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How Activists “Take Zapatismo Home”

South-to-North Dynamics in Transnational Social Movements

by Abigail Andrews

Transnational Zapatismo exemplifies a broader pattern wherein Southern movements inspire discourses and practices in the Global North that challenge lines of economic and political domination. Recent scholars describe South-North mutuality at the level of international framing. Consideration of what this apparent mutuality means to Northern activists on the ground suggests that for many of them espousing Zapatismo entails not only a set of tactics but also the interrogation of their own positions of power. As a symbol of reflexivity, the Zapatista name legitimates Northerners’ commitment to changing the very system that privileges them. Inspiring this reflexivity may prove to be a lasting legacy for the Zapatistas, but it has provoked rifts with some former allies and diverted resources from Chiapas as activists elsewhere focus on problems at home.

Keywords: Neo-Zapatismo, Solidarity, Networks, Transnational movements, Anti-neoliberalism

Many current theories suggest that transnational advocacy networks echo broader patterns of economic and political domination. Within these networks, writers like Leyva (2001) and Bob (2005) argue, the discourses, practices, and identities of relatively wealthy “global” participants overshadow those of poorer, “local” actors. Often, scholars imply, ideas and organizational forms follow the money, flowing from North to South and from global to local, becoming “vernacularized,” and reinforcing power imbalances (e.g., Merry, 2006). Recent scholars such as Millie Thayer (2009) and Ruth Reitan (2007) have questioned this image, highlighting the multiple dimensions of North-South interchanges and the dynamic engagement of Southern organizations.
with privileged supporters. Still, the character of this interplay calls for further study. For years, social movements from marginal geographic and economic positions have led the antiglobalization struggle ideologically and tactically. This paper examines Northern organizations in the transnational Zapatista movement to illustrate some ways Southern movements inspire ideological and behavioral change in more privileged allies.¹

The Zapatista movement is well known for leveraging transnational economic and political support in its struggle for autonomy and against the Mexican government (e.g., Tarrow, 1998; Harvey, 1998). Also, particularly recently, it has stood out as a leader in calling for and forging “mutuality” with its allies. Theorists of this emerging mutual solidarity such as Thomas Olesen (2005) and Xochitl Leyva (2001) define “International Zapatismo” as a transnational network frame that politicizes left-wing activists’ interconnected grievances, primarily against neoliberalism. Such analyses often portray International Zapatismo as a form of solidarity that emerges because participants in radical social movements share experiences of economic or political subjugation that draw them together in a common struggle. They argue that through mutual solidarity, Zapatismo takes on a life outside of Chiapas that contrasts with and complements stereotypically paternalistic, altruistic solidarity.

Given that Northern organizations often impose their agendas and forms of activism on Southern movements, intentionally or not, more work needs to be done to understand the South-to-North forms transnational Zapatismo can take. Existing research describes “neo-Zapatismo” as a set of practices or an identity that links participants across distance and through which the Zapatistas influence activists elsewhere (Leyva, 2001; Swords, 2007; Zugman, 2009). But what gives the Zapatistas influence over the ideologies and organizational practices of better-endowed groups all over the world? How and why do activists outside of Chiapas take on Zapatista discourses, practices, and identities?

In this paper, I use interviews and participant observation of more than 30 Zapatista solidarity groups in the United States and Mexico to explore possible answers to this question. I focus on privileged groups, using California and Mexico as examples, in order to highlight the flow of the movement’s ideas from South to North, counter to broader power dynamics. My results confirm those of other studies (Swords, 2007; Zugman, 2009) showing that the Zapatistas provide sympathizers with concrete strategies, identities, and hope, just as Southern movements have for decades, from the Mexican and Cuban revolutions to liberation struggles in Africa in the 1960s and 1970s and in Central America in the 1980s. Sympathizers adopt Zapatista ways of talking and working because they believe that the Zapatistas have compellingly demonstrated the feasibility and relevance of certain long-admired practices of radical democracy. Yet, my findings go beyond previous scholars’ results, suggesting that Northern activists use the Zapatistas for more than just a model.

In addition, Northern activists associate themselves with the movement because they are concerned about their own legitimacy. They benefit from the prevailing social order and have access to political, social, and economic capital. Therefore, they have paradoxical relationships to movements against that order. The Zapatistas’ particular ways of questioning Northern domination...
without excluding people of privilege give left-wing activists from the North a framework for understanding their roles in such struggles.

In what follows, I first engage existing research on transnational social movements and mutual solidarity. Then I explain my use of the case of Zapatista sympathizers in California and Mexico and describe my research design. Next I describe ways in which the Zapatistas have influenced supporters, and I reflect on the reasons outsiders seek out this influence. In conclusion, I consider the promises and risks involved in a Southern movement’s efforts to disseminate ideas and strategies to the North. I examine the meaning of mutuality in this South-to-North solidarity and the potential implications of this kind of influence for the Zapatistas’ strategies on the ground in Chiapas.

THE STATE OF KNOWLEDGE ON MUTUAL SOLIDARITY

This paper builds on social-movement scholars’ recent analyses of the growth of what they call “mutual” transnational activist networks. Lately, academics have noted a qualitative distinction among left-wing alliances (Waterman, 1999; Eterovic and Smith, 2001; Reitan, 2007). In traditional solidarity, they claim, privileged Northern “conscience constituents” (McCarthy and Zald, 1977) provide disadvantaged Southern movements with financing, legitimacy, political connections, visibility, and psychological support that give them leverage vis-à-vis local power holders (Smith, Chatfield, and Pagnucco, 1997; Edwards and Gaventa, 2001). This earlier generation of transnational advocacy networks relies on Northern altruism and “principles” (Keck and Sikkink, 1998). In contrast, in the newer “mutual” solidarity, also called “direct action networks” or “reciprocal” or “alternative” solidarity, activists exchange ideas and tactics horizontally, politicizing their partnerships and emphasizing their shared struggles (Bennett, 2004; Olesen, 2005; Juris, 2008). In such cases, which lack an obvious direction or rigid structure, reciprocity, empathy, or shared identities draw activists together. Hinting at a natural convergence among leftists around the world, writers such as Evans (2008) suggest that by joining forces, progressive activists North and South minimize their vulnerability in a common struggle against an entrenched, dominant order. Shared identities, others argue, are increasingly foundational to and potent for organizing transnational activism (Waterman, 1999; Reitan, 2007).

Thomas Olesen (2005), John Holloway (2005), Guiomar Rovira (2009), and others consider “international” or “urban” Zapatismo a paradigmatic example and leading proponent of the new form of activist alliance. They note that activists all over the world have adopted, adapted, and linked up with the Zapatistas’ campaigns for radical democracy and against neoliberalism. Xochitl Leyva (2001: 177) describes neozapatismo as encompassing “various forms of political participation at different levels” and bringing together “a wide range of individuals and organizations.” She argues that sympathizers’ variegated forms of relating to the movement have broadened the meaning of solidarity. Similarly, Kara Zugman Dellacioppa (2009) demonstrates that Zapatista solidarity entails not only visits and donations to Chiapas but also the “globalization from below” of an array of Zapatista practices, identities, and discourses.
Yet, the image of mutual solidarity as a horizontal exchange across shared identities can obfuscate power dynamics. As I have argued elsewhere (Andrews, 2010), activist identities that appear to be spontaneously shared often emerge from the South and spread only as a result of contentious challenges to and renegotiations of top-down forms of solidarity. A few scholars (Reitan, 2007; Juris, 2008; Thayer, 2009) point out that South-to-North diffusion originates in Southern beneficiaries’ demands to speak, act, and strategize for themselves.

This paper seeks to understand how power dynamics inform the South-to-North diffusion of Zapatismo. In the Zapatista case, bottom-up transnational relationships not only send ideas and inspiration from South to North (as well as to other places in the South) but also link the shared fight against hegemonic power dynamics to interrogating power dynamics within transnational movements. By directly questioning Northern sympathizers’ forms of practicing solidarity, including their presence in Chiapas, the Zapatistas challenge more privileged activists to reflect on their own behavior. My findings suggest that this reflexivity is the core of respondents’ relationships to Zapatismo. Thus, while it seems more horizontal or mutual than previous forms of solidarity, the diffusion of neo-Zapatismo to the North is not exempt from the power dynamics of more patronizing partnerships. Rather, it highlights those power dynamics in order to acknowledge and confront them. In Northern organizations that align themselves with the Zapatistas, “taking Zapatismo home” is closely linked to experience and awareness of confrontations between the movement and outside activists.

INTERNATIONAL ZAPATISMO

International Zapatismo, the transnational network surrounding the Zapatista movement, provides an ideal case study for this paper because it is both prominent and unusual. Since January 1994, when the Zapatistas rose up in Chiapas to demand basic social rights, their transnational network has been cited as a success story of transnational activism. Over their 15 years of building autonomous communities and anti-neoliberal activism, the Zapatistas have sought out partnerships with organizations from more than 70 countries (EZLN, 2007). Their allies include nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), think tanks, filmmakers, tourists, scholars, students, feminists, neighborhood movements, farmers, and indigenous organizations, among others (Leyva, 2001). Some of these groups provide material or political donations to the movement, helping it to bypass unfavorable opportunity structures (see, e.g., Castells, 1997; Stephen, 2002; Johnston and Laxer, 2003; Tarrow, 2005). As scholars such as Raúl Zibechi (2003), Ruth Reitan (2007), and Kara Zugman Dellacioppa (2009) point out, the Zapatistas’ philosophies and forms of organizing have also helped feed antiglobalization activism elsewhere in the South—for instance, providing a key model for other members of the farmers’ movement Via Campesina.

Zapatista-inspired networks have been at the forefront of efforts to construct the much-touted horizontal, mutual, or reciprocal solidarity, wherein activists exchange experiences and coordinate common campaigns, positioning
themselves as allies in a shared struggle instead of as differently endowed donors and beneficiaries (Brand and Hirsch, 2004; Olesen, 2005; Holloway, 2005; Zugman, 2005; 2009; Rovira, 2009). From the start of their movement, following a long tradition in which Southern movements inspire Northern activists, the Zapatistas have championed the notion of taking Zapatismo home.

Over time, the Zapatistas have increasingly publicly attacked the imperialistic nature of many outsiders’ interventions in Chiapas. In particular, in a set of speeches called “The Thirteenth Stele,” their spokesman Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos (2003) explained that, in response to the “imperialism” of Northern NGOs, the movement had formed good government councils (juntas de buen gobierno), regional representative committees that would manage not only internal movement affairs but also all outsiders’ projects in Chiapas. Rather than just letting sympathizers impose their notions of aid in whatever locations they chose, the councils would require proposals for projects, consult with communities before implementing them, and monitor the distribution of aid.

Then, in 2005, in “The Sixth Declaration of the Lacandón Jungle,” the Zapatistas announced a new effort, called the Other Campaign (La Otra Campaña), to network with parallel movements throughout Mexico and the world, extend solidarity to similar organizations that suffered repression, and encourage activists elsewhere to adapt Zapatismo to their own contexts (Marcos, 2005). In addition, the Zapatistas began to classify allies as “adherents to the Other Campaign,” marking their status as horizontal partners. The Other Campaign explicitly encouraged Northern organizations that had been focusing their resources on Chiapas to shift their attention to struggles against neoliberal globalization in their own homes. This strategy produced several contradictions. For one, it diverted crucial resources away from Chiapas. As the Zapatistas have promoted “taking Zapatismo home,” they have lost some of their financial support—a significant cost but one that they have been willing to assume. Second, the Zapatistas’ commitment to showing solidarity with their new allies interrupted their agenda. In 2006, to support protesters repressed by the government in Atenco, the Zapatistas halted their efforts to promote the Other Campaign. Third, the Zapatistas’ intransigence about avoiding power-laden collaboration, particularly with parties or governments, has generated ambivalence and conflict over what their relation should be with other radical Latin American movements such as those in Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador, as well as with Northern Zapatista allies who support those movements.

In this paper I contend that scholars need to do more to understand the power dynamics behind Zapatismo’s apparent influence as a stimulus (Brand and Hirsch, 2004), inspiration (Holloway, 2005), or tactical exchange among groups that come from equivalent experiences of subjugation. While extensive research has considered the Zapatistas’ transnational networks, much of it focuses on the period before 2003, when the Zapatistas denounced the imperialism of Chiapas-based solidarity efforts to date. Yet, this confrontation with and censure from the movement stands behind many activists’ more recent adoption of mutual solidarity. As a result, for many Zapatista allies, “taking Zapatismo home” means reflecting on the contradictions between their own or
others’ past (albeit unintentional) impositions on the Zapatistas and their support for the movement. Examining the content of the discourse that travels throughout the Zapatista network and not just the breadth of its diffusion reveals that many activists take on Zapatismo to confront their positions of power.

METHODS

My analysis draws on 34 in-depth interviews, four months of participant observation between June 2007 and May 2008 with solidarity groups based in the United States and San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas, where most pro-Zapatista NGOs reside, and background information from Zapatista and solidarity group documents on early alliances and the Zapatistas’ perspective. To understand why Northern sympathizers seek Zapatista influence, I conducted 34 semi-structured interviews with leaders of 35 well-known solidarity groups, drawn from lists in Leyva (2001), Stephen (2002), and Olesen (2005). Interviews helped illuminate decision making and interactions between outsiders and the Zapatistas, which are rarely documented. While these interviews came out of a snowball sample and are not representative of the Zapatistas’ transnational networks as a whole (particularly in that they include only Mexico and the United States and not Europe), they provide clues about some reasons behind activists’ efforts to adopt and adapt Zapatismo outside of Chiapas.

Because interviews entailed potential sources of bias, including interviewees’ involvement in the process and possible reluctance to discuss politically and economically sensitive topics, I sought to note their biases, asked for concrete examples, and triangulated their claims with documents, other interviewees’ accounts, and my own observations. Participating with respondents in solidarity organizations and Chiapas-based solidarity activities enabled me to identify key informants, build trust, refer to shared experiences, and compare respondents’ self-reports with their interactions with the Zapatistas and each other. When activists declined to grant interviews or share information, I considered their refusals illustrative in their own right of power dynamics among Zapatista sympathizers.

In addition to sympathizer interviews, I applied to the Zapatista leadership for permission to interview members of Zapatista communities. My time ran out before they could grant it. As a result, my representation of the Zapatistas’ perspective and their responses to Northern adoption of their philosophies is confined to in-community observations and public Zapatista speeches, communiqués, and publications. While such documents could be read as propaganda, for analytical purposes they approximate the Zapatistas’ perspective on the movement’s relationship with outsiders.

TAKING ZAPATISTA PRACTICES HOME

As many scholars (e.g., Swords, 2007; Holloway, 2005; Zugman, 2009; Olesen, 2005) have documented, activists outside rural Chiapas regularly employ Zapatista language and practices. For instance, respondents echoed the Zapatistas’ broad ways of talking about the world in terms of other possibilities, autonomy, and inclusion. Also, almost all respondents adopted specific Zapatista
slogans such as ¡Ya basta! (Enough!), mandar obedeciendo (lead by obeying), caminamos preguntando (we walk asking), todo para todos y nada para nosotros (everything for everyone and nothing for ourselves), un mundo donde quepan muchos mundos (a world where many worlds fit), and abajo y a la izquierda, donde el corazón (below and to the left, where the heart is). In particular, starting with the Other Campaign in 2005, many Zapatista-affiliated groups have identified themselves as “Other,” spawning an array of organizations that identified themselves as, for instance, “The Other Chicago” or “The Other Radio.”

The Zapatistas also provide allies, North and South, with strategic models, such as rotating councils. As a longtime Zapatista ally and coordinator for Via Campesina put it, “When the Zapatistas formed the good government councils, other good government councils began popping up all over the place” (Galiana Hernandez, interview, San Cristóbal de las Casas, January 9, 2008). She recounted that after meeting with the Zapatistas, visitors from Thailand and India established Zapatista-style good government councils, while members of Brazil’s Landless Workers’ Movement initiated a discussion on how they might echo the Zapatistas’ commitment to autonomy from government funding. Meanwhile, with the start of the Other Campaign, neighborhood associations in poor areas of San Cristóbal de las Casas, inspired by the Zapatistas, began to practice collective decision making (Ricardo Gonzalez, interview, San Cristóbal de las Casas, January 7, 2008). In another example, a San Francisco group organizing direct action to stop the war in Iraq formed councils similar to the Zapatista governments. A leader from this group said that Zapatista practices permeated his work, explaining, “The global justice movement now has been hugely influenced by participatory decision-making processes and non-hierarchical processes as well as a network-style organizing from the Zapatistas” (Steve Conway, interview, Berkeley, CA, March 16, 2008).

One Zapatista practice that many U.S.-based respondents reported having adopted was holding open meetings (encuentros) meant to foster dialogue. For instance, one radical Northern California collective centered its work around such meetings, in which, a member reported, “We share food, we claim a space of rebellion, and we have dialogue. And there would be events we would have that 300 people would show up, all around Zapatismo and what does Zapatismo look like locally” (Bryan Moore, interview, Berkeley, CA, March 16, 2008). In another example, a Texas collective founded a bookstore in order to create a space for community building and analysis—a “central space for people to come together who were working on progressive politics of all kinds, from church people to antiwar people to all kinds of folks—youth, queer folks, whatever” (Sarah Young, telephone interview, March 23, 2008).

What made these practices appealing to outside activists? On one hand, the Zapatistas’ strategies had proven effective over time. By implementing radical democracy in their autonomous communities and defying the dominant cultural, political, and economic order for more than 15 years, the Zapatistas had demonstrated that “it can be done.” Though the Zapatistas’ own organization is dynamic, several of their core practices, such as collective decision making, “worked” on a practical level. Activists from the South who shared Zapatista identities as farmers or disenfranchised peoples, such as local neighborhood committees or the members of Via Campesina, attested to this practical relevance by using Zapatista tactics to reinforce their own struggles.
On the other hand, and perhaps more important in places such as the United States where activists encountered a dearth of extant, effective, radical movements, the Zapatistas’ ability to sustain autonomous communities inspired hope. As one Mexican-American organizer who had worked in a variety of Zapatista-affiliated collectives over the past seven years put it, “The Zapatistas are inspiring to me because they were able to really successfully challenge the system in the way that the communities are organizing themselves. . . . It’s not just saying, ‘OK, we have this constitution’ but then they don’t follow it. When you see someone, a government that’s actually following it, it’s amazing, like ‘Wow, it’s actually happening!’” (Adriana Arriaga, interview, Berkeley, CA, March 16, 2008). A San Francisco–based advocate for affordable housing similarly explained, “Growing up in the U.S. and not having that much access to social movements, I think it’s just amazing to go somewhere where you’re like, wow, this is real!” (Jennifer Clark, interview, San Francisco, CA, February 24, 2008). Almost every respondent mentioned that the Zapatistas had “sharpened their hope” (Matthew Johnson, interview, San Cristóbal de las Casas, December 30, 2008). Rather than considering Zapatista tactics applicable to a similar struggle, several U.S.-based groups adopted these practices as a way to affirm faith that radical social change was possible.

A SET OF QUESTIONS

In addition, for U.S.-based respondents, practicing Zapatismo at home symbolized a commitment to reflecting on their positions of power. Many analyses of power dynamics within social movements take it for granted that relatively privileged participants want to preserve their privileges (e.g., Hulme and Edwards, 1997; Cooke and Kothari, 2001). However, most Zapatista sympathizers have been drawn to the movement by a shared grievance against neoliberalism. Though their actions may reinforce inequality in unacknowledged ways, on a broad level, even relatively wealthy or powerful Zapatista sympathizers want to change power relations between North and South. However, their radical critique conflicts with their access to political, social, and economic capital. They recognize the durability of such power relations and the impossibility of transcending them or forging completely horizontal exchange. Thus, for such activists, “taking Zapatismo home” means espousing reflection about unequal partnerships and insisting on a critique of traditional altruistic solidarity. As one respondent who had spent several years working for the Zapatistas’ civil-society coordinator Enlace Civil put it, this means “not just ‘The Zapatistas make collectives, so we do, too,’ but asking ‘What does bringing solidarity home mean?’” (Teresa Flores, telephone interview, March 23, 2008). For activists in the North, using Zapatista words and practices can be as symbolic of self-critique as it is strategic.

Zapatismo represents a set of questions, not just a set of answers. Many respondents mentioned that, as one put it, even if the Zapatistas were “dead or old-school,” “I think they’ve asked questions that will be with me for the rest of my life and inform any political project or any school teaching I may or may not be doing in 10 years” (Bryan Moore, interview, Berkeley, CA, March 16, 2008). Another said that she thought this legacy would persist: ‘I don’t think
they could stop existing anymore. . . . I think Zapatismo is going to be an identity from now on like any other social name, like Marxism, Leninism, socialist, communist. It’s just going to be a new terminology, and I think if the Zapatistas fade out or whatever, there will be other groups who follow and take their steps” (Adriana Arriaga, interview, Berkeley, CA, March 16, 2008). For many activists, Zapatismo now exists over and above the movement itself.

U.S.-based respondents recognized the contradictions in their desire to participate in antisystemic movements. For example, one U.S. feminist organizer felt that Zapatismo entailed “acknowledging our own privilege—that we’re people who walk in the world with that sense of entitlement” (Jennifer Clark, interview, San Francisco, CA, February 24, 2008). Another, who had run a Zapatista solidarity program in Northern California for many years, said of white people, “We take too much power in the world” (Angela Peterson, interview, Berkeley, CA, February 22, 2008). Similarly, Isabel Tavares (interview, Berkeley, CA, March 18, 2008), who helped start a Zapatista collective, recognized the possibility that she might be “just be another lame-o from California who shows up and doesn’t know shit and expects everything and complains.” As a result, she constantly asked herself, “What’s the impact of my interest, of my participation, of my presence? What are the ways that I’m negatively affecting this process? What are the ways I’m reproducing the very things that I critique?” Sympathizers like Tavares worried about the unintentional effects of their own privilege.

Often, interviewees were uncertain whether their participation in anti-neoliberal movements was legitimate, given that they benefited from the neoliberal system. For example, a respondent who ran a Zapatista radio collective and described himself as a “white middle-class gringo” reflected that the Other Campaign and its promotion of the idea of practicing Zapatismo from your own space made it possible for him to both be an activist and come to terms with his position of power: “It’s empowering. Instead of always having Chiapas as your referent, you’re being empowered to think of yourself or your community as the referent. At the same time, it’s not like they’re saying, ‘We don’t want your help. Just go deal with your own problems.’ They’re saying, ‘Think about your own problems, but think of them in a global context’” (Adam Taylor, interview, Berkeley, CA, March 4, 2008). Similarly, another U.S. respondent who had both run medical support programs in Chiapas and helped found a cooperative in Texas explained that while the most inspiring part of Zapatismo for her was what was happening on the ground in Chiapas, she felt she didn’t have a place in that process (Sarah Young, telephone interview, March 23, 2008). The possibility of doing Zapatismo at home instead of having to go to Chiapas helped these activists support and relate to the movement while simultaneously acknowledging the ways privilege twisted radical, transnational alliances. In sum, recognizing their own power, interviewees in the United States saw Zapatismo not as a politics of sameness, as many authors imply, but as a politics of difference that made alliances across race, class, and nation possible without reinscribing existing power hierarchies.

The Zapatistas provoke allies to grapple with power differences by questioning their presence in Chiapas and foregrounding self-critique (Andrews, 2010). Numerous respondents described feeling “humbled” by their direct or indirect interactions with the Zapatistas (e.g., Alice Williams, interview, San
Cristóbal de las Casas, January 8, 2008). For instance, Isabel Tavares explained that the Zapatistas’ demand that people seek permission for their actions “forces people to question for the first time, ‘Should I go everywhere that I’m able to go? Maybe I shouldn’t. Maybe just because my passport lets me, I should think if I’m wanted in that space, how I’m going to affect that space, all that.’ . . . I think that the way that it makes outsiders uncomfortable is really productive.” She said that questions like these had problematized her relationship to solidarity, forcing her to ask, “What does that term mean? Who gets to claim it? Who should? Why do we need that term?” Similarly, Bryan Moore, also from a northern California Zapatista cooperative, reflected that what attracted him to Zapatismo was “the questions that they asked, like, ‘Who are you? What are you doing? What do you want?’” For Moore, Zapatismo meant bringing these questions into his own life. His collective, he said, used Zapatista tactics such as open meetings not just because they were effective organizing tools but also because they made it possible to spark critical conversations about race and power. He explained, “We looked at their meetings and looked at the motivations that they had of people coming together to talk, not to change each other, not to be, like, ‘Hey, we got the right way, you got the wrong way, let me conscientize you or let me change you.’”

While scholars such as Olesen (2005) and Rovira (2009) note the diffusion of Zapatista discourse, examining the content of that discourse reveals that the most important Zapatista lesson for many activists in the North is the critique of power. Zapatista practices like the open meeting appeal to radical groups because their very structure implies a challenge to the typical way of practicing solidarity (in Moore’s words, “Let me change you”), from which most U.S. Zapatista activists try to distance themselves. For Moore’s group, the meaning of practicing Zapatismo in the United States was closely tied to the question “How do we go beyond solidarity? Let’s not just go help the little brown brother, the indigenous folks outside. Let’s use the Zapatistas as a practice, a political practice, not a model.” Taking Zapatismo home, to a certain extent, meant rejecting the kind of solidarity that reproduced Northern condescension or control over Southern discourses and practices.

Activists took on the word and name “Zapatista” because it provided a shared reference point that implied this kind of reflexivity. Adam Taylor, a member of a Zapatista radio collective, commented, “I think it’s a good way to sum up a set of ideas so that if other people don’t know, they can be like, ‘What is Zapatista?’ And I could say, ‘I’m organizing in a nonhierarchical, anticapitalist, horizontal collective’” (interview, Berkeley, CA, March 4, 2008). Adriana Arriaga, a participant in a Mexican-American group that used the Zapatistas as impetus for reflection, also said, “Calling yourself Zapatista you can identify with people very quickly. . . . I think this goes across race or class or gender” (interview, Berkeley, CA, March 16, 2008). While simply calling themselves Zapatistas likely did not transcend race, class, or gender, Arriaga’s statement hints at Zapatismo’s importance as a symbol of the commitment to questioning such power relations.

In calling themselves Zapatistas, Northern activists tie parts of their identities to reflexivity and Southern critiques of Northern imperialism. Regularly, respondents referred to the Zapatistas as “a fundamental reference point in my life” (Rocio Perez, telephone interview, March 21, 2008), saying that the
movement gave their lives meaning or that they felt “reborn with [the Zapatistas]” (Sergio Avila, interview, Oakland, CA, March 15, 2008). A shared identity did not precede their alliance, as scholars of horizontal solidarity have suggested. Rather, many Zapatista sympathizer organizations have constructed and reconstructed their anti-neoliberal identity as they have engaged with the movement. One founding member of a prominent mutual solidarity organization based in Chiapas explained that her group was “meaningless, and it could not exist, without being linked to the Zapatistas. What brings our organization into existence is this radical movement that criticizes the capitalist world system” (Jimena Rivera, telephone interview, January 11, 2008). The director of the same organization said, “The Zapatistas give us strength to continue. We would not have been able to construct this without their inspiration and without having them as a point of reference.” By honoring Southern leadership and valuing the Zapatistas as the source of ideas and self-critique, these privileged activists gain legitimacy in their relations with the Zapatistas, vis-à-vis other activists, and in their identities as radicals.

CONCLUSION

This paper has used the examples of Zapatista-inspired activist groups in the United States and Mexico to reflect on the shape and meaning of International Zapatismo, or “taking Zapatismo home.” Broadly, the diffusion of Zapatista philosophies into the North defies the stereotype of an active, global, Northern civil society impacting passive local communities. International Zapatismo demonstrates ways in which a Southern movement can influence and inspire the global social-justice movement. It reinforces the point that Southern struggles have been inspiring activists elsewhere for decades, and their defiance has often been tied to the demand for reflection in the North on the role and potential imperialism of cross-class solidarity.

In particular, the Zapatistas have questioned power relations on the left and projected this critique across the globe in a way that goes beyond their movement and may have a lasting legacy. Compared with their historical antecedents, the Zapatistas have placed particular emphasis on addressing power differences by encouraging sympathizers to turn Zapatista philosophies back on their own home contexts. The movement’s impact is grounded in its willingness to stand up to more powerful activists but to do so in a way that is inclusive, asking them to echo the Zapatistas’ practices elsewhere even as the Zapatistas refuse to be told what to do in Chiapas.

This example of alternative solidarity in the North shows that not all South-to-North solidarity is spontaneous, horizontal, and mutual (this description is likely more appropriate for South-to-South solidarity). South-to-North partnerships can also represent a way of establishing alliances across power differences by critiquing existing power dynamics. International Zapatismo links “internal” Zapatista activism in Chiapas to “external” Zapatista activities not only through practices and rhetoric but also by providing a way for relatively privileged activists to respond to power-laden tensions in their attempts to support the Zapatistas’ efforts in Chiapas. As Karl Polanyi (2001 [1944]) and Antonio Gramsci (1971) would point out, effective counterhegemonic strategy
relies on building coalitions across classes. Whereas movements such as those in Ecuador, Bolivia, and Venezuela have focused their demands on class and race, the Zapatistas have paid much attention to transcending social differences, partly by critiquing them. It is possible that the Zapatistas’ ability to deal with difference rather than exclusively pursuing sameness stands behind their broad transnational resonance. Their direct attention to outsiders may also be one reason foreigners continue to romanticize Zapatismo more than, for instance, state-run socialism in Bolivia or Venezuela.

In spite of the Zapatistas’ resonance abroad, questions remain about the relationship between the Zapatista movement on the ground and the practices and forms of reflexivity that activists adopt elsewhere. Outside support for the Zapatistas has ebbed and flowed according to Northerners’ own priorities, not necessarily in conjunction with the needs of the movement in Chiapas. As people take the movement’s ideas abroad, the Zapatistas themselves remain circumscribed by their disadvantaged position. By encouraging the people who provide them with financial and political support to take up Zapatismo at home, the Zapatistas may have forgone crucial resources. Though reciprocal organizing may be efficient at mobilizing transnational alliances in some cases, it can also be precarious, leaving members more focused on autonomous, local, and national action than on their shared projects (Reitan, 2007).

What is the significance of Northern organizing for the Zapatistas’ understanding of their own possibilities and for their proposals for action on the ground in Chiapas? Sustaining attention and support in the North remains a key challenge. By the end of my fieldwork in 2008, the Zapatistas were facing economic scarcity and increased violence from paramilitary and state forces. In a speech in late 2007, Subcomandante Marcos suggested that the Zapatistas had never before faced such grave aggression with so little media attention or political support. The founder of a think tank close to the movement attested, “The head could be cut off the Zapatistas at any moment. The proximity of civil society is the most important safety belt protecting the Zapatistas in the face of foreseeable military actions against them. The survival of everything . . . depends on nurturing and keeping that vital link” (Pablo Gutiérrez, interview, San Cristóbal de las Casas, January 12, 2008).

Furthermore, International Zapatismo remains subject to the chaotic politics of activist networks. Northerners’ desire for reflexivity does not signal the end of their impositions on the Zapatistas; whether it is intended or not, domination within the movement persists. As activists, particularly in the Chicano community, have pointed out, race and other structures of privilege permeate the Zapatista movement (e.g., Flores, 2008; Barmeyer, 2009). Furthermore, as Héctor Perla (2008) argues for the case of the Central American Peace and Solidarity Movement, attention to international solidarity—even such as the analysis put forth in this paper—can obscure the importance of local actors in developing and promoting transnational movements at both an analytical and a practical level.

Finally, what does the Zapatistas’ demand for reflexivity in the North mean for other movements? The Zapatistas are one of the most salient radical movements of the past 20 years. They emerged at a key moment in history, shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall, when many activists had lost faith in the old Marxist paradigms of organizing. Whether other movements can build
transnational networks by critiquing difference in the same way may depend on an array of factors, such as their particular cultural cachet and historical resonance. Still, the Zapatistas’ insistence on critique may provide space or inspiration for other movements to do the same.

More could be done to understand the limits and possibilities of transnational social-movement networks in questioning internal power dynamics. To do so, further research should test the propositions put forth in this paper, specifying the conditions under which shared identities and transnational interchanges emerge. It should begin to reflect on the relationship between Southern organizations’ influence on Northern allies, the critique of traditional solidarity, and the possibilities for Southern gains on the ground. It should also look into the kind of South-South ties alluded to briefly in this paper and the ways in which the horizontal sharing of tactics intersects with the vertical diffusion of critique. Such analyses would help build insights on the ways a broad coalition might defy the dominant order not only within social-movement alliances but also in their shared project to challenge structures of oppression.

NOTES

1. The Zapatistas have also provided important inspiration to similarly positioned allies in the South. However, because this paper aims to complicate the assumption that flows of discourses and practices follow economic and political domination, it focuses on how they have inspired sympathizers in the North.

2. Nevertheless, scholars such as Keck and Sikkink (1998: 78) do acknowledge that the top-down advocacy model is often challenged to the point of becoming unsustainable.

3. Scholars have widely debated the success of the Zapatista case and the negative implications of building up support networks through diffuse, Internet-based ties (see, e.g., the debate between Hellman [2000] and Paulson [2001]).

4. Of the 34 respondents, several had led multiple organizations, and in some cases I interviewed multiple leaders of the same organization, so the number of respondents does not correspond to the number of organizations represented. I conducted one interview with each respondent.

5. While the Zapatistas did not explicitly refuse my repeated requests, they persistently said they did not have an answer yet, asking me to return until I ran out of time. As a U.S. scholar, I was constrained by a point I sought to underscore: that the movement has not only asserted its control over outsiders but also, given its politically sensitive position, guarded its information extremely carefully.

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