the particular form of the vanguard party developed under conditions quite particular to Russia would ultimately prove unable to carry forward social revolutions in the advanced capitalist countries.

Several European revolutionary thinkers attempted to grapple with the evident limitations of the Bolshevik model. While Luxemburg's (2004) early criticisms of Lenin anticipated certain problems, far more fruitful was the work of Lukacs (1971, 1972) and Gramsci.(1971)

Despite Lukacs's and Gramsci's important theoretical contributions, the European proletariat did not rise to the challenge of the Russian Revolution. Every one of the revolutionary uprisings that followed in the wake of the first world war went down to defeat. It is against this backdrop that Lukacs is officially chastised within the Third or Communist International and the determinist reading of Marx is effectively restored as the official philosophical foundation of the official ideology of Marxism-Leninism.

### REVOLUTIONS IN THE THIRD WORLD

Just as the close of the First World War opened the floodgates of (failed) revolution across Europe, the close of the Second World War opened up the floodgates of revolution across the Third World and this time they encountered greater success. And just as the unfolding of a revolutionary situation in Russia demanded a confrontation with the determinism of the Second International, the wave of revolutions across Asia, Africa and Latin America demanded a reckoning with Soviet Marxism's determinism.

Three revolutions carried out on three separate continents made three distinct theoretical breaks with Soviet Marxism, each revolving around the persistent questions of revolutionary agency. Taken together the Chinese Revolution as theorized by Mao, (1971) the Cuban Revolution as theorized by Ché, (1998) and the Algerian revolution as theorized by Fanon (1967, 1968) illustrate the enormity of the impact on revolutionary theory of the whole wave of Third World revolutions that swept the globe in the decades after the Second World War.

While all the major revolutions in the Third World embraced the Leninist analysis of imperialism and some variation on the vanguard party as the appropriate

organizational model, their experiences were as heterogeneous as the conditions that obtained in Asia, Africa and Latin America and so were the resulting contributions to the development of revolutionary theory.

More than any other, the Chinese Revolution loomed over this whole period. Mao's theoretical work, which codified the lessons of this historically unparalleled upheaval, recognized the revolutionary potential of the peasantry within what he characterized as the world-wide context of proletarian revolution set in motion by the Russian Revolution. His strategy of protracted peoples war; his theory of the "new democratic revolution" in a semi-colonized semi-feudal country like China, that would include the participation of the anti-imperialist or "patriotic" bourgeoisie; all this implied a greatly enlarged notion of the revolutionary subject, as of course did the less theorized but no less real transformations in the status of women.

The two most important theoretical contributions of Mao, however, were the development of the "mass line" theory of leadership and the principle that class struggle continued under socialism.

The theory of the mass line emphasized the active role of the masses in the development of correct revolutionary ideas, directing party cadres to "take the ideas of the masses (scattered and unsystematic ideas) and concentrate them (through study turn them into concentrated and systematic ideas), then go to the masses and propagate and explain these ideas until the masses embrace them as their own, hold fast to them and translate them into action and test the correctness of these ideas in such action." (290)

The principle that class struggle continues under socialism represented a critical break with the view of the Soviet Union in recognizing that the seizure of political power

is only a moment in the larger process through which the capacities of the masses to rule emerge and develop and that once a revolutionary party takes state power that both the party and the state apparatus itself become arenas of ongoing class struggle as capitalism attempts to reassert itself through new forms.

The Cuban Revolution, as theorized by Ché, represents a more modest break with Soviet Marxism, but an important one nonetheless, in particular here because of its role in the eventual genesis of neo-Zapatismo. Whereas in China the urban proletariat was relatively insignificant, in Latin America it was, in varying degrees, coopted by corporatist regimes, often with the de facto connivance of the official pro-Soviet Communist Parties. Based on the peculiar conditions in Cuba, Guevara locates revolutionary agency in the countryside, not as in China with the peasantry, but rather in the political-military organization of the guerrilla foco.

As a model to be applied elsewhere, this approach of extreme voluntarism would prove universally disastrous, often degenerating into the worst sort of military adventurism before going down to defeat at a considerable cost in the lives of young revolutionaries. The Cuban revolution itself, however, would remain an important source of inspiration in Latin America and in a few cases, Guevarist-inspired focos were able to survive, to sink roots among the rural population, and develop into effective revolutionary forces. The one of particular interest to us here is the Forces of National Liberation (FLN) that would go on to establish the EZLN represented serious attempts to fuse the political-military form of organization with a mass base organized on more democratic lines.

## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF FANON

The Algerian Revolution which confronted the distinct problem of a large colonial settler population also produced a distinct body of theory in the work of Frantz Fanon. If the theoretical legacy of post-war Third World revolutions had remained limited to these two trends, Maoism and Guevarism, that despite their significant innovations (and the considerable differences between them) remained within the idiom of Marxism-Leninism, Holloway et. al's insistence that neo-Zapatismo represents a total rupture with this inheritance would be more convincing. This why Fanon's break is so critical. While Fanon doesn't identify himself as a Marxist he is very much a man of the revolutionary left and is quite deliberate in indicating where his thinking departs from Marxism. Fanon's break with Soviet Marxism is of course more than just a break with Soviet Marxism but with the whole of Marxism's failure to confront the centrality of the psychological and cultural dimensions of both colonial oppression and liberation through revolutionary action.

Fanon's contributions to revolutionary theory were qualitatively different from those of both Mao and Guevara and represented a more serious departure from the language of Marx and Lenin, although his debt to both is apparent. Trained as a psychiatrist, Fanon's central concerns revolved around the psychological violence of colonialism, the resistance it generated in the colonized, the process of liberation of the colonized mind through revolutionary violence, and the role of culture in the revolutionary process. While the conditions that Fanon described in Algeria could not be generalized to the rest of Africa, they found particular resonance in other countries with

histories of settler colonialism (e.g. the United States, South Africa, Israel/Palestine) or of particularly intense racism.

While it is reasonable to assume that many of the radicals and revolutionaries who accompanied the indigenous communities of eastern Chiapas in their struggles read Fanon, I have not yet discovered some scintillating anecdote that demonstrates his influence. We do not see any formations or leading figures who identify as “Fanonian” but his fingerprints are everywhere.

The Zapatistas emphasis on dignity and indigenous autonomy are essentially elaborations on Fanonian themes. While the Zapatistas have eschewed the use of violence since agreeing to a ceasefire with the Mexican government shortly after their initial uprising, they have retained their weapons for thirteen years and episodically remind the world that their survival to date is owed to their continuing willingness to retain them and to use them if necessary. When called on to justify their resort to arms the Zapatistas do not speak the language of military strategy but rather repeat Emiliano Zapata’s quote that it is “better to die on ones feet than to live on ones knees.” The notion of dignity is inextricably tied up with the willingness to fight and the refusal to cower anymore before the *caxlanes* (the non-indigenous). (EZLN 1995, 1996, 1997, 2003a, 2003b.)

Similarly, the demand for indigenous autonomy which dominated the discourse of the Zapatistas from the San Andres Accords in 1996 through the 2001 March of the Color of the Earth on Mexico City to the Sixth Declaration of the Selva Lacandon in 2005, resound with Fanon’s attention to the importance of national culture.

The EZLN (or rather Marcos) denounces “vanguards” even though it undeniably functions as one in the very best sense of the word. They insist that they are not pursuing

state power, but they effectively exercise it in several hundred villages. What is most central to the politics of the Zapatistas then is not the occasional semi-anarchist statements of Marcos but the development of the Fanonian inheritance in their discourse on dignity and cultural autonomy expressed in their call for a “world that contains many worlds.”

### CONCLUSIONS

I have presented above an alternative historical account of the development of revolutionary theory in order to more coherently locate the genesis of neo-Zapatismo within its sweep and to problematize accounts that see only a rupture between the Zapatistas and what preceded them. The central theme running through this account is the continuing effort to grapple with the genuine contradictions that exist at the heart of the revolutionary project around the question of the revolutionary subjectivity of the oppressed majority of humanity.

Marx’s location of revolutionary agency in the European proletariat was not so much wrong as it was incomplete and failed to anticipate the changing geography of proletarianization or the ways that the revolutionary process itself would run ahead of proletarianization and awake all sorts of new and unexpected revolutionary subjects. Marx and his successors failed to appreciate the cultural and psychological dimensions involved in the actual assertion of a revolutionary subjectivity.

Despite premature declarations of farewell to the working class, the proletariat is the class of the future. The rapid urbanization of the Global South is transforming a peasant majority of humanity into a proletarian majority. It does not look like the European proletariat of today or even of 1914, but it bears a very palpable resemblance to

the ragged polyglot European proletariat of 1871 that inspired the first lines of *The Internationale*:

Arise, you prisoners of starvation,

Arise, you wretched of the earth.

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