Labelling the Zapatistas

A Comment on Deneuve — Reeve

John Holloway

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When I first started to read the paper by Deneuve and Reeve on 'Behind the Balaclavas of South-East Mexico', I confess that I quickly put it aside as being too silly to take seriously. To criticise the practice of community decision-making in Chiapas on the basis that the Maya and Inca societies were authoritarian is just too ridiculous — something like criticising the IRA on the basis that Genghis Khan was undemocratic (the distances in time and space are roughly comparable).

Two things led me to read the article more carefully: firstly, the careful discussion to which it was subjected in the aut-op-sy mailing list, and secondly, the fact that Wildcat, for whom I have a great respect, urged me to read it seriously: in the editorial introduction to no. 45 of Wildcat-Zirkular (June 1998), they say in bold type that George Caffentzis (who also has an article published in that number) and I should listen to Reeve and learn something about emancipatory processes.

With this admonition in mind, I went back to reading the Deneuve-Reeve article, together with the discussion in the aut-op-sy list, which included a reply by Reeve (20/4/98) to criticisms made in that discussion. Having read the discussion, I abandoned my original intention of replying to Deneuve-Reeve's criticism of the Zapatistas, because there are already excellent replies to be found in the aut-op-sy discussion, especially the contributions by Monty Neill on 29/3/98, by Christopher Day on the same date and by Monty Neill on 7/5/98.

Nevertheless, I continue to find the Deneuve-Reeve article not only ill-informed but deeply disturbing. In this note I want to explain why.

Possibly the most important charge that Deneuve-Reeve make against the Zapatistas is their statement at the beginning of the article that the Zapatista movement is 'a movement which is a vehicle for the values of ethnic identity … which are nowadays at the heart of the most barbaric tendencies in the world'. While I agree that identity (and not just ethnic identity) is at the heart of the most barbaric tendencies of the world, what disturbs me about the article is that it is Deneuve-Reeve's argument, and not the Zapatista movement, which is identitarian.

Identity is the core of bourgeois thought. What distinguishes bourgeois thought is the assumption that capitalist social relations are permanent, that they 'are'. Deprived of historical movement, interconnected processes appear as so many separate things that 'are', each with its own Is-ness, its own identity. This identity is not, of course, a matter of mere appearance: the material

establishment of social relations through the exchange of commodities, and the fracturing of the relation between subject and object which that implies, means that the flux of social relations (the 'sheer unrest of life') really exists in the form of things, of identities. Bourgeois thought, scientific and non-scientific alike, proceeds through identifying, classifying, defining, labelling. The thing or person is abstracted from the flux of social relations and identified. The argument goes: 'it is x, therefore …'

Identification as a pattern of thought (and action) receives its clearest expression in fascism, racism and sexism: 'he is a Jew, therefore …; she is black, therefore…; she is a woman, therefore …; they are long-haired, they are gay, etc …' The starting point of identification precludes any understanding of social change, because all possible movement is entrapped within the identification on which the argument is based. Anything can be explained by 'well, what do you expect, they're Jews', or 'women are like that': an eternal return in which there is nothing new. Over all such arguments stands the grim, terrible warning of Adorno: 'Auschwitz confirmed the philospheme of pure identity as death.' (Negative Dialectics, 1990, 362).

Identity is the hallmark of bourgeois thought, but it penetrates deep into would-be oppositional thought as well. The response to Nazi fascism is often: 'they are Germans, therefore …'; or to US domination, 'they are Americans, therefore…' Or it can be a simple inversion: 'we are black, therefore …; we are women, we are Basques, we are Irish, we are gay…' In all these cases, as long as the assertion of identity does not consciously carry with it its own negation ('we are black, but more, etc'), then it reproduces precisely the pattern and the danger of fascist thought. Hence the force of Deneuve-Reeve's suggestion that identity is 'at the heart of the most barbaric tendencies in the world'.

With this, I return to Deneuve-Reeve's argument. In general, the Zapatista movement has been strongly and consciously anti-identitarian. They have consistently refused to present themselves as an ethnic movement, although some of their symapthisers have tended to represent them as such. That is also the sense of many of their statements about being a national movement: 'we are not an indigenous movement but national', etc. Against all the attempts by the state, and by the established left, to label them, they have refused to fit into any categories. In one of their communiques, Power says to them: 'I am who am, the eternal repetition… Be ye not awkward, refuse not to be classified. All that cannot be classified counts not, exists not, is not.' (La Jornada 10 June 1996) Their response, of course, is mockery, laughter, jokes, dancing. And to their supporters from all over the world they say, in the anti-identitarian statement by Ana Maria to the first Intergalactic: 'Detras de nosotros estamos ustedes' ('Behind us are the we that are you').

Deneuve and Reeve, on the other hand, insist on identifying, on labelling. Their argument is: 'they are Maoists, therefore…' Like all identitarian arguments, it is caught in an ever-returning present: 'They were Maoists in the 1970s, they were Maoists when they went to the jungle in the early 1980s, therefore they're Maoists now, therefore …' And then, in perfect reproduction of the pattern of anti-Jewish arguments: 'They claim that their decisions are taken in democratic assemblies, but then they would, wouldn't they, Maoists always do.'

In this context, the criticism of the claim of community democracy in Chiapas by reference to the practices of the Incas (six centuries and thousands of kilometres away) seems not only ridiculous but sinisterly logical: 'The Indians claim to have a democratic tradition, but look at the Mayas, look at the Aztecs, look at the Incas, that shows what sort of tradition they have: once an Indian, always an Indian'.

And as for Latin American revolutionaries: ‘nothing new, we’ve seen it all before — Cuba, Nicaragua, El Salvador’. And as for the enthusiasts who support them: ‘why can’t they learn that we live in an eternal present, that nothing changes?’

That, dear Wildcat, is why I find the Deneuve-Reeve argument not only ill-informed but deeply disturbing.

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