

## Beat Dietschy

### **NO FUTURE WITHOUT NON-SIMULTANEITY. Indigenous attempts to build another possible world<sup>1</sup>**

"We are from times past, yes, but we are something new."<sup>2</sup>

For Bloch, non-simultaneity is part of the programme of a multi-layered dialectic and itself a multi-layered, ambiguous concept.<sup>3</sup> It is easier to say what it does not mean: it does not mean mere retardation. For this belongs to the thought pattern of unilinear progress. The talk of non-simultaneity, however, implies per se a semantic break with a goose-stepping conception of history, as it still dominates in the guise of development, market or statehood discourses. But what does Bloch mean positively by non-simultaneity? In essence, he is addressing the continuing effect of the "unfinished past"<sup>4</sup>: "History is not merely haunted and heaped with sweepings, nor is it merely chaff, and all the grain is already out on the respective last stage, last threshing-floor: but precisely for this reason, because so much of the past has not yet come to an end, it too rumbles through the dawns of newness."<sup>5</sup>

It is noticeable that this unrealised history haunts and rumbles. The "uneven otherness" is described as skewed.<sup>6</sup> In 'Inheritance of this Time', disparity is dealt with primarily from the aspect of an unresolved and therefore continuing past, i.e. as something that can threaten the future project as a crooked revolt. In view of the fascist danger that the book deals with, this prioritisation makes sense.

The priority for Bloch was an examination and transformative occupation of disparate contradictions against the capitalist now. "Heritage of this Time", says the preface, is a critique in melee. It seeks to wrest from the Nazis what they use. In the preface to the 1st edition (written in 1934), he stresses, "The limits of the book are not the limits of the identical thing." The task of a second book, he says, remains "to dialecticise current content even without epithet".<sup>7</sup> This book has never been written.

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<sup>1</sup> The text is based on a lecture given at the conference "Ungleichzeitigkeit und Erbschaft unserer Zeit", which the Ernst Bloch Association held in Tübingen from 30 September to 2 October 2005 on the occasion of Bloch's 120th birthday.

<sup>2</sup> From a speech by Subcomandante Marcos on 7 March 2001 at the marcha "El colour de la tierra", quoted in Gloria Muñoz Ramírez: EZLN: 20 + 10. Das Feuer und das Wort, p. 175ss.

<sup>3</sup> Vgl. dazu Beat Dietschy: Gebrochene Gegenwart. Ernst Bloch, Ungleichzeitigkeit und das Geschichtsbild der Moderne, Frankfurt/M 1988 und ders.: Im Zwielficht der Zeit. Ernst Blochs Erkundungen der Ungleichzeitigkeit, in: VorSchein, Blätter der Ernst-Bloch-Assoziation, Bodenheim 1998, Nr. 16, S. 104ff.

<sup>4</sup> Ernst Bloch: Erbschaft dieser Zeit, Gesamtausgabe Band 4, Frankfurt/M. 1962, S. 122.

<sup>5</sup> Ivi, S. 160.

<sup>6</sup> Ivi, S. 120.

<sup>7</sup> Ernst Bloch: Erbschaft dieser Zeit, Zürich 1935, S. 14.

So here we have to think further. How does the question of the meaning of non-simultaneity arise today, in the context of neoliberal globalisation? Is the non-simultaneous - even more so than in the 1920s - possibly an important source of alternative designs to the prevailing simultaneity of global capitalism?

Bloch had not contented himself with sounding out the weather angles of reaction. Rather, he was looking for the "unrealised light that may also be in archaisms".<sup>8</sup> But the question can be posed even more radically: Is it possible to imagine and produce a future that is different from the prevailing present without the non-simultaneous, without recourse to the old and seemingly outdated? I want to explore this question here using a current example, that of the indigenous movements in southern Mexico.

Indigenous peoples are actually doomed to disappear in the view of Latin America's creole elites. In the eyes of the majority, they are a relic, at best a cultural fund from which the national identity of a country like Mexico or Peru can be symbolically fed. But now, in Ecuador and Bolivia, we have indigenous movements and organisations overthrowing and forming governments. And even in a country like Mexico, where the 54 indigenous peoples make up only about one tenth of the total population, they are shaking up the political landscape. What is happening?

### **A war against oblivion**

When thousands of fighters of the "Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional" (EZLN) occupied seven district capitals of the state of Chiapas at dawn on 1 January 1994, the Mexican public, the federal government and the army were taken completely by surprise. Although the "Zapatista Army of National Liberation" had already been founded on 17 November 1983 in a hidden place in the Selva Lacandona and, together with its bases in the indigenous villages, had been preparing for this day for ten years, no one in the country had seen the uprising coming. It was experienced by many as an actual collapse of the non-simultaneous into the simultaneous<sup>9</sup>, an impression reinforced by the inequality of the adversaries: the indigenous armed with simple rifles, woollen caps over their faces, faced an army with the most modern equipment, with planes, helicopters and tanks at their disposal.

The question is, however, whether this is not a premature perception misguided by the indigenist discourse<sup>10</sup> and its folkloristic glasses, a mere deception, which, with

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<sup>8</sup> Ernst Bloch: *Erbschaft dieser Zeit*, Gesamtausgabe, S. 103.

<sup>9</sup> "We have discovered the Indians - before the uprising they were only a subject for anthropologists and historians," judged political scientist Octavio Rodríguez Araujo under the impression of the events (*Mi paso por el zapatismo*, México D.F. 2005, S. 52).

<sup>10</sup> Especially in states such as Mexico, Peru and Bolivia, a multitude of discourses on the "Indio question" have been conducted since the 19th century. Characteristic of this "indigenismo" is that it constructs the pre-Hispanic peoples as subaltern "others" in order to be able to interpret them from their own superior discourse and treat them as objects

Bloch, would have to be described as "false non-simultaneity". In fact, the real "simultaneity" of this uprising cannot be overlooked: on the same 1 January, the "North American Free Trade Agreement" (NAFTA) came into force, which was supposed to hand over Mexican small producers to the overwhelming competition of US agribusiness. The chief negotiator for the Mexican government expressed the neoliberal dogma behind NAFTA by saying that the best project for a country is to have no project at all, because this allows the market to produce the best possible country.<sup>11</sup> This marked a fundamental change of course in Mexico from a state-controlled, domestic-centred economic model to a competition-oriented opening of the world market, with devastating consequences especially for those sectors that lived from subsistence agriculture and which now lost state protection. Disparities within the country increased.

The eleven demands of the insurgents point to such simultaneous contradictions: Work, Land, Housing, Food, Health Care, Education, Independence, Freedom, Democracy, Justice and Peace. Official figures underline the urgency of their cause: 1.5 million people in Chiapas, 43% of the population, had no access to medical services in 1992. Infant mortality in the state was the highest in Mexico, over 70 percent of children suffered from malnutrition in 1993 and 54 percent of the population was undernourished, as much as 80 percent in the highlands and selva. All this despite the enormous wealth of resources in Chiapas, which produces 60% of the country's hydroelectric power and is one of the country's leading producers of petroleum and exporters of wood, coffee, cocoa, sugar, bananas and cotton.

And yet it would be too simple to interpret the Zapatista rebellion as a poverty revolt in a backyard of global capitalism. Older times and mentality structures and other social formations interfere. "For hundreds of years we have been making our pleas and believing in promises that are never fulfilled, always they have told us to be patient and we could hope for better times ... nothing has changed ... Our people continue to die of hunger and curable diseases", is how the Zapatistas explain the reasons for the armed uprising.<sup>12</sup>

### **"The dead smell of hope"**

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of state assimilation policies. As a rule, the right to integrate the "others" into the nation-state as those in need of protection was derived from ethno-cultural difference. The folklorisation of poverty contributes significantly to this construction.

<sup>11</sup> „El mejor proyecto de país es no tener proyecto de país y dejar que el mercado modele el mejor México posible“ (zitiert nach Miguel Pickard: Los efectos del Tratado de Libre Comercio de Norteamérica (TLCAN) sobre el desarrollo rural en México, in: Chiapas al día. Boletín no. 427, CIEPAC, San Cristóbal de Las Casas 2004).

<sup>12</sup> El Despertador Mexicano, 1. Januar 1994, zitiert nach Muñoz Ramírez, a.a.O., S. 75f.

Another statement from the early days of the revolt says: "History is bitter, but its bitterness need not cause disappointment. It can also lead to anger, hope and dignity. We saw our oldest forefathers suffer and struggle, we saw our grandparents struggle, we saw our parents with anger in their hands." With this, the indigenous rebels bring into play the memory of centuries of discrimination and exclusion. Even more: they remind us of the explosive power of unfinished history, - and the claim of the dead on the living<sup>13</sup>:

"And we saw that dignity was good for people, to be people again, and dignity came back into our hearts to live there, and we were new again, and the dead, our dead, saw that we were new again, and they called us again, to dignity, to struggle."<sup>14</sup>

It is not an appeal from the spirit of revolutionary romanticism that speaks from these words, but the experience made by many in the January days of 1994 that the uprising, even if it can bring death, dispels fear, the pillar of every rule: "These planes and these helicopters smell of fear. The air that comes from above smells of fear. Not the air from below. The air from below smells good, it smells of things changing, of everything getting better. ... We are from below. We and many others like us. Yes, that's it: on this day the dead smell of hope."<sup>15</sup>

### **The past as the key to the future**

Bloch, who excavates what is fit for the future even in the past, once speaks of "tradition as revolution of the departed, in the midst of revolution as tradition of the emerging".<sup>16</sup> This particular tradition is often found in the indigenous revolts and movements of Latin America. In Zapatista discourse, it is called the "true word" or the word of the ancestors. The past is understood as the "key to the future"<sup>17</sup>.

This could be misunderstood as a conservative revolution dreaming of a restoration of vanished empires. Such tendencies are certainly found in indigenous and popular rebellions. In Zapatismo, however, apart from a certain glorification of the revolutionary hero and eponym Emiliano Zapata, there is little evidence of this. For the insurgent village communities in Chiapas, remembering the "true words" does not

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<sup>13</sup> "The dead come again, their actions want to become with us once more", Bloch programmatically formulated in the preface to his book on Thomas Münzer in 1921, with a view to the catastrophic defeat of peasant resistance in the 16th century, but also to the wasted opportunity of the German Revolution of 1918.

<sup>14</sup> EZLN: La Palabra de los Armados de Verdad y Fuego, Band 1, Mexiko 1994/95, S. 122, zitiert nach: John Holloway: Der Aufstand der Würde. Zum Revolutionsverständnis der Zapatistas, in: Ulrich Brand und Ana Esther Cecena (Hg.): Reflexionen einer Rebellion. „Chiapas“ und ein anderes Politikverständnis, Münster 1999.

<sup>15</sup> Subcomandante Marcos in a letter to the writer Fernando Benítez, who had died shortly before, in: Muñoz Ramírez, op. cit. p. 35.

<sup>16</sup> Ernst Bloch: Tübinger Einleitung in die Philosophie, Gesamtausgabe Band 13, Frankfurt/M. 1970, S. 153.

<sup>17</sup> Comunicado der EZLN, zitiert in: Carolin Kollwe: Die neue Nation. Diskursstrategien der indianischen Befreiungsbewegung EZLN in Mexiko, Münster 2002, S. 128.

mean sealing off their own culture from change.<sup>18</sup> They are far removed from an "ethnic essentialism" that ascribes certain identities to "the Indio" or the respective ethnic group in the manner of indigenismo. Instead, they see themselves as shaped by confrontations and conflicts in the struggle for survival under colonial and post-colonial regimes. "We are the result of 500 years of struggle", says the First Declaration from the Selva Lacandona in January 1994.

It is the experiences of diverse collective forms of resistance from which the Zapatista movement draws its creativity and ability to learn. They enable it to enter into active exchange with other indigenous and non-indigenous actors of national and international civil society, but also to gain access to the discourse repertoire and the symbols of the nation in a critical and re-functioning inheritance and to reoccupy key concepts of the victorious history such as "patria" or "revolución". The approval that the Zapatistas still enjoy in wide circles of the Mexican population has to do with this cultural revolutionary aspect of the movement. It has succeeded in reversing definitions of Indianity, making official historiography and even the self-image of Mexican society the subject of public debate.<sup>19</sup>

### **No democracy without indigenous autonomy**

This also applies to the basic demands of the movement: "democracy, freedom, justice". It would be to misjudge the explosive power of this tricolour of Zapatismo to understand it only in the light of the prevailing "simultaneity". It is no coincidence that in the years of negotiations with the state power for a constitutional article on indigenous rights and culture, it was not possible to grant indigenous peoples a new place in the nation state as independent legal subjects. This attempt was resisted - despite promises to the contrary - by the established parties and subsequently by both the executive and the legislature, and most recently by the country's supreme court.

However, the Zapatista project has never been content with integrating itself as another force in the existing party landscape in order to gain a share in the political patronage system. On the contrary, what the Zapatistas are trying to build, in dialogue with other citizens' movements, is "a new political force that can organise the demands and proposals of the citizens, in such a way that he who governs, governs obediently".<sup>20</sup> This means nothing less than "turning over" the business of politics. So

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<sup>18</sup> Certainly, autonomy rights, self-government according to their own legal tradition and values are very important for the indigenous rebel villages. However, the traditional customs and traditions are not regarded as sacrosanct, on the contrary: problematic traditions, for example regarding women's rights, are questioned.

<sup>19</sup> Vgl. dazu: Kollewe: Die neue Nation und Beat Dietschy: Zukunft im Rückspiegel. Drei Thesen zur Rettung der Tradition, in: Ueli Mäder und Hans Saner (Hg.): Realismus der Utopie. Zürich 2003.

<sup>20</sup> Fourth Declaration from the Selva Lacandona, 1 January 1996, quoted from Muñoz Ramírez, op. cit. p. 99.

it is not a takeover of political power that they seek, but to "liberate" politics from the hands of politicians and "lead it downwards" to those who must govern: the citizens.<sup>21</sup>

"We do not have to ask permission to be free. The function of government is a prerogative of society, and it is their right to exercise that function."<sup>22</sup> In line with this indigenous understanding of popular sovereignty, when the constitutional reform on indigenous autonomy was definitely thwarted, the Zapatista village communities set about implementing it in practice. They further developed forms of self-government and self-governance, some of which had already been tried and tested, at the community level and began to build an "other politics" at the regional level.

At the heart of this collective learning process are the "Councils of Good Government", in which "obedient governance" is tested as a way of life. Of central importance are the transparency and accountability of the elected council members, their constant replacement and removability at any time, as well as the linking of their decisions back to the deliberations in the village communities. This self-government, which has been practised since August 2003, should not be idealised. It takes place in the midst of the most precarious conditions and in an environment of militarisation and numerous conflicts. Nevertheless, with Susan Street, one can discover in it the beginnings of a new "democratic rationality" based on argumentation and dialogue, which stands in sharp contrast to the political model of the state-supporting parties.<sup>23</sup>

Dialogue between different people is central to the Zapatista movement. The word, not the force of arms, is its strength.<sup>24</sup> It is no coincidence that one of the meeting places, which also serves as the seat of a "Good Government Council", is called "Whirlwind of Our Words". Understanding among the different indigenous peoples, who also speak different languages - Tzeltal, Tzotzil, Ch'ol, Mam, Tojolabal and Zoque - plays an important role. This interethnic dialogue has also contributed significantly to the emergence of the Zapatista project: from the 1970s onwards, due to the scarcity of land and population growth<sup>25</sup>, many indigenous people left their original

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 122.

<sup>22</sup> Similarly, Bloch postulated in 1956 in the GDR: "The working people do not have to experience that they are well governed; but that they themselves should govern belongs to a piece of their work" (Über die Bedeutung des XX. Parteitags, in: Ernst Bloch: Politische Messungen, Pestzeit, Vormärz, Gesamtausgabe Band 11, Frankfurt/M. 1970, S. 360).

<sup>23</sup> Vgl. Susan Street: La palabra verdadera (das wahre Wort) des chiapanekischen Zapatismus. Einige emanzipatorische Ideen zur Demokratie, in: Ulrich Brand und Ana Esther Cecena (Hg.): Reflexionen einer Rebellion. „Chiapas“ und ein anderes Politikverständnis, Münster 1999.

<sup>24</sup> It has maintained the military structure of the EZLN. It serves as protection against the attacks of the paramilitary groups that are used to fight the insurgency, but also against those of the still massively present federal army. Today, however, the main focus of the movement is on the organisational processes: the establishment of economic self-sufficiency, a health and school system and the structures of self-government.

<sup>25</sup> In Chiapas, the Mexican Revolution did not lead to land reform. Therefore, archaic agrarian structures and a large landowner oligarchy have remained until the present. In 1984, for example, 1 million indigenous people and

villages and settled in the ravines leading to the lowlands of the Selva Lacandona. There, together with members of other linguistic regions, they have built new villages with different structures than in their areas of origin. Here, servants on the fincas of land barons and dependent smallholders have become free farmers who determine their own destinies and build pluricultural village communities.

Thus, it is not an empty claim when the Zapatistas advocate for "all colours of the earth". The rejection of a claim to leadership in the alliances and networks they initiated also belongs in this context. Fundamental to the movement is a respect for others in their otherness and the conviction that "living together with those who are different is preferable to homogeneity and hegemony": "We do not ask you to forget your differences and discussions," reads the call for the founding of the National Indigenous Congress, "nor do we ask you to join against your will or to sacrifice one idea to another. We ask you to respect and tolerate the one who thinks differently but who has the same longing for life."<sup>26</sup> The principle of mutual recognition implies that one's own model and approach must not be absolutised: "Don't just follow our example!" is the Zapatistas' invitation to other movements. "We invite everyone, not that they follow us, but that they go their own way."<sup>27</sup>

For the Chiapas rebels, going their own way means listening and asking questions. This applies both internally and externally. With this in mind, on 27 August 1995 they conducted a national survey on the question of whether the EZLN should transform itself into a new kind of political force. The fact that the vast majority of the more than one million responses answered in the affirmative was a decisive factor in their move from arms to words. In March 1999, 2.8 million Mexicans took part in another survey on issues of indigenous rights, the building of another nation with indigenous participation and the relationship between the governed and the governed.

Even more important than these plebiscites are the "marchas", in which the comandantes of the EZLN seek direct contact with grassroots groups and citizens' initiatives in other states. The most recent example is the experiment of the "Other Campaign": in conscious counterpoint to the election campaign of the parties, this mobilisation tries to make the forgotten local struggles of the economically impoverished and the racially despised up to those excluded on the basis of sexual orientation and gender roles the starting point of a new, pluralist alliance. As the more than 1000 organisations and groups involved see it, an "other Mexico" cannot come into being if those excluded from the dominant model merely allow themselves to be

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campesinos together owned 823,000 hectares of land, while a single large landowning family owned 121,000 hectares. Today, 20 family latifundia still own the best soils and largest fincas.

<sup>26</sup> Muñoz Ramírez, a.a.O., S. 101 und S. 235.

<sup>27</sup> Interview von Subcomandante Marcos, ebd., S. 249 und 237.

represented politically. Rather, they have to organise themselves as subjects of a new way of doing politics.

The commitment to a multiverse of social designs is without doubt one of the most important things that the Zapatistas bring to the political arena. They rightly say in their fifth declaration from Selva Lacandona: "Without the Indio peoples, there will be no transition to democracy, no state reform and no real solution to the important problems of the national agenda".<sup>28</sup>

### **News from other times**

"We come from times past, yes, but we are something new": Indigenous rebellions like the Zapatista are far more than a weather glow of a past believed to be dead. Nor are they "revolts of older strata against civilisation" or "heterogeneous surprise"<sup>29</sup>, as Bloch noted with regard to the National Socialist revived archaic. At the very least, they are an expression of prevented polyphony in history. They not only claim the right to their own paths, but also raise questions for society as a whole: isn't non-simultaneity such only from the point of view of the dominant, excluding simultaneity? What about this present and its non-simultaneous parts is fit for the future? And for whom?

As a potential relegated to the sidelines of historical processes and banished from the sphere of shaping society, the non-simultaneous is certainly not by nature a birthplace of the new. As such, it is rather subject to the repetition constraints of a socially established unconsciousness.<sup>30</sup> What is excluded from the simultaneous can, however, become a productive, non-contemporaneous contradiction if it enters into an actively changing dialogue with contemporary events. This was precisely the central idea of Bloch's 'Inheritance of this Time': "The contradiction of genuine non-simultaneity against the capitalist death machine, when properly understood and grasped, ends up as properly guided in a multi-layered material dialectic, not necessarily, as before, in the logic and physics of capital."<sup>31</sup>

Neoliberal globalisation policies, in combination with the unilateralism of empire, produce a totalitarian simultaneity that tolerates no deviations: "There is no alternative. But precisely in this way, it evokes uneven contradiction and the

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<sup>28</sup> 5. Erklärung aus der Selva Lacandona, 17. Juli 1998, zitiert in: ebd., S. 136.

<sup>29</sup> Ernst Bloch: Erbschaft dieser Zeit, Gesamtausgabe, S. 111. However, the indigenous rebels do offer surprises: "When you wait for them to speak, they are silent. When you expect silence, they talk. If you wait for them to take the lead, they get in line. If you wait for them to follow, they go in another direction ... And when you expect them to be satisfied with life, they go off and fight" (Thirteenth Stele, EZLN, July 2003, quoted in: Muñoz Ramírez, op. cit. p. 209).

<sup>30</sup> Vgl. Mario Erdheim: Die gesellschaftliche Produktion von Unbewusstheit. Eine Einführung in den ethnopschoanalytischen Prozess, Frankfurt/M. 1984.

<sup>31</sup> Ernst Bloch: Erbschaft dieser Zeit, Gesamtausgabe, S. 103.



multiverse of excluded *alteritas*. The latter articulates resistance and alternative concepts in the plural and thus hints at what another globalisation beyond capital logic and empire could consist of: in polycentric, polyphonic concordance, with "wind from below". The Chiapas rebels are paving the way in the country of the former monopoly party PRI - to a world in which, as they say, "all worlds have a place".