

Transcommunality in the Heart of Empire:
Zapatism, Immigrant Struggles and the U.S. Social Forum

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Introduction

This essay discusses my experiences at the US Social Forum in Atlanta in June of 2007. As a regional gathering of the World Social Forum, it sought to bring together the social forces in the United States most impacted by neo-liberal globalization. I was particularly interested in how political practices that emerge from the global south like Zapatismo from Southern Mexico have transculturated (Mignolo 2000) to various immigrant communities in the U.S. My larger argument is that anti colonialism is becoming more prominent in the discourses and practices of the global justice movement. The EZLN being one of the “mothers” of the global justice movement represents this reality. In previous research, I have argued that Zapatismo represents a decolonizing theory of social change that has great resonance outside of Mexico (Zugman 2005). As immigrants become a growing force in the US in terms of labor and politics, this influence can be seen in a number of US organizations that are emerging. Third World political discourses are resonating in communities of color, especially of immigrants of Latin American origin. Many such movements had a powerful presence at the US Social Forum.

While immigrants had the strongest presence of any group at the social forum, it is difficult to discuss the issues of immigration without talking about labor, gender, militarism, and Katrina, as these issues are all intimately connected. Still, the immigrant presence was remarkable.

Movement for Justice in the Barrio (MJB)

Workshops on urban issues at the forum proliferated. MJB was one just organization, made up of largely Mexican immigrants, working on housing issues. “We make the Road by Walking” was another NY organization based in the Bronx working on similar issues.

The organizers of the Social Forum organized the conference under six major themes for which for each of the themes there was a plenary of speakers. The themes were War, Militarization and the Prison Industrial Complex, The Aftermath of Katrina, Immigrant Rights, Indigenous Voices, Workers Rights in the Global Economy and Liberating Gender and Sexuality. The organizers represented a wide range of social and political organizations and constituencies. People of color really were the leading force of

the forum. Grassroots Global Justice is a network of 50 local and nation wide organizations that helped organize the forum. Looking at their list of participating organizations, one can get a sense of the diversity of this movement. .

I attended several of the workshops over the course of four days. I was especially interested in workshops that were organized by movements that were participating in the EZLN's "Other Campaign." The "Other Campaign" was launched by the EZLN in mid 2005 in order to link poor communities throughout Mexico who have been disenfranchised by the corrupt, repressive neoliberal politics of the Mexican state. This campaign seeks to link communities in resistance to oppression in Mexico. During the first phase of the campaign, the EZLN delegation met with social movements and communities in a tour of 32 Mexican states during the election campaign season (Maccani 2006). It also focuses on building bridges between communities of people of Mexican descent on the "otro lado." To that end, the EZLN delegation of the "Other Campaign" held meetings with people of Mexican descent residing in the US in Ciudad Juarez and Tijuana. The long term goal of the "Other Campaign" is to draw up a manifesto that includes all of the proposals of the people that they met with in Mexico and from the United States to create the basis for a new Mexican Constitution. The "Other Campaign" also has the goal of building a global movement against neoliberalism and a component that is organizing indigenous peoples of the Americas (Bellinghausen 2007). One organization that has signed on to the Other Campaign called "Movimiento por La Justicia en el Barrio (Movement for Justice in the Barrio) MJB wanted to send a delegation to Ciudad Juarez but could not due to a lack of funds and fear of reprisals by immigration agents. MJB is a community organization of mostly Mexican immigrants in East Harlem, New York who are struggling against gentrification. Creatively, instead of sending a delegation which could have endangered the delegates, the MJB members made a video of their struggle called "Message to the Zapatistas." The EZLN delegation screened this video at the Juarez meetings and in turn created a video for the MJB called "Message from the Zapatistas." Both of these videos were shown during the U.S. social Forum workshop. Members of the MJB were there to answer questions. Like the Zapatistas, their delegation was two women and two men that represented the MJB at the

US Social Forum. They also discussed how they have borrowed from the organizing principles of the Zapatistas.

In their fight against gentrification, they, like the EZLN, “collect proposals from the people” in community assemblies (Interview with Juan Haro 2007). In October of 2007, in the spirit of the “Other Campaign”, MJB sponsored an “Encuentro For Humanity and Against Gentrification” where 15 organizations representing diverse communities came together to “share ideas, listen and learn from each other”. Organizations such as CAAAV (Communities Organizing Against Anti-Asian Violence) participated (Maccani 2007). (CAAAV had also sponsored some amazing workshops with Domestic Workers United at the US Social Forum.)

The MJB workshop was one of the first that I attended at the conference. The workshop was standing room only. There were only 100 chairs in the room but I counted almost 152 people. Some other workshops that I dropped by were not well attended. Those workshops tended to be run by older intellectuals or by sectarian political parties like the Revolutionary Communist Party. Needless to say, it was refreshing to see so many new movements and young people “de-center” traditional sectarian left organizing. The RCP and the Stalinist PLP (Progressive Labor Party) had their tables and newspapers but they were overshadowed by the invigorating workshops of youth, immigrant, and worker organizations.

After the workshop member of the MJB sat with me a good while discussing the workshop that just ended. All five members were grinning with pride. “I can’t believe people were so interested in our little group!” Juan Haro remarked to me, “I really think it’s the Zapatista connection, I think we were the only workshop out of 1000 to explicitly talk about Zapatismo! I can’t understand why there weren’t more workshops like ours because the Zapatistas are so important to global justice!” (Interview with Haro 2007). Indeed it was very important. As I was walking outside the workshop to get some coffee, a group of three young women were talking about the workshop, “That was fascinating.. the way they [the Zapatistas] talk about power.... I’m going back to see if I can get more information.” Ana Laura, member of MJB and the delegation describes MJB’s decision to sign on to the Sixth Declaration of La Selva Lacandona of the EZLN and become a part of the “Other Campaign.”

When the EZLN put out their Sixth Declaration and we got together and read it. We were really excited and hopeful about what they were proposing. Marcos traveled to the 32 states of the Mexican republic to listen to the problems of the people.the people who were not being listened to by the politicians. They are dealing with things like trying to get decent housing, food, work and having to deal with political repression. After the tour that the EZLN would draw up a national program of resistance for the Mexican nation based on what the communities told them on their tour. The other Campaign is a national campaign of change for Mexico. And this campaign includes Mexicans who live on the other side of the border. The EZLN considers Mexicans on the other side to have the right to participate in this campaign because most Mexicans left Mexico by force not by choice. Therefore, they are an important part of the other campaign which is why the MJB is part of it. The purpose of the other campaign was to get to know the people from the grassroots of Mexico, what are their problems, what do people think, what they need. These are the people that are marginalized and forgotten by the politicians. We think it's really important what they are doing. They (the EZLN) are making sure that these people are not forgotten. We wanted to be a part of the change here and in Mexico (Interview with author 2007).

Oscar and Juan then began to chime in about how they feel that the Zapatista political vision has given them a new impetus to organize for social change in their community in East Harlem. In spite of the fact that as undocumented immigrants, they are increasingly threat of prison and deportation, they felt that they related to this discourse and practice. They were especially drawn to the critical Zapatista concept of "autonomy."

One of the main ideas that came out of the Sixth Declaration and the Zapatista movement is the idea of autonomy, or of creating spaces where different cultures, big and small can exercise democracy and their will without the bigger one imposing itself on the smaller one. The bigger ones shouldn't try to incorporate other groups but that they should respect each others rights to autonomy. By respecting our differences and each others autonomy we feel that that is the best way to organize against a capitalist social system

that attempt to homogenize us all. So we don't want to homogenize anyone (Interview with author 2007).

We have three staff members which include Juan. The whole organization votes on who should be a staff member. We have 300 members representing several buildings in East Harlem. Those who are most active in each of the buildings we call "leaders." These leaders are voted in by the membership and they come to the MJB's general meetings. We are largely working against gentrification. We try to rotate our leadership in the way the EZLN does, which is to try to prevent corruption and we often have referendums from the base to get the people to say if they feel their leadership is really representing them (Interview with author 2007).

All of the members of the MJB that I interviewed were extremely excited to be at the US Social Forum and they felt their experience exceeded their expectations. One important benefit that it gave them a sense of diversity of struggles that are all in some way connected to global capitalism and U.S. imperialism. They felt they the conference provided them an educational opportunity they would not have otherwise had. Also, perhaps more importantly, they met with members of Zapatista inspired organizations from the West Coast such as the Eastside Café, and the Autonomous People's Collective in Los Angeles. They told me that they were unaware that these organizations even existed and now discussions among these organizations are underway to potentially form a national network of Zapatista community based organizations in the U.S.

Domestic Workers United (DWU) and the Coalition for Immokalee Workers (CIW)

One of the most moving workshops I attended was sponsored by Domestic Workers United, a New York based coalition of organizations working for the human rights of domestic workers. Members of DWU included: Coalition for Against Anti Asian Violence (CAA AV), Haitian Women for Haitian Refugees, Andolan (organization for South Asian Immigrant workers), Unity Housecleaners of Long Island, Damayan, (Filipino Migrant Workers Association). They represent thousands of Caribbean, Latina, and African nannies, housekeepers and elderly care-workers and sponsored a panel at the US Social Forum with Coalition for Immokalee Workers (CIW). The CIW, a

farmworker organization in Southwest Florida of Mexican, Mexican indigenous and Haitian Farm-workers, recently gained national notoriety in their campaign against Taco Bell for using exploitative subcontractors in Florida's tomato fields. The purpose of the panel was to critically analyze the situation of farm-workers and domestic workers and how their histories and social conditions intertwined. It was by far the most theoretically sophisticated panel I attended. Activists from each of the organizations presented an analysis of how both the exploitation of domestic workers and agricultural workers are essential to global capitalism.

The panel was shared with a host of other organizations including, the Beloved Community Center of North Carolina, Black Workers for Justice, North Carolina, the Filipino Workers Center, Los Angeles, People to Win Economic Rights (POWER) San Francisco, San Francisco Day Labor Women's Collective, the Mississippi Worker's Center, and Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles (CHIRLA). Also present was UC Santa Barbara Professor Grace Chang, author of *Disposable Domesticity*.

The workshop opened up with members of DWU singing a calypso song about their organizing in the domestic industry. Some of the lyrics included "We love the Mexican, Up with the Mexican!" People became teary eyed. Then, Joyce Johnson from the Beloved Community Center launched into a history of slavery in relation to domestic workers and agricultural workers. She spoke about how current labor laws do not apply to agricultural and domestic workers. Joyce Johnson stated "The fate of farm-workers and black workers in the south is intimately tied to the fate of domestic workers. Our histories are very intertwined. We want to build long term partnerships with each other. That is the one way to win." Next was a woman from the Filipino Worker's Center spoke. She stated that:

Domestic Workers are still living in the shadow of slavery but the only difference is that our new master is global capitalism led by the US. The new slavery is managed by IMF World Bank and WTO.... Control the economies of our home countries. So we don't have economies that provide employment leading to forced migration for unemployed and underemployed. Women are hardest hit. Unemployment is 11.3 percent. Domestic work and agriculture work were performed by slaves in the US historically. Now there are third world immigrants

who perform work that US middle class does not want to do. They want us to stay illegal and undocumented so that we can't organize and cant demand better treatment. Domestic workers and agricultural workers are excluded from the national labor relations act. We are creating workers' centers and workers organizations. We are excluded from the minimum wage law. No employment insurance or health care (Field Notes 2007).

Julia Perkins, an organizer with the CIW in Florida discussed the situation of farm-workers in the U.S. and described the struggles that the CIW has faced and what their organization has accomplished.

Low wages, exploitation and abuse are the stuff of daily life in agricultural work. We have prosecuted six cases of modern day slavery. Farm-workers were beaten by overseers in front of other workers. We had cases of indentured servitude where the supervisors paid farm-workers with drugs instead of money. This happened this year in 2007. Yes these are extreme cases but they are happening in the industry and that's what we are fighting for dignity and respect in the workplace. It gives us great pleasure to see that the domestic workers are organizing because for so long your voices have not been heard and your situation is very much like ours. People don't think about how a house gets so clean or who cleans the house. People need to be made aware of this. United farm-workers and domestic workers, we are going to become a force that no one can stop (Fieldnotes 2007).

One member of POWER discussed the situation of wages in the global economy. People in the workshop asked a lot of questions and shared their experiences of working the domestic work industry and in agriculture. Towards the end of the workshop Grace Chang ended by discussing how slavery and trafficking are becoming important issues only when linked to sex trafficking but in fact trafficking for agriculture, the domestic industry and the service industry is far more common than sex trafficking. The problem, she points out, is that people focusing on prostitution because it is titillating. She continued stating that if the government tackled the real issue of trafficking in the other

above mentioned industries, the economy would be drastically effect because it relies so heavily on cheap and “flexible” labor (field notes 2007).

At the end of the workshop, an announcement was made that all of the organizations present along with others were going to form a national network for domestic and agricultural worker rights. Those in attendance rose and cheered. I spoke with Julia Perkins at the end of the workshop. She told me that the CIW is has a high percentage of Mexican indigenous migrants, mostly from Southern Mexico and from Chiapas in particular. Many of them she stated had been involved in labor movements back in Mexico. The CIW began organizing in 1993 on the heels of the Zapatista movement and had felt a strong affinity since. She stated that when the “Other Campaign” was launched in 2005, there was a great interest on the part of the membership to be involved to the extent that it was possible. In 2006, they sent Melody Gonzalez to Chiapas to attend the international gathering sponsored by the EZLN because they wanted to show solidarity with the EZLN.

In September of 2005, the EZLN held a gathering to organize the Other Campaign and invited participants from all over Mexico and the world. A representative of the CIW attended and spoke these words. The fact that the CIW sent a representative, Melody Gonzalez all the way to southern Mexico demonstrates the deeply felt commitment to the Zapatista political vision.

We understand that our struggle is already part of the Sixth thus we commit ourselves to the Sixth continuing the work we are already doing. And we also wish to strengthen our paths of communication and dialogue with the organizations and people in Mexico that also struggle against free trade and in favor of fair trade. We see this trip to Chiapas as an opportunity to learn what is being done and what is going to be done in Mexico. We are constantly learning from other struggles and this is part of our consciousness-raising. Many of our friends there [in Immokalee] are from Chiapas and since back in the day they have talked of the struggle here. We commit ourselves to continue learning from the struggle here and in all parts of Mexico, and also to assure ourselves that the Zapatista word continues being expressed in our work. We also wish to leave some materials from our struggle to share our experience with you. My

compañeros in Immokalee send their greetings and brotherly hugs to the Zapatista communities and say that although you don't know them in person, they know that work, commitment and consciousness converts us into compañeros. We are with you and the Sixth (Macani 2007).

The CIW's participation in the Other Campaign is much more than a superficial or a temporal connection. Many of the workers in the CIW hail from southern rural Mexico, many even from the state of Chiapas. Their world view is shaped by a history of colonialism. Now, globalization has now thrown them into the thick of new working class struggles in the United States. Zapatismo, through the Other Campaign, is a political vision that offers immigrants of color in the U.S. a subject position to organize for their rights without having to wait for a political party or a union to protect them. As Julia Perkins, a staffer for the last seven years with the CIW stated to me during an interview at the World Social Forum, "Most of our membership immigrated here in the 1980s and 1990s fleeing the ravages of war and structural adjustment policies in places like Mexico, Guatemala, and Haiti.. they brought their histories and experiences organizing with them to Florida and that shapes their view of organizing and social change" (Interview with Perkins 2007).

Concluding Thoughts

My experience at the U.S. Social Forum was beyond inspiring. It was clear that political visions and practices born in the Global South like Zapatismo and the Social Forum process themselves impacting social justice communities in the Global North. And the immigrant communities are the bridge between the two worlds. The CIW and MJB are indicators of new forms of social struggle being waged in the heart of the American Empire.

For information on Spanish and English on the "Other Campaign" and news from Latin America, please go to www.narconews.com

World Social Forum www.forosocialmundial.org

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