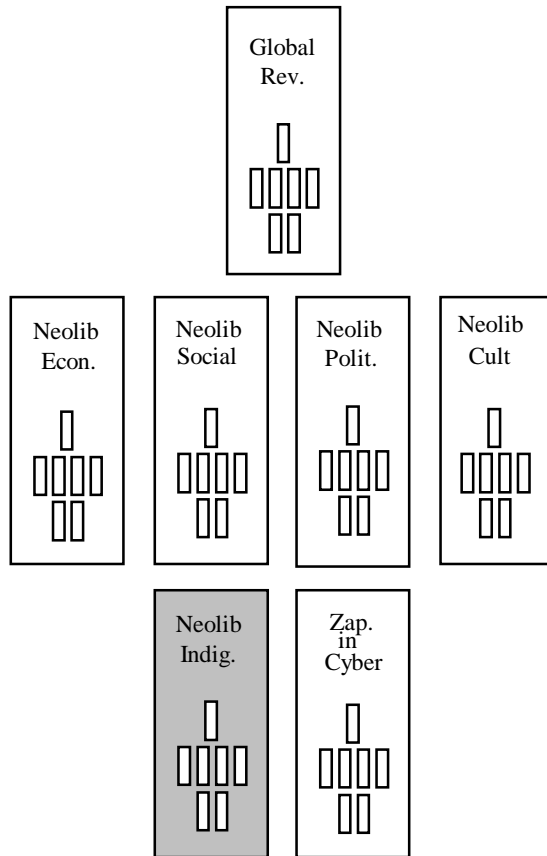


Neoliberalism:

Identity Aspects

One of a series of interconnected notes prepared by Acción Zapatista de Austin (www.utexas.edu/students/nave)



Neoliberalism and Identity

Neoliberalism's most dramatic impact on indigenous communities has been its attack on their access to land. Throughout North America NAFTA has provided a rationale for new enclosures of indigenous lands for purposes of commercial exploitation. In Canada indigenous land claims are being overridden with growing ferocity. In the US efforts to privatize public lands and commercialize indigenous ones are rampant. In Mexico the privatization of *ejidal* lands is aimed at their concentration in the hands of agribusiness. On a world scale the GATT has provided a rationale for the enclosure of all public and indigenous lands and the reduction of life everywhere to private property exploitable for private gain. Such enclosure degrades all of nature to a mere "natural resource" to be raped via mining, clear cutting, ranching, the rip off of indigenous knowledge or genetic engineering. But such enclosures not only destroy the land, its flora and fauna, mountains, river systems and oceans. It also wipes out the material foundations of indigenous community survival and cultural development.

As a replacement for the cultures undermined, and for the self-determined identities of those excluded from the land, neoliberalism offers only the hollow rhetoric of development and a new identity of "homo economicus" --the selfish economic person without ties to others and standing alone in work and consumption. The rhetoric is hollow because it hides a vast concentration of wealth and spreading poverty. Homo economicus is not only an impoverished abstraction but even the usual formulation of "consumer" rings false amidst starvation wages and endless work for the wealthy.

Indigenous Resistance to Neoliberalism

From local artisan and farming cooperatives to human rights watchgroups and armed guerrilla movements, indigenous peoples throughout the Americas have organized themselves to resist such attacks. Local coalitions have merged to form multi-ethnic alliances and multi-national organizations that recognize the common struggles that all indigenous and subordinate groups face. The Foro Nacional Indigena in Mexico stands as an

exemplary model of this movement. This forum allows for permanent dialog among indigenous communities and opportunities for joint action against potentially devastating neoliberal policies at both local and national levels.

Decades of repression and subsequent political struggle have developed strong, vibrant and militant indigenous movements that present sophisticated, well-organized challenges to the capitalist system and the new era of neoliberal policymaking. Because of their well-developed sense of purpose, of the clarity of their autonomous conceptions of alternative, non-capitalist ways of being and doing, the influence of these indigenous movements has reached far beyond their own communities and organizations. Their ideas and self-activity have come to provide models of organization against neoliberalism for others engaged against the same enemy. Perhaps most obvious in this regard has been the struggles of those concerned with ecological degradation who have often looked to the indigenous for alternative approaches to the relations between humans and nature.

Indigenous Leadership Against Neoliberalism

With the development of the struggles against neoliberalism around the world, growing numbers have also come to appreciate the politics of indigenous networking: collaboration with respect for autonomy and new, creative ways of discussing democracy, justice and peace. Through their discussions of self-determination and democratic practices rooted in community-level cultural, political and economic traditions and needs, the international indigenous movement has reinvigorated debates over developing democratic practices and alternative community consciousness in many non-indigenous left and radical communities.

The indigenous movement has placed community autonomy at the center of the development of democratic practices and the renewal of community consciousness and identity. Indigenous autonomy goes beyond simple economic self-determination to include social, cultural, legal and political community autonomy. This notion of autonomy recognizes local and ethnic differences and is not based on a universal notion of rights, needs, culture and desires but on a plurality of political, economic and cultural systems. This conception of autonomy allows for a radical pluralism that accepts and fosters both differences and dialog among people everywhere --an essential ingredient of a better world.

"In my view it was the reform of Article 27 that most radicalized the *compañeros*. That reform closed the door on the Indigenous people's strategies for surviving legally and peacefully. That's why they rose up in arms."
Subcomandante Marcos