

Look from Above or Look from Below: An Interview with Raúl Zibechi

Written by Heriberto Paredes Coronel, Translated by Christina Hewitt
Tuesday, 11 December 2012 16:05



Source: [SubVersiones](#)

At the end of October 2012 Raúl Zibechi, an Uruguayan journalist and international affairs analyst, travelled to Mexico to present his most recent work: “Brazilian power. Between regional integration and a new imperialism,” published by Bajo Tierra Ediciones and JRA (Young People in Alternative Resistance). Thanks to those who made the trip possible and to this Mexican edition we were able to interview him about various universally important issues.

This is the result of our enjoyable and polemic conversation. We touched upon some general issues and these then led to a discussion on the different ways to approach social struggles. We would like to thank Jóvenes en Resistencia Alternativa for making this interview possible, to Xilonen Pérez, a member of our Editorial Collective, for managing the process, and to Raúl Zibechi for the conversation, his thoughts, his time and his jokes...

On a potential Mexican revolutionary process and on how it can be seen from different perspectives.

-Is revolutionary change possible in today’s Mexico, given the experiences of the different regions, the level of disorganization and the disruption of the social fabric?

When we talk about revolutionary change, the only guide we have is history. We cannot let ourselves be guided by ideology, because ideology is a declaration of intentions or an abstract construct. I think there are two preconceived ideas on the subject of revolutionary change that I would like to question.

Firstly, the idea that a revolutionary process can be managed and planned. Throughout history no successful process of revolutionary change - leaving aside the Soviet Union and China because, for me, they were not successful - was previously planned. Secondly, change what you may but a new society cannot be built until it is previously destroyed. In other words, enough must be destroyed for a new world to be built in the place of all that fell and was destroyed. To change the world on the foundations of what already exists, for me, is not feasible. There are pre-existing prejudices that must be modified.

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-Is it impossible to predict the level of destruction in which we live and which we need so that, perhaps, we may pass through a revolutionary process?

History tells us that all revolutions were children of war: the French Revolution, the Paris Commune, the Chinese Revolution and the Russian Revolution. Why are they children of war? Because there was such a huge level of destruction that turning back was not feasible and instead, on top of the ruins, something else could be built; only then, more or less, was it possible. Changing the world from what already exists does not seem conceivable to me. What are you going to do? Make Sanborn, Radisson, all things evil disappear? How do you convert that into something else? Evil in another space...I just cannot imagine. This means that, most probably, a revolutionary process is not possible. Even though it is what I want and I work for it, the preconditions are not dependent on us. Revolutions, built on the foundations of the destruction of the previous world, such as the First World War, were not built by Lenin or the Bolsheviks. Instead, they decided - at least that was consciously done - to convert the war into revolution. That is what Lenin had seen happen in the Paris Commune and the French Revolution.

From a more Eastern thinking, fighting something head-on does not weaken it, but instead, strengthens it. A big dilemma, is it not? Philosophical, political, epistemological...but real.

-Fighting drug-trafficking is only making it stronger...

¡Of course! The Bolsheviks did not weaken the Czarist state. Instead they took advantage of its weaknesses, created by war and its own mistakes, to bring about a revolution. Then they rebuilt the country, but that is another story.

I mean, if we base our thoughts and actions on previous experiences which we know more or less well and which can give us inspiration, those thoughts still need to be cleaned up; the ground cleared of false arguments or preconceived ideas that do not work. What works is, in a small space, as in a snail's shell, to establish a Good Government Council; and it is an excellent and much-needed experience. Then what? I do not know. We do not have a revolutionary theory to implement. We do not. What's more, a significant part of our emancipatory thought must be rebuilt, re-adapted or reassembled. A large part of our thinking has been shown to have some serious problems: what I and my comrades in Chiapas thought fifteen years ago does not work today, that much is clear. So, without abandoning our principles, without abandoning our ethics, without abandoning anything, we must stir that soup again to rethink things, because I believe the worst we can do is fool ourselves and create false expectations.

The traditional left is tired of talking out against capitalism. In our everyday lives, everyone and every one of us reproduces capitalism because we go to Sanborn's, because we are consumers, because we have an iPhone, because we have a high-tech dictaphone that I have never seen before in my life - and I'm a journalist - because we go to hotels, because we use a car. An indigenous person from the Guerrero mountains can talk to me about revolution and capitalism because their everyday life justifies it, but not in our case. For this reason, revolution and autonomy are still much more theory than practice.

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-In that sense, we need to break normality in other contexts as well, and only under that pretext, one which allows us to reproduce these structures, can we think about other possibilities...

Exactly. If I seize power - or part of that power - but people's everyday life remains the same, there is no alternative mode of production and society continues to function as it always did, we cannot do anything.

You have probably read the Communist Manifesto. In the first chapter, Marx tells the story of how capitalism rose from the bosom of feudalism. A great, and real, story: the bourgeoisie did not plan the construction of capitalism; no member of the bourgeoisie said, "Comrades, this is how it will go!". The takeover was the final chapter in a process that lasted centuries.

Today in our short lives, what can we do to make a new world - whether to call it socialism or communism is our last concern - but look to real life examples. The Paris Commune and the Spanish Civil War are unavoidable points of reference for any emancipatory thought or action, as is Zapatismo.

-It is already a point of reference.

It already is, even though it may not do much more in the future, and most probably it will not do much more. In some sense, we can also look to the more complex example of Cuba. It is also a reference point showing the limits of state power. If we are thinking about going through a 10-year transition process we have to worry about tactics and strategy, but if we are thinking about a transition over centuries, we should concern ourselves more with leaving tracks, crumbs, small signs - as Ginzburg says - that indicate there is another way. Is it clear?

-Yes, except I am thinking about how to convey this change in perspective when faced with people and experiences of struggle that are involved in more immediate processes. How is one to face them and suggest that really all we can manage to do is leave behind traces of a path rather than actually build one?

Historically, the idea of construction has been seriously questioned. The idea of building a new society is a construct of the Age of Enlightenment and modern rationalism, but it has nothing to do with the history of mankind.

-For example, I am now thinking about the social process occurring in Cherán and about the conversations among friends, colleagues and the town in general and it all revolves around that fact they are trying to screw over the state, the local government and the federal government. They are challenging the government to build a new form of social relationship. They are thinking about revolutionary change and they only have a population of just under thirty-thousand...they are really thinking about change from this alternative perspective. They are proposing that, more than definitive change, over time and history it may end up being one of those signs, a reference point. If I speak that way, I will be in trouble.

If you speak that way with the community elders, what can it be other than old Antonio's [the

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Mexican writer, Antonio Machado] usual discourse. When I was in *La Realidad* I spoke with Tony and I said:

- Tony, when will the construction of a new political culture begin?
- Look, we started five-hundred and three years ago. We can wait a little longer.

That is why I mentioned community elders. They look to the long-term and our Western culture lacks that vision, because in politics, at least in Mexico, they are all in their sixties and I believe it is not something that can simply be changed, even though we should be working towards it.

-How are we going to recover those experiences that sprang out of Zapatismo and Cherán to use in other contexts? How can we use that experience for our own cause?

One can conclude that Zapata was a historical failure or conclude that he was a reference point, right? Zapata lost miserably. If we take that idea and think in the short-time, we are trapped. If we think about a transition over centuries, there will definitely be some interesting experiences, defeated revolutions and triumphant revolutions that later go on to take an unexpected turn. But also, history is not a linear.

If we go back to the 1300s, in 1348 the black plague breaks out and one-third of the European population disappears, one-third in two years. It is brutal. Imagine thirty-million Mexicans dying in two years, it would be a catastrophe.

-We already have enough to deal with...

Well, that happened in Europe and upon those foundations, the demographic abyss, the social and cultural horror and the overwhelming fear of death, capitalism was born. What happened afterwards? Well, six centuries of the onslaught of capitalism, uprisings of all shapes and sizes, rural and urban, and colonization. All of that, is history.

The fight for socialism has lasted a little more than a century. To make a comparison, we are still in the 1400s, with the difference that nowadays the black plague wears a different mask: atomic bombs, annihilation, genocide. Today weapons of mass destruction are much more perfect and sometimes more subtle.

What should we do? Of course, you cannot tell the people of Cherán, “you are going to be but a breadcrumb that others will gather.” You cannot tell people that, but if you are wise and elegant in your manner, you can - while also reflecting on the history of their community - because at the end of the day they are communities that have spent five centuries fighting. To answer your earlier question, this is the framework to work towards, upon which experiences

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can be recovered. You cannot talk to them about the Paris Commune or Leningrad but you can talk of their ancestors.

It is vital to do even the smallest thing because it is what we can and should do. I think that is where our tactics lie, today. What can we do? Stand up and fight with all our strength for what we want, fight against what we must, resist what we must. What will the future hold? I do not know.

-Here, we are talking about various issues. I can place your comments on the question of the state and the different levels of social organization. However, in the last few years cartels and drug-trafficking has changed the social landscape. It seems a complex issue and difficult to place. For example, in Michoacán, the two most dominant cartels also have a social side to them. They build schools, provide jobs...they are building their own legitimacy, more than the state and even more than the revolutionaries. They achieve it in five minutes, but suddenly, just as soon as a school is built in a town, so they are also capable of killing all the men in that same town, without the slightest consideration. How are they to be placed? Particularly so we can understand how a small struggle can instigate change...

I do not have an answer for that and it is one of the issues that most concerns me. How is modern-day drug-trafficking to be interpreted? Of course, I do not agree that it is an imperialist ploy. I do not think it is and I believe it is related to the resistance of the lower classes.

There is a wonderful book entitled, "The Many-Headed Hydra", and it is a story of the slave trade in the Atlantic in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It argues that the pirate outlaws were part of the class war, in some way. It seems clear that they were. Well, I would also like to make the same argument here. How will our successors view the drug-trafficking issue? Did it help to weaken or strengthen capitalism? Evidently, today, in the areas where drug-trafficking proliferates, the left is eliminated. Now, has the left of today actually got something to do with post capitalism, with the fight against capitalism? Or is it looking for shade under the capitalist umbrella? I am not only referring to López Obrador, I am referring to people closer to us. I am not thinking about Zapatistas, rather I am thinking about revolutionary organizations that want to bring down capitalism but that in reality fight for better salaries and a better life situation. How does this fit into the long-term? They are good questions to ask because if not, we are left with the reasoning that drug-trafficking is shit because it weakens us, even though it is an irrelevant argument. I am not suggesting that it has a positive side - I believe drug-trafficking is shit - but at the same time, it questions the power of the bourgeoisie. After all, the war is not for nothing.

-We know of fellow journalists that have received offers from some of the drug cartels to "improve their quality of life and get a good job" but they have not accepted. However, it would mean a big jump in living conditions, without their integrity being affected, and it has caused them to think before they refuse...

If they refuse, it is for fear, not because of some rational plan, it is for fear. I would refuse for fear and refuse because, ethically, it seems wrong. The DEA [the US Drug Enforcement Agency] seems worse to me. Have any of you seen Breaking Bad? Who do you think wins, the

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dealers or the DEA? I think the dealers win, obviously. There is one unifying link: Mexican *corrido* folk music and *narcocorrido*, with its lyrical focus on criminal activities. That much is clear. The real Pancho Villa, the one that Paco Ignacio Taibo II described, was a rapist, a sexual predator, a criminal and an assassin. Where would he be today? With one of the cartels, without a doubt.



Clearly, if there was a real revolutionary process in Mexico, the cartels would play their part; if tomorrow the people's forces seize power, the cartels will adjust to them. This means that real historical change is unpredictable. How can you eliminate the millions of people associated with the drug world, the whole youth drug culture that extends from the middle of Mexico into the North? It is not something that can be eradicated in ten years, nor in one, nor in a hundred. What I am trying to get at is that in my opinion, Zapatismo's Other Campaign, a rational, planned, and just political program that I support and continue to support has hit a roadblock: reality. Oh, what a reality! I cannot get involved in the drug war. I cannot say I am with one side or the other, but nor can I be indifferent, and the left have yet to formulate a position on the drug trade. The only thing we have are some very dogmatic people who say, "it is an imperialist idea". It might be, but *narcocorrido* music takes a clear stand against imperialism. *Narcocorrido* clearly leans towards a resistance against the state, towards insubordination and rebellion.

Let us take another perspective. I have done this exercise with young people from the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro, young shantytown dwellers of 15 and above: one young boy, 15-years-old, black, goes out into the street and the police beat him up. Well, first he lives in poverty, his parents do not have a stable job, there is no security. If one of his parents gets ill they have nowhere to take him, they definitely have to come for him, so he goes out into the street, and he is vulnerable to the police. Tomorrow the neighborhood gang puts a gun in his belt and he is respected. To look at it more closely, these kids are never going to go to university. So, if I look at the situation from above I see the government, imperialism, the drug cartels, but if I look from below, as it should be seen, from our point of view, I see something else; they even said to me in Rio, that if a 15 or 16-year-old kid is handsome, cute, he dances well, he is good at football and basketball, he gets the girls, he would never get involved in drugs, he is a very confident person.

I will give you another example. If you take a page out of the book of the lives of the kids who get involved in the drug trade post-15 and those who got involved with Sendero Luminoso (a violent Peruvian revolutionary organization), they are a carbon-copy of each other, because ideology is an a posteriori justification, nothing to do with reality. There is an Argentinian writer called Christian Alarcón who has written many, great books, "Cuando me muera quiero que me toquen cumbia" (When I die, I

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want them to play me cumbia) and others, and he works as a journalist in poor neighbourhoods. The novels he writes describe the lives of the pibes chorros (the thieving kids). If we were a revolutionary organisation such as Mononeros or ERP (The People's Revolutionary Army), or one those from the 70s, those kids would not be in with the drug-traffickers, they would be with us, the same as them. So, we do not look at the drug trade from above.

We carried out the same exercise with a Brazilian sociologist friend from the Sin Tierra movement that works with Pentecostalism: according to the traditional left, the Pentecostal Church is the opiate of the people. But if you see a family, a woman alone with her kids in the shantytown, with a husband who hits her or leaves her or is a drunkard, and since they have been going to church the husband has stopped drinking, the children go to nursery school, the family is better organized and she can go out to work without having to worry that her husband might burn the house down, then, if seen from below the Pentecostals are opium, seen from the woman's point of view it is a space for personal growth, even perhaps a small opportunity for emancipation; we are talking about the same thing but in different places. This is the exercise I want us to carry out to look at the drug-traffickers, look at football, look at the Pentecostals. Why do people get so passionate about football? Because mothers want their children to be like Messi, lift themselves out of poverty and be somebody because if not, they will never be anybody. If Messi or Maradona had not played football, they would have died of hunger in a poor shantytown, that is the truth, and that same Maradona is the one who takes cocaine and has tattoos of Che Guevara and Fidel Castro. So, let us not mess with ideology. Many people criticize Maradona, but he is the people.

-Of course, he could be any one of us. Although in football...

It is important to see passion from this point of view. The left have this enlightened idea that oppression is everywhere, that people are oppressed by religion, football and they do not imagine that people make a choice, albeit from a limited range of options, of course they are not entirely free to choose. For people that live in poor settlements on the margins of society, what is it they most want? To improve their situation. That doesn't mean just having a plasma TV, but they also want stability, because for many poor families, when one member gets ill they have to sell the house to pay for treatment or they die. The health issue is an everyday concern for all of us. Tomorrow I may be taken ill and it will be a huge worry. However, those who are not under the government's protection or anybody's protection are screwed. This does not mean I am suggesting the Pentecostals are revolutionaries, nor does it mean you should become a Pentecostal or a drug-trafficker. No, it means that I am trying to look at the issue of revolution from a more complex perspective, particularly from the point of view of the common people. No revolution ever happened because Lenin said, pointing over there, "Take the Winter Palace," as suggested in the pictures. Revolutions are not made that way. People were dying of hunger. The three slogans of the Russian Revolution were: Peace, because millions of people died or were injured fighting on the Front; Bread, because they were starving, dead, and hungry; and Freedom because they were suffocated. Those who believe that the people read Marx and Lenin and said, "We must take the Palace," are wrong, they know nothing of life,

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they are some unknowing, enlightened academic or a leader full of ideologies that does not know the reality. How many Bolsheviks were there? Just a few, and millions were involved in the revolution.

“Let’s take the Winter Palace”. It does not work, does it? The people took the Bastille without Lenin and without a leader, because the day it was taken there was no Danton and no Robespierre - they came later - it was the people. And the Commune? There was not one leader but twenty leaders. We created Lenin the leader afterwards, others created Trotsky, and others Mao; but it was the common people that were pursued by the Japanese and the Long March was a more or less organized retreat. Necessity and hate for the Japanese drove them away. Now more is known and one of the reasons for that hate was that the Japanese abused their women and daughters. They bomb you, they starve you and on top of all that, they abuse your family: of course they went to battle. It is not that they read Mao, no, the revolution was a necessity.

I question our idea of revolution. They are ideological constructions that emerge after events have occurred. In Argentina, something wonderful happened: on the 19th and 20th of December 2001, when there was widespread hunger and the government had declared closure of the banks, for 20 days supermarkets were looted and the government, who saw a tidal wave coming to sweep them away - the left were talking, they were not there, of course, the left was not going to loot a supermarket, “because stealing food is fine but stealing a TV isn’t” - declared a state of siege. So, the people gathered in the streets, the government fell and in two or three days 300 assemblies had been formed in one area of Buenos Aires and thousands throughout the country. The Trotskyists and the Maoists who were there at the time, reading Mao, Lenin and Trotsky when the assemblies formed - these were later called el Argentinazo - went out with their red banners, sickle and hammer, shouting “for another Argentinazo!”. Of course, they wanted a rebellion, an Argentinazo, led by them. It never happened and it will never happen. In reality, they had lost but they wanted the people to follow them into another similar revolt because the next one would be great. What are we talking about? About domesticating people so you can rule them, that is the idea of revolution we have.



If a revolution is possible in Mexico or in any other place, revolutionaries such as myself that back autonomy, that are Zapatistas or pro-Zapatismo, but that sympathize with the Commune of Oaxaca, with the Guerrero Community Police Force, with Cherán and all of them, can probably have an influence. Hopefully, we can have an influence; although, do not think for a second we can have a 99 per cent influence. If we can have a 10 per cent effect, I have already signed up. In the Russian Revolution they looked to the long-term: how much influence did the Bolsheviks, in other words Lenin’s ideas, really have in what eventually became the Soviet

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Union? 10, 100, 40 per cent? Because the new power under Stalin was very similar to the power of the Czars and Peter the Great; just as Mao's ministers were the new Mandarins. I am not saying that Leninism and the Bolsheviks had no influence at all, maybe 20 per cent. In a nutshell, we can look at the peasant in Siberia or central-Russia, and ask what the Russian Revolution really changed about his life?

It changed. To give an example, in Uruguay there was a historiography on the dictatorship before, during and after, based on interviews with political leaders, union leaders and community leaders, and it portrays the dictatorship as a rupture. In terms of my life, it was a rupture because I was exiled and many of my friends died. It cut into my life, and I am not saying for better or for worse, it just cut into my life radically. Other people who have written micro-histories have looked at the life of a gay man in his seventies, and the first thing they say is: back then, you did not say gay, you said fag. It was a form of insult. In that chapter of his life, the dictatorship did not exist, because as a gay man, he was repressed and despised before, during and after. For an essential part of his gay identity the dictatorship did not exist because it did not matter whether they were the military, the fascists, the democrats or the revolutionaries, he received the same treatment from them all. Only recently has he begun to emerge, even though it is towards the right.

That is what seems important: from where we look. Of course, in the mind of a union leader or a politician the dictatorship created a rupture. But then, how many union leaders or politicians are there in the world? Is the biography of a working class laborer more similar to the gay man or the leader? It is probably somewhere in between. But let us not get stuck on the viewpoint of the leader as if it represented the viewpoint of the masses, even if it is our friend Marcos, leader of the Zapatista National Liberation Army, or our friend from Cherán. The idea is to complicate things a little; although perhaps we took a path you did not want us to take...

On the subject of processes of change in Latin America...

-We have conflicted opinions about the Evo Morales government, especially after the TIPNIS (Isiboro-Secure National Park Indigenous Territory) conflict. Saying that, is it clear which viewpoint we should take...

Yes, well, it is complicated for reasons we have just discussed: it depends on the viewpoint we take, because we are secular but we are masters at creating leaders, prophets and gods, are we not? Marxist historiography is full of untouchable gods and the rest of the monasteries, saints and churches are divided up among the saints: Saint Trotsky, Saint Mao, Saint Gramsci. So, what is new?

I think what happened at TIPNIS is a just struggle, a fight against progress. Yesterday I was quoting John Womack Jr. (I was really impressed with his book, "Zapata and the Mexican Revolution"), and even though today he no longer takes the Zapatista perspective, when he wrote Zapata's biography, he began by saying, "This is the story of some peasants who did not want to change and because of that they had to start a revolution."

Usually, people start a revolution to prevent change; so that their non-capitalist way of life is

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not annihilated. That is what the TIPNIS fight is all about. The only thing is that it has become more complicated because there are indigenous communities and “invaders” involved, that is, coca farmers that have migrated to TIPNIS and set up plantations there and now have as much right to call themselves part of the town as the other villagers. It is a very complicated situation and it means that a simplistic analysis of the issue is not possible. I support the compadres that are defending TIPNIS. I believe that a road should not be built. They organized a very successful protest march - and it was hugely successful because the government later reacted to shut it down - with hundreds of thousands of people out in the streets and because the government did not stop them, they were able to move forward and organise another similar march. But this time it failed because the government knew how to deal with it this time. Today, it is the government that takes the political initiative. Their struggle is similar to those in Cherán and Parota: there is a large and solid group of people that is aware of the situation and a very divided base. Here it is divided as well. You cannot say that the coca farmers should be evicted from TIPNIS because they have lived there for a long time. This complicates how we view the reality of the situation. I think the Evo Morales government, if we look at it from the point of view of his speeches, is a revolutionary government. The Dilma Rouseff government in Brazil is very moderate and centrist. However, in practice, if we take away the speeches and we look at what each government is doing, there is hardly any difference between the two. The difference is not in the government but in society. Bolivia still has a mobilized society and Brazil does not. Of course Evo Morales never fulfilled the promises he made when he was elected.

-It seems that it is an attempt to create a nation state that previously never had the chance to exist.

Of course. Have not all revolutions reconstructed the nation state? I agree with Wallerstein when he says there have been two big, successful revolutions, the French and the Russian, that have not changed the world and two failed revolutions, the 1848 revolution when Marx wrote the Manifesto and the 1968 revolution, that were defeated but were nevertheless triumphant because they changed the world. Wallerstein says that, “it happened because they were spontaneous, in the most meaningful sense of the word, rather than led.” Who led the 1968 revolution? Nobody seized power, but the world changed. It forced the capital to fund itself, it de-legitimized the old communist and socialist left and it opened the way for new things. Zapatismo is the child of the 1968 revolution and so, everything is. We are looking at the issue from a complex viewpoint.

-What is happening in Brazil with the Guaraní-Kaiowa? How can we look at the complexity of the issue?

I do not know the ins-and-outs of the dispute over land, but I think that we are in a very strong period of capitalist expansion in Brazil, with the Amazon at its core. In the Amazon, they are building around 70, small, medium and large, hydroelectric dams in large, fast-flowing rivers, and they are building roads. The idea is that these large-scale infrastructure projects, such as waterways and IIRSA (Initiative for the Integration of the Regional Infrastructure of South America) communication points, create fast growth which subsequently affects the traditional communities. It is part of Brazilian neo-developmentalism and part of a process of subjugation

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of peoples that is expanding outward and especially inward, because the Amazon is a border that must be crossed and conquered. There is a book available that talks exactly of that. It is called "Brazilian Power" and Lula, the author, suggests that, "Brazil will become a global power by conquering the Amazon." The Amazon is electricity, soya, livestock...

-It seems these issues are important when considering the question of center-periphery change...

The idea that there has been a shift from the peripheries to the center is purely hypothetical. The center-periphery model has been deconstructed and we do not know how it is going to be reformulated. It is likely that in South America there are going to be new centers and new peripheries. There must be both centers and peripheries for capitalism to function. I think it is possible that Brazil may not become a new form of imperialism, but nor will it be a periphery state.

To conclude, I would like to say that it is important for the militants to move towards these processes with enthusiasm, but without asking too much of them. For example, many people feel that Zapatismo has let them down because they thought it would fill an emotional and spiritual gap and it has not been not the case. That is why capitalism is constantly changing. It is always renewing itself because if it does not, it will collapse. We cannot mirror capitalism. Often we do, but it is not the best thing to do. Social struggles and revolutions can solve problems but it cannot solve life and we must be reminded of this because if we are not, we will resort to something that never disappoints us: consumerism. Consumerism never lets us down because everyday credit is renewed until you cannot consume anymore and then, you would definitely turn to revolution...