

# After the Storm: Zapata and the Collapse of Pragmatic Anarchism of Leftist Guerrilla Forces

by Hong

## Introduction

On January 1, 1994, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN), an indigenous armed organization in Chiapas, Mexico, launched an uprising deliberately timed to coincide with the enactment of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). The revolt began with brief, but intense armed confrontations yet concluded 12 days later with a government ceasefire and negotiations. Unlike traditional guerrilla movements pursuing prolonged warfare, the EZLN swiftly pivoted to non-armed struggle, demanding indigenous autonomy. In 1996, it signed the San Andrés Accords with the Mexican government, calling for constitutional recognition of indigenous self-governance. Over the past three decades, the EZLN's core struggle has shifted from firearms to farmlands and parliaments. Autonomous communities known as "Caracoles" serve as self-governing administrative units, grounded in direct democracy and composed of multiple indigenous collectives. These communities make decisions through "community assemblies," overseeing political governance, justice, education, and public services. Agricultural production is organized through cooperatives, including coffee, corn, and honey, with the "Café Zapatista" cooperative as a flagship project.

The symbols of resistance have been transformed into fair-trade handicrafts. The movement has shed its guerrilla militancy, surviving through isolated autonomy—neither seeking to dismantle the state nor allowing assimilation, but instead building a self-sufficient "state within a state" within autonomous communities, slowly reshaping the dynamics of power and survival.

## The Swift Disarmament of an Armed Revolution

The ideological roots of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) trace back to the global left-wing upsurge of the late 1960s. Following the brutal suppression of the 1968 Mexican student movement, intellectuals influenced by Marxism and liberation theology turned to rural areas, seeking to sustain revolutionary momentum among indigenous communities. In 1983, the EZLN was secretly founded in the jungles of Chiapas, southeastern Mexico. Its early members comprised urban leftist activists and indigenous leaders, aiming to overthrow the oppressive regime through traditional guerrilla tactics. Initially obscure, the EZLN gained prominence only in the early 1990s.

By 1993, based in the Lacandon Jungle of eastern Chiapas, the organization called on Mexico's indigenous peoples to rise against the one-party rule of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). The Zapatista movement's primary goals were land reform and redistribution, alongside greater political and cultural autonomy for the indigenous peoples of Chiapas and beyond. The uprising was driven by the Mexican government's economic reforms, particularly those preparing for NAFTA's implementation. A pivotal 1993 land reform bill sought to privatize communal lands (ejidos) and public farms, threatening indigenous livelihoods.

On January 1, 1994, the EZLN stunned the world with a symbolic uprising. Coinciding with NAFTA's enactment, armed Zapatistas, donning balaclavas and wielding wooden rifles, occupied five towns in Chiapas, seizing large landowners' estates and restoring the land to indigenous collective farming.

Though the Mexican government branded them a “separatist terrorist organization,” the “12-day war” was more a political spectacle. By January 12, a ceasefire was reached, and after over two years of negotiations, the 1996 San Andrés Accords were signed, mandating constitutional recognition of indigenous autonomy. Thereafter, the EZLN’s armed forces assumed a defensive role, with the military structure of the “Zapatista Army” becoming largely symbolic, serving as a protective shield for the autonomous Caracoles. Despite occasional small-scale clashes, the Zapatistas transitioned from armed struggle to peaceful political action.

### **Cooperative Economy: An Alternative to Capitalism?**

Rooted in Mexico’s traditional ejidos collective land system, the EZLN reclaimed land seized by large landowners in Chiapas, designating it for collective community ownership, prohibiting its sale or privatization. Members are required to participate in collective labor, with harvests distributed according to family needs and surpluses allocated to community public funds. The EZLN rejects involvement with transnational corporations or intermediaries, establishing direct sales networks with international leftist groups and fair-trade organizations. Consumers are explicitly framed as “comrades” (*compañeros*), and their purchases are seen as direct support for the resistance movement, not charity. Among these efforts, “Café Zapatista,” characterized by organic cultivation and fair-trade certification, is a primary economic pillar for community income.

Mexico is a major coffee producer, and Chiapas’ climate and terrain make it the country’s largest coffee-growing region. The cooperatives aim to develop new supply and export methods to reduce reliance on intermediaries and global markets. The first fully Zapatista-run coffee cooperative, Mut Vitz (“Bird Mountain”), was established in 1997 in the highlands of San Juan de la Libertad, Chiapas, with 200 coffee producers. Its prices, set by fair-trade organizations, were exported directly through overseas contacts, bypassing

intermediaries. As a result, producers earned over double the rates offered by traditional markets. Tragically but predictably, Mut Vitz’s equipment was confiscated by the Chiapas state government for alleged tax evasion, leading to the cooperative’s dissolution in 2009.

Today, Café Zapatista is distributed to at least 12 European countries through various solidarity networks. These initiatives are linked via RedProZapa (Zapatista Product Distribution Network), a non-physical alliance of approximately 15 cooperatives dedicated to selling EZLN products like coffee, honey, and lemongrass.

The cooperatives’ goal is to “carve out autonomous enclaves within capitalism,” rather than overthrowing the state or abolishing private property. To preserve the revolution’s “purity,” they reject government subsidies. The Zapatistas and the Mexican government maintain a tacit understanding: the state opts for “neglect” over repression, while the Zapatistas pursue “isolated autonomy” instead of revolution. Both sides avoid direct confrontation, sustaining an institutional indifference.

Due to the state’s absence, cooperatives rely on NGOs to fill resulting gaps, though NGOs cannot offer systemic alternatives. Consequently, the cooperatives depend heavily on leftist consumer markets. Zapatista products rarely enter mainstream Mexican commercial channels (e.g., Walmart or major supermarkets), appearing only in leftist bookstores, university cooperatives, and indigenous markets. Their coffee, sold directly to international leftist groups (e.g., Italy’s *Ya Basta!*, France’s Zapatista Solidarity Network), bypasses corporate intermediaries, commanding a 15–20% premium over market prices, far exceeding Mexico’s average consumer affordability. Cultural products like embroidered textiles, featuring Zapatista symbols (balaclavas, jungle motifs), are sold through international ethical stores (e.g., the U.S.-based Schools for Chiapas online platform). A hand-embroidered scarf, for instance, retails for \$50–80, far above similar products in Mexico’s

local markets, relying on the “aesthetics of resistance” to attract global leftist consumers.

### **Non-Revolutionary Political Strategy: The Anarchist Destiny**

The cooperatives undeniably offer a pluralistic vision, imagining possibilities beyond capitalism. Aesthetically, they exude exotic allure, but politically, they are profoundly awkward. At their core, they sidestep the question of power—a revolution that does not seek power is an odd “virtue.” What, then, is the essence of the revolution they advocate?

In a 2015 speech, EZLN Subcommander Moisés stated: “We receive nothing from the government; in fact, we don’t even speak with them, nor does any of our support bases. Even if they murder us, we won’t talk to the bad government (as opposed to the ‘good government’ of our autonomous zones). How do we handle issues that need to be raised with the bad government? One way is through public denunciations by our good governance councils, letting the bad government know. If that fails, we use the Zapatista community radio, because, as we discussed yesterday, the government has spies and informants who record our broadcasts, so we put the information there.”

The Zapatista movement can be seen as a class struggle or an ethnic movement, but regardless, government encirclement renders it nearly immobilized—not through overt violence like massacres, but through a slow, silent war of attrition: contaminated water, severed electricity, denied healthcare, and restricted access to or through Zapatista territories. The Zapatistas’ symbolic power remains undiminished, but their practical capacity is severely limited.

This echoes the earlier Zapatista peasant uprising of the early 20th century, from which the movement takes its name, honoring Emiliano Zapata’s legacy. In late November 1914, Zapata and Pancho Villa jointly entered Mexico City, ending Victoriano Huerta’s attempt to restore the

old regime. For one to two months, they effectively controlled the government. Yet neither sought to seize state power, retreating instead to their regional strongholds. Within a month, Venustiano Carranza—a wealthy landowner and governor under Díaz’s dictatorship—emerged as Mexico’s new leader, forcing Zapata into a besieged stronghold in Morelos. Zapata began recognizing the need for a peasant-worker alliance, land and property socialization, and radical democracy, but he refused to address political power or state control. By early 1915, he withdrew from Mexico City, abandoning the struggle for power. During this tragic siege, the rebels had little chance to connect with urban proletarian movements, much like today’s Zapatista cooperatives, which have largely detached from Mexico’s working class, enclosing themselves as a “state within a state.”

There is no space outside the system—globalization tolerates no free territories. The Zapatistas’ decades-long standoff with the government has grown increasingly awkward. Despite unparalleled public support and sympathy, they remain confined to Chiapas. Born from specific local conditions, the movement claims to be part of global processes and resistance, but its model is unreplicable. Periodic referenda (Consultas) organized by Zapatista supporters repeatedly confirm overwhelming support in Chiapas, yet the movement’s initial appeal to a broader working-class base has failed to evolve into a national organization.

The Zapatistas made a catastrophic misjudgment: believing capitalist states are governed by principles and laws rather than class interests, their fragile equilibrium with the government rests on a fantasy of neutral institutions. Their survival hinges on whether those complicit with global capital are willing to occasionally offer crumbs of justice or morality. Consequently, their discourse is one of “rights,” not power. The real issue is the necessity of seizing power—producers’ control over society. There is no choice between pursuing power or abandoning it; the only question is which class will wield it.

# The Antagonistic Logic of Far-Right Populism and Its Possible Transcendence

The global rise of far-right populism is a product of intertwined crises in the era of globalization. It is neither a fleeting political backlash nor a mere ghost of history resurfacing, but a systemic malaise deeply embedded in the fractures of contemporary social structures. As economic inequality widens, cultural identity anxieties fester, and technological revolutions spiral unchecked, far-right forces spread like wildfire across the parched grasslands of democratic institutions. This phenomenon not only threatens the foundations of pluralistic coexistence but also exposes the structural fragility of liberal democracy in confronting complex challenges. To untie this Gordian knot, we must pierce the fog of populist rhetoric to reveal its internal contradictions and seek genuine paths to unity through the reconstruction of the social contract.

The social soil nurturing far-right populism is the toxic fruit of three imbalances in the modernization process. Economically, neoliberal globalization has carved a chasm between winners and losers, casting industrial workers in developed nations and urban poor in developing countries into shared survival struggles. When Silicon Valley tech moguls and Wall Street financiers amass wealth at a pace dozens of times faster than the livelihoods lost to vanishing manufacturing jobs, embittered unemployed workers become the “forgotten majority” championed by populist demagogues. This economic alienation collides with cultural and identity politics, where progressive advocacy for diversity is perceived by conservative communities as a threat to traditional ways of life. When German small-town residents see their corner bakery replaced by a halal diner, or when Southern U.S. evangelicals witness the legalization of same-

sex marriage, cultural disorientation morphs into a zealous defense of “purity.” Meanwhile, social media algorithms weave these scattered grievances into contagious collective narratives, making QAnon conspiracies more viral than scientific warnings about climate change. The resonance of these crises enables populists to reduce complex social issues to a battle cry of “us versus them.”

Yet this antagonistic ideology harbors irreconcilable contradictions. When far-right parties pose as champions of the “underdog,” their policies often betray their promises. Trump’s 2017 tax reform slashed corporate rates from 35% to 21%, delivering over 17% of tax benefits to the richest 1% of Americans in 2018, while ordinary workers’ real wages stagnated. This blatant favoritism toward capital is cloaked in the nationalist rhetoric of “making America great again,” with working-class voters, sedated by cultural identity, willfully ignoring the systematic erosion of their economic interests. More perversely, the immigrants and refugees demonized as “internal enemies” by the far right share the same fate of abandonment under globalization as their populist supporters. France’s National Rally blames North African immigrants for draining welfare resources yet remains silent on the wealth siphoned offshore by BNP Paribas, which triples the Île-de-France region’s annual welfare budget. This contradiction is the survival strategy of populist politics—it thrives on perpetually manufacturing another to sustain group cohesion, even when that “other” is a fellow victim of the same economic order.

Confronting the far right’s exclusionary mindset

and its propaganda offensives rooted in self-interest demands abandoning illusions. Appeals to mutual understanding or sentimental harmony cannot dismantle the far rights carefully crafted “working-class” narrative. On matters of core interest, far-right populists ruthlessly prioritize their own, showing no regard for others sharing their plight. Hollow calls for empathy merely indulge cheap moralism, failing to alter material realities, as the far right’s ideological contradictions stem from its fundamental self-interest.

Thus, exposing the contradictions of populist ideology in public discourse is essential. To counter and contain far-right street movements, beyond forming overt counterforces, tactics like infiltrating for surveillance and sabotage are commonly employed. The challenge lies in building organized, actionable resistance. The bourgeois class is unreliable, as right-wing policies promise them benefits, and even if they recognize these promises as hollow, their pessimism breeds apathy. Nor will improving external conditions automatically mobilize them, as the rise of far-right populism is itself a diversionary tactic, making the co-opted bourgeoisie complicit by design. For the proletariat, the urgent task is to stay vigilant and seek solidarity. Embracing shared values and rejecting narratives that pit the marginalized against the even weaker can prevent mutual harm. Directly disrupting far-right street actions can also maintain order and secure safe, stable workplaces. Amid the encirclement of right-wing policies, unchecked media platforms, violent threats, and digital control, preserving resistance requires forming vibrant, self-sustaining organizations rooted in mutual aid, gradually enhancing bargaining power for long-term gains.

Maintaining ideological purity and resisting capital’s co-optation (e.g., through NGO funding or financial colonialism) demands exploring non-capitalist internal exchange models to ensure economic independence, counter corporate coercion, and mitigate policy risks. This includes building trusted networks and non-monetary mutual aid systems. Such efforts must be

sustained and adaptable to endure ongoing suppression. Robust mutual aid organizations can shield vulnerable groups while standing as steadfast opponents of far-right ideology.

At its core, far-right populism is a mechanism of monopoly capitalism to deflect its inherent contradictions. Merely highlighting its inconsistencies is insufficient to halt its domineering rule, as its rise is invariably propped up and facilitated by big capital. Under this logic of inertia and violence, achieving true solidarity and nurturing genuine hope demands relentless exploration by every principled individual. Flexibility, resolve, and the willingness to set aside personal gain and past suspicions are essential. Collective effort must strive for the true, universal independence and liberation of all.