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The face of the other: Zapatismo, responsibility and the ethics of deconstruction

E. Jeffrey Popke

Department of Geography, East Carolina University, Greenville, NC 27858, USA

Recent work has highlighted the importance of moral and ethical issues for geographical inquiries of space and place. Much of this work has been couched in a modernist framework, drawing on universalist conceptions of subjectivity and legal rights in an attempt to ground the normative foundations for ethical conduct. In this paper, I draw upon post-structuralist theory to elaborate an alternative approach to spatial ethics. Drawing on the work of Emmanuel Levinas, I outline a theory of subjectivity that would view our relationship to distant others as a form of unconditional responsibility. Our ability to meet this responsibility, I suggest, is dependent upon a deconstructionist ethics which, in recognizing the impossibility of grounding ethical conduct, expands the horizon of political engagement. In the second half of the paper, I interpret the Zapatista movement in Mexico as an example of such an ethics. Through an examination of the writings of Subcomandante Marcos, I argue that the Zapatistas have articulated a new form of ethical and political engagement, one that transcends the boundaries of space and identity, and invokes an unconditional responsibility.

Key words: ethics, deconstruction, Levinas, Derrida, Zapatistas, Subcomandante Marcos.

Introduction: the impossibility of modernity

There has of late been a great deal of work in geography dealing with issues of ethics and morality. These investigations have opened a wide array of issues for reflection and discussion, and highlighted the many ways in which moral and ethical concerns intersect with geographical inquiries about space, place, technology, environment and development (Corbridge 1994, 1998; Cutchin 2002; Gleeson and Low 2001; Harvey 2000; Procter 1998; Procter and Smith 1999; Smith 1997, 1999a, 2000, 2001). It seems, then, that ethics is very much on the agenda within geography.

It is no accident, I think, that such work has emerged as we mark the transition to a new century, for the events of the twentieth century called attention to the challenges we face in attempting to cultivate an ethic of care and responsibility toward distant others. It is a century, above all, whose moral imaginary is shaped by the experience of the Holocaust, and yet place names such as Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Bosnia and Chechnya remind us that we have

yet to develop a code of international law and mediation that can prevent violence and bloodshed. Add to this the continuing prevalence of crushing poverty and environmental despoliation, and it is hard not to conclude that the previous century was marked by a series of ethical contradictions, between the principles and procedures of modern liberal democracy, on the one hand, and a catalogue of violence and exploitation, on the other.

This diagnosis is nothing new, having been forcefully articulated by, among others, Max Horkheimer and Theodore Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, written in 1944: 'in the most general sense of progressive thought, the Enlightenment has always aimed at liberating men from fear and establishing their sovereignty. Yet the fully enlightened earth radiates disaster triumphant' (Horkheimer and Adorno 1994: 3). In the decades since this pronouncement, critical social theory has continued to be marked by a sense of scepticism toward the more grandiose claims of modernity and the enlightenment, perhaps most forcefully expressed in recent strains of so-called 'postmodern' thought. Thus, for authors such as Zygmunt Bauman, we would do well to consider modernity as a failed project, a utopian mission that was, from the beginning, always-already impossible:

the long and earnest efforts of modernity have been misguided, undertaken under false pretenses and bound to—sooner or later—run their course … in other words, it is modernity itself that will … demonstrate beyond a reasonable doubt, its impossibility, the vanity of its hopes and the wastefulness of its works. (1993: 10)

In this essay, I want to follow Bauman and others in suggesting that modernity is indeed impossible, that its universal discursive codes, rules and legitimations cannot guarantee nor-mative foundations for ethical conduct, and especially for the type of conduct that has been termed in this themed section as 'caring at a distance'. Indeed, I will go so far as to suggest that the discourses of modernity, by attempting to legislate certainty, have in fact created the conditions of possibility for an *abdication* of our ethical responsibility. This does not mean that the ideals typically associated with modernity—notions such as democracy, equality or justice—must be discarded entirely. Rather, it suggests that we must pursue them in the absence of hubris, and recognize that their potential lies precisely *in their impossibility*. In order to activate this potential, I believe that we need a conception of ethics and politics that breaks from the ontological and epistemological order of modernity.

It is this task that is taken up in what follows. In the first half of the essay, I focus on two theoretical interventions that, taken together, offer a new way to think about responsibility and political agency: first, I argue for an ethical relationship to alterity as a founding moment of subjectivity; and second, I promote a deconstructive ethos, which is sensitive to the impossibility of grounding our ethical conduct. In the second half of the essay, I discuss the Zapatista uprising in southern Mexico as one concrete example of the alternative ethics I have in mind. Through a deconstructive reading of Zapatista discourse, I hope to illustrate the ways in which the Zapatistas articulate a new type of ethical subjectivity and an alternative political imaginary, through which we can reinvigorate a responsibility toward distant others.

Rethinking the modern subject: Levinas, responsibility and alterity

As David Smith (1999b: 277) has noted, one of the 'fundamental issue[s] of moral motiv-

ation … [is] whether the empathetic relations which we seem to be able to establish with close persons (emotionally and spatially) can be extended to different as well as distant others'. Within modernity, this ethical quandary has been addressed by transferring ethics to the terrain of the political, where they have become embodied in a universalist discourse of rights. Within this discourse, the problems associated with affinity and distance are overcome through the establishment of a certain form of Law (moral or juridical) that would guarantee the rights and responsibilities of individuals irrespective of their identity or location. As Zygmunt Bauman puts it, the nature of modern ethical practice can be described as 'finding a code of behaviour which every sound-minded person would have to follow … [and] legislating a social setting which would leave the person no choice but to obey the code' (Bauman and Tester 2001: 93).

The problem with such conceptions, in my view, is that they relegate the ethical subject to a position of passivity. If it is possible to rely upon a universal code, then we are absolved of any responsibility to engage actively or intervene in ethical matters. Under modernity, then, in the words of Horkheimer and Adorno (1994: 30), 'subjectivity has given way to the logic of the allegedly indifferent rules of the game, in order to dictate all the more unrestrainedly'. To suggest why this matters, I want to argue for a different conception of subjectivity, in which our responsibility is not prefigured by the 'rules of the game', but instead emerges out of our collective condition of being-human.

I draw here on the work of Emmanuel Levinas who, perhaps more than any other philosopher, has called into question the metaphysics of modern subjectivity (Campbell 1998; Critchley 1999). In contrast to the modern philosophical tradition, extending from Descartes, through Kant and Heidegger,

Levinas argues that our very subjectivity appears first and foremost as a relationship of responsibility to and for the other. 'Responsibility', Levinas (1985: 95) states, is 'the essential, primary and fundamental structure of subjectivity'. This responsibility is not in any sense a moral or philosophical commitment that can be made by an autonomous subject. It is, rather, the very nature of subjectivity itself:

I am defined as a subjectivity, as a singular person, as an 'I', precisely because I am exposed to the other. It is my inescapable and incontrovertible answerability to the other that makes me an individual 'I'. So that I become a responsible or ethical 'I' to the extent that I agree to depose or dethrone myself—to abdicate my position of centrality—in favor of the vulnerable other … ethics redefines subjectivity as this heteronomous responsibility, in contrast to autonomous freedom. (Levinas and Kearney 1986: 27)

For Levinas, then, subjectivity is not the property of an autonomous individual, for our autonomy is from the start called into question by the existence of the other. The other's existence brings about 'a putting into question of the self … a responsibility that is not assumed as a power but responsibility to which I am exposed from the start, like a hostage' (Levinas 1989: 243). For Levinas, ethics consists precisely in this condition of 'being hostage', an unconditional responsibility toward the other, which exists not as a code or rule to be followed, but as a fundamental feature of our subjectivity, our collective humanity.

This conception of ethics and subjectivity has affinities with recent attempts in geography to rethink the nature of the modern subject, to 'dissect the autonomous self' in favour of a 'relational ethics' (Whatmore 1997). A number of authors have drawn on poststructuralist

theory to suggest that both space and identity are open and fluid, and defined through webs of interconnection and engagements (e.g. Doel 1999; Howitt 2002; Massey 1994; Natter and Jones 1997; Slater 1997; Soja 1996). In their analysis of normalized whiteness, for example, Dwyer and Jones (2000) elaborate a relational epistemology, suggesting that socio-cultural categories can only be defined in opposition to their 'constitutive outsides'. Identities, in this view, are by their very nature contingent, differentiated and relational. That some categories (such as whiteness) become normalized is in part due to the circulation of social power, which creates an illusion of objectivity by obscuring the constitutive nature of any social identity.

The working out of such anti-essentialist or relational epistemologies has done much to shed light on the nature of socio-cultural difference, and the ways in which it becomes inscribed in space. The political and ethical purchase of such work arises from the recognition that identities (and spaces) can never be pure and self-present, that they are always haunted by the traces of difference against which they are defined. Still, any sense of responsibility is here conditioned by the *epistemological* relations of social and spatial difference by and through which the self–other distinction is defined.

For Levinas, by contrast, our responsibility for the other is *ontological*, a fundamental and unconditional feature of our being-human. For Levinas, we are not hostage to *specific* others because of any social or historical relationship. Rather, his is an argument about the general ontological structure of alterity and subjectivity, an ethics that is an unconditional devotion, which is prior to any given social or cultural context:

The other is not other because he would have other attributes, or would have been born elsewhere or at another moment, or because he would be of a different race. The other is other because of me: unique and in some manner different than the individual belonging to a genus. It is not difference which makes alterity: alterity makes difference. (Levinas 2001: 106)

There are two dimensions of this formulation that I want to highlight. First, within a Levinasian ethics, our responsibility toward the other is irrespective of whether she is 'like me'. Rather, the other appears 'out of context' and 'without mediation', in a figure Levinas describes as the *face*. The face is not any particular individual, but the very essence of the other human, prior to any cultural coding:

ordinarily one is a 'character': a professor at the Sorbonne, a Supreme Court Justice, son of so-and-so, everything that is in one's passport, the manner of dressing, of presenting oneself. And all signification in the usual sense of the term is relative to such a context … here, to the contrary, the face is meaning all by itself. (Levinas 1985: 86)

What this means is that our ethical responsibility cannot be tempered by the social construction of identity/difference, for the 'face is a bareness without any cultural adornment' (Levinas 1996: 53). For Levinas, 'whatever countenance it may put on, whether this face belongs to an important person, titled, or in appearance simpler. This face is the same, exposed in its nakedness' (1999: 104).

The second point is that our responsibility is not based upon physical presence, and thus is not subject to 'distance decay'. Instead, the ethical relationship to the other is constituted by what Levinas calls *proximity*. This is not a matter of Euclidean distance: 'the relation of proximity does not amount to any modality of distance or geometrical contiguity' (Levinas

1996: 81). Rather, proximity is the way that Levinas figures the immediacy of the other. 'In humanity', he writes, 'from one individual to another, there is established a *proximity* that does not take its meaning from the spatial metaphor ... it is myself *for* the other' (1994: 124).

In sum, then, an ethical responsibility inspired by the philosophy of Levinas would be unconditional and infinite, demanded by the face of the other in a relationship of proximity as a fundamental feature of our subjectivity. Theorizing subjectivity-as-responsibility in this manner allows us to recast the question of ethics: not as a duty to be fulfilled according to the dictates of universal principles, nor even as an obligation arising out of the relational nature of socio-cultural difference; but as an originary responsibility that, within the infrastructure of modernity, has somehow become elided. This would lead ethics away from a search for ever more certain codes and rules, and instead toward a dislocation of the discourses of modernity, to open a space in which we can live up to our unconditional responsibility to the other. This leads us to the question of politics.

Rethinking politics: Derrida, deconstruction and the law

The provocation of Levinas is primarily philosophical. His project was aimed at breaking down the modern metaphysics through which the autonomous self has traditionally been theorized. Although I believe that his relational ontology is a crucial first step for thinking through a postmodern ethics, it is by itself insufficient as a theory of ethical and political engagement. Indeed, although Levinas was deeply concerned about issues of social injustice, he was at times forced to admit that

his philosophical vision provided no easy guide to political action (e.g. Levinas and Kearney 1986: 29–30). I believe, however, that it is possible to weld Levinas' notion of responsibility-for-the-other to an anti-essentialist political theory, in order to suggest an ethics that moves away from modernist notions of universal rights.

Recall Zygmunt Bauman's description of modern ethics as 'a code of behaviour which every sound-minded person would have ... no choice but to obey' (Bauman and Tester 2001: 93). Although such codes have undoubtedly served a useful purpose, and indeed have helped to limit certain forms of violence in concrete circumstances, the problem is that these guarantees can also become a means of evading our fundamental obligation to the face of the other. And this is because under the dictates of universal codes, the other does not approach me as an unconditional responsibility, but rather as an autonomous individual, whose moral standing derives from his status as the bearer of an abstract set of rights. As Wingenbach puts it:

the systematic and legal reduction of the other to the same for political purposes helps to create conditions under which the face of the other can be obscured, transcendence hidden, and ethics ignored. It reduces the human to the object, opening space for human beings to be treated as objects rather than as unique subjects. (1999: 223)

This would suggest that the pursuit of a relational ethics also requires putting into question the political and legal infrastructure of modernity, indeed in articulating a new conception of the political. Here I want to turn to the work of Jacques Derrida, and in particular to how we might draw upon deconstruction as a way to bring our ethical responsibility to the fore.

Put simply, deconstruction can be viewed as a practice that seeks to destabilize the grounds of authority for concepts, categories or discourses, by exposing their inherent instability. Derrida argues that such 'grounding' implies a certain kind of violence, which creates an illusion of certainty or objectivity, or what he has called a 'metaphysics of presence'. The apparent certainty or objectivity of any order, however, is highly dependent upon its context. As Derrida puts it:

What is called 'objectivity' ... imposes itself only within a context which is extremely vast, old, powerfully established, stabilized or rooted in a network of conventions ... One of the definitions of what is called deconstruction would be the effort to take this limitless context into account, to pay the sharpest and broadest attention possible to context, and thus to an incessant movement of recontextualization. (1988: 136)

Deconstruction, in other words, is an attempt to expose the inherent instability of any foundation or norm, to highlight the 'impossibility for a principle of grounding to ground itself' and hence to disclose 'the silence walled up in the violence of the founding act' (Derrida quoted in Campbell 1998: 29; Derrida 1990: 943).

The important thing for this discussion is that for Derrida, the Law participates in such a grounding, and for this reason, Law can be seen as a form of violence that is inherently deconstructible:

since the origin of authority, the foundation or ground, the position of the law can't by definition rest on anything but themselves, they are themselves a violence without ground ... The structure I am describing here is a structure in which law is essentially deconstructible ... because its ultimate foundation is by definition unfounded. (Derrida 1990: 943)

This is perhaps where I part company with much of the current work on geography and ethics, for most commentators pull back from the radical implications of a deconstructive ethos. Thus, Stuart Corbridge has written that he is 'not willing to deconstruct certain minimally universalist claims' (1994: 110) and Sayer and Storper (1997: 9) have argued that 'postmodern relativism undermines calls for an extension of an ethic of care to our others, for relativism denies the existence of any universal grounds for caring about them; relativists need only worry about themselves'.

But if these 'universal grounds' are a form of violence, then deconstruction would do just the opposite: it would reactivate an obligation *to the other*, and it would force us to take our responsibility seriously, to take action and make decisions *without* the assurance of a grounding for ethics or politics. To argue against universal principles is thus not an invitation to political impotence; it is to acknowledge, as Horkheimer and Adorno did more than half a century ago, that 'Enlightenment is as totalitarian as any system ... [because] for enlightenment the process is always decided from the start' (Horkheimer and Adorno 1994: 24). Or, as Derrida puts it:

I will even venture to say that ethics, politics, and responsibility, *if there are any*, will only ever have begun with the experience of aporia. When the path is clear and given, when a certain knowledge opens up the way in advance, the decision is already made, it might as well be said there is none to make: irresponsibly, and in good conscience, one simply applies or implements a program ... it makes of ethics and politics a technology. (1992: 41, 43, emphasis in original)

A politics and praxis of deconstruction would highlight the ways in which decision-making can become mere technology, thus maintaining

a constant vigilance against the violence of closure.

It is in this sense that Derrida (1996: 85) has referred to deconstruction as a 'hyper-politicization'. Deconstruction participates in a form of relativism whose ethical importance lies in proliferating the sites of political negotiation, and thus in multiplying the potential sources for social change. Deprived of the certainty of codes, rules or law, we are encumbered with a responsibility to intervene politically, to analyse, to compare and judge, and ultimately to make decisions without the assurance of a predetermined outcome. As Derrida argues (1990: 953), 'what is currently called deconstruction would not correspond … to a quasi nihilistic abdication before the ethico-politico-juridical question of justice and before the opposition between just and unjust … but rather to … a sense of responsibility without limits'.

As I have described in more detail elsewhere (Popke 2003), these arguments have important implications for the practice of geography, and the ways in which we conceptualize the relationship between ethics and space. But they also, I believe, have implications that move beyond the level of philosophical argument, or the modern–postmodern debate. They impact the ways in which we conceptualize political agency and social change, and the interpretive strategies that we use to make sense of the material geographies of transformation. In what follows, then, I want to provide a concrete illustration of one such site of transformation, namely the Zapatista uprising in southern Mexico, to suggest some of the ways that this particular social movement has sought to articulate the kind of ethical responsibility that I have attempted to outline here.

¡Ya Basta! Ethics and politics in the Zapatista movement

On 1 January 1994, the Mexican people first heard the call of ¡Ya Basta! echoing from the mountains of Chiapas state, as 'thousands of indigenous armed with truth and fire, with shame and dignity, shook the country awake from its sweet dream of modernity' (Marcos 2001c). In the years since, the Zapatistas (or EZLN) have produced a series of writings challenging the ways in which the indigenous populations of southern Mexico have become the 'Other' within Mexico's neo-liberal model of development.[1] These writings have brought world attention to the plight of Mexico's poor, and in this way have functioned as a discursive intervention, challenging the meanings of identity, community and democracy within Mexico's hybrid modernity (Bonfil Batalla 1996; Katzenberger 1995).

There is of course more to the Zapatista uprising than their writings. The events of the past ten years have arisen out of a specific set of political events (Higgins 2000; Ross 2000), which have themselves been conditioned by the complex culture, history and political economy of southern Mexico (Barry 1995; Collier with Quaratiello 1999; Harvey 1998; Womack 1999). The motivations for the Chiapas uprising are not merely philosophical; the Zapatistas are seeking concrete changes to Mexico's political and legal infrastructure, in order to redress a long history of violence and exploitation suffered by the country's indigenous peoples. In articulating their demands, however, the Zapatista movement has also sought to project an alternative conception of politics and responsibility, one which breaks from the modernist obsession with legal codes and rights. As Marcos has put it (2001a), 'we walk at the verge of messianism as well as of political realism, something extremely difficult for us'.

Although it is undoubtedly important to assess, and support, the reform process in the domain of 'political realism', I want to focus my attention here on the messianic tenor of Zapatista discourse, on what Huntington (2000) has called their 'politics of poetic resistance' (see also Evans 1999; Higgins 2000). I do so because the discursive intervention of Zapatismo represents, in its aims, strategies and composition, a challenge to modern ethical ideals in a manner consistent with what I have argued thus far: first, they articulate a form of ethical subjectivity that transcends both cultural difference and borders; and second, they argue for an alternative conception of politics, in which the future is open to construction in the absence of certainty.

This ethical discourse is important in part because it has produced effects that resonate far beyond the immediate context of southern Mexico. The Zapatistas are 'awakening, moving and stimulating the creative imagination of many others, who are already involved in similar concerns and struggles but often found themselves at a dead end' (Esteva and Prakash 1998: 36). In this sense, I believe that the writings of Marcos and the EZLN are more than simply interventions in a regional struggle over indigenous rights and autonomy. They also both reflect and contribute to, through their broader engagement with global society, the development of a new conception of social and cultural agency, within which a different form of ethics and politics is at stake (Couch 2001; Stahler-Sholk 2001).

Deconstructing neo-liberalism: the impossibility of modernity

One of the key elements of Zapatista discourse is a critique of the prevailing neo-liberal world order. Many of these writings have been penned in the voice of Don Durito, a beetle modelled on the persona of Don Quixote, who provides Marcos with expert analyses of the trajectories and contradictions of neo-liberalism. For Durito, the defining feature of neo-liberalism is that it lacks any coherence, that it is a project fundamentally defined by chaos: 'Neoliberalism is the chaotic theory of economic chaos, the stupid exaltation of social stupidity, and the catastrophic political management of catastrophe' (Marcos 1995c). Elsewhere, Durito comments that:

Neoliberalism is not a theory to confront or explain the crisis. It is the crisis itself made theory and economic doctrine! That is, 'neoliberalism' hasn't the least coherence; it has no plans nor intrinsic perspective. In the end, pure theoretical shit. (Marcos 1995a)

Writings such as this have served to disrupt what Walter Benjamin (1983–84) once described as the 'catastrophic myth of progress', which has served as the national imaginary governing Mexico's entry into industrial modernity (Hilbert 1997). Indeed, by calling attention to the incoherence of neo-liberalism, the Zapatistas have challenged the certainty of Mexico's development, highlighting the ways in which neo-liberal modernity is *impossible* (Rabasa 1997: 402). In this way, the Zapatistas aim self-consciously to move beyond the political narrative of the twentieth century: 'This should be the century of differences, and not only nations can be built upon them, but also realities, the world … When we say [this], we set a breaking point with respect to the twentieth century' (Marcos 2001a). In a sense, these writings participate in a deconstruction of Mexican society, disrupting the 'sweet dream of modernity' and opening a space within which it may be possible to reassert a relational ethics.

Recall that for Levinas, our ethical responsibility is an unconditional affirmation, a demand that we account for a fundamental responsibility that we have for the very position of the other: 'my being-in-the-world or my "place in the sun", my home—have they not been a usurpation of places which belong to others already oppressed or starved by me, expelled by me into a third world: a repelling, an exclusion, an exile, a spoliation, a killing' (1998: 144). In Mexico, this would signal a responsibility to recognize how the excluded spaces and exiled indigenous populations of southern Mexico have served as support and condition of possibility for the position of Mexico's political and economic elite, and for the country's 'place in the sun' on the international stage. As Marcos puts it (2001e: 83), 'today, the thick mantle with which they try to cover their crime is called neoliberalism, and it represents death and misery for the original people of color of these lands'.

Until now, the Mexican nation has denied any such responsibility, refusing to acknowledge the forms of interaction and connection within and between Mexico's peoples and regions. In a sense then, Mexico's poor have been denied the possibility of being political agents. Thus, says Marcos (1998), they feel a sense of resignation: 'the resignation that assumes the inevitability of injustice and the role of victim while the murderer erases his face, becoming real in the boss, the police, the man, the mestizo, the thief, the neighbor, the other-always-the-other'. One of the goals of the EZLN's writings, then, would be to highlight this injustice, and in so doing, to call our attention to the faceless victims of Mexico's development, repositioning them as ethical subjects.

The mask and the face: reasserting the ethical relation

That Marcos describes these victims as 'faceless' is I think important for, as I have suggested, the 'erasure of the face' is one of the problems with the categorical imperatives of law-based ethics. For Levinas, by contrast, 'the proximity of the other is the signifying of the face. A signifying that is immediately from beyond the plastic forms that keep covering it up like a mask' (1999: 23). In signifying their plight, the Zapatistas have *donned* masks, precisely in order to highlight the ethical responsibility abdicated by the Mexican nation. As the Zapatistas write, 'the mountain told us to take up arms so we would have a voice. It told us to cover our faces so we could have a face. It told us to forget our names so we could be named' (The Zapatistas 1998: 22); elsewhere, Marcos has said that 'we cover our faces in order to show the world the true face of … Mexico' (Marcos 2001h).

The mask worn by the Zapatistas is thus more than simply a device to avoid being identified. It symbolizes the anonymity of Mexico's nameless and faceless indigenous people, and hence serves as a critique of the way in which modernity has denied them a subject position within the Mexican nation. It is a critique of the fact that 'in modern society proximity has been so deeply covered as to have been almost lost, resulting in a society where the face of the other is indistinguishable' (Wingenbach 1999: 231). Part of the Zapatista mission is to recover this face, to reclaim their status as subjects and citizens. As Marcos writes, 'brothers and sisters: that voice [of dignity] gives us a name. No longer are we the unmentionables. We the forgotten have a name … Now that we have a name, we hope that tomorrow, brothers and sisters, you will give us a face' (2001d: 81–82). This 'giving of

face' can be viewed as a way of re-establishing a form of ethical engagement, of insisting that we open ourselves to the presence of the other. 'This nation', Marcos has said, 'must acknowledge that it is not made up of equals, but of others' (quoted in Navarro 1998: 162–163).

At the same time, the Zapatistas have refused to define their 'otherness' in terms of specific cultural difference. Difference, in their discourse, is that which we all have in common, and their conception of social and cultural autonomy is a critique of a world in which some differences are made to matter more than others. As Marcos has put it (2001f: 161):

There are indigenous, there are workers, there are women, there are homosexuals, there are lesbians, there are students, there are young people … If we look at what they all have in common, we will see that they have nothing in common, that they are all 'different'. They are 'others' … Power has armies and police, to force those who are 'other' and 'different' to be the same, identical.

It is in this sense that John Holloway (1998: 168, 170) has argued that the Zapatistas' attempt to reclaim their dignity represents a 'revolution [that] is essentially anti-definitional … [a revolt] against separations, classifications, definitions, the assertion of unities that have been denied out of existence'. Instead, Marcos is reconfiguring Mexican notions of community, citizenship and nation, by fostering principles of openness and inclusivity, and by establishing an ethical web of interconnections between the faces of the Zapatista subjects and their others:

Behind our black mask,
behind our armed voice,
behind our unnameable name,

behind what you see of us,
behind this, we are you. (The Zapatistas 1998: 24)

Many Mexicans would seem to agree. When in 1995 the government 'unmasked' the Subcomandante as one Rafael Guillen, a former philosophy lecturer and son of a furniture salesman, thousands of masked demonstrators took to the streets to refuse that singular identity (Taussig 1999). '*Todos somos Marcos*', they chanted: 'we are all Marcos'.

The politics of proximity: transcending boundaries and distance

The discourse of Zapatismo has not only challenged modern Mexico's notion of the political subject, but also its political boundaries. The Zapatistas are well known for extending their struggle beyond Mexico through, for example, the staging of a series of international *encuentros* (encounters) and their use of the Internet in disseminating their message (Cleaver 1998; Couch 2001; Froehling 1997; Martinez-Torres 2001). 'Zapatismo', Marcos has suggested, is 'something so open and flexible that it really occurs in all places' (Marcos, cited in Couch 2001: 244). In this sense, the message of Zapatismo serves to articulate a new form of mobile political action, a movement that transcends traditional borders, and re-establishes a form of spatial ethics.

In the first instance, the Zapatistas explicitly situate their struggle in the context of globalization—both of neo-liberal political-economic policies and the social movements which are confronting them:

Clearly there exist at least two things greater than borders: one is the crime disguised as modernity, which distributes misery on a world scale; the other is the hope that shame exists only when one fumbles a dance step and not every time we look in the mirror. To end the first and to make the second one

flourish, we need only to struggle to be better. (Marcos 2001j: 309)

More important than identifying the global scale of modernity's 'misery' however, is the recognition that we need a new political ethic capable of transcending distance. In a 1995 letter to writer John Berger, Marcos highlights the ways in which modern forms of ethical responsibility can be diminished by distance. Discussing a newspaper photograph of Alvaro, a dead Zapatista soldier, he remarks:

Alvaro's photo can also 'be read' as a distance, seen as a vehicle that serves to create more space in order to stay on the other side of the photo, like 'reading' it in a newspaper in another part of the world. 'This did not happen here', is the reader's take of the photo. 'That is Chiapas, Mexico, it's a historical accident that can be fixed, can be forgotten … is far away'. (2001g: 263)

By contrast, the Zapatista movement has tried to work across boundaries and distance, linking their struggles with others that, while physically distant, are clearly resonant with Zapatista aims (Holloway 1998). If the humanness articulated by the Zapatistas is concerned to give a face to the faceless, it is clearly also about overcoming the distance decay of our moral imperatives. I think we can view this as a way of conjuring a form of proximity, in the Levinasian sense, as a responsibility to alterity that is beyond boundaries.

For Levinas,

the face *enters* our world from an absolutely foreign sphere, that is, precisely from an ab-solute, which in fact is the very name for ultimate strangeness. The signifyingness of a face in its abstractness is in the literal sense of the term extra-ordinary, outside of every order, every world. (1996: 53)

I would read the political morality of the Zapatista struggle as also 'outside of any order or world'. That is to say, the EZLN is not fighting only for a certain group of people, living within a particular territory, but instead for a new way of being a political subject, a 'nation without nationality': 'dignity is that nation without nationality, that rainbow that is also a bridge, that murmur of the heart no matter what blood lives it, that rebel irreverence that mocks borders, customs and wars' (The Zapatistas 1998: 13). This collective political irreverence can be viewed as a new form of political movement that Marcos has described as an echo:

an echo that breaks barriers and reechoes. An echo of small magnitude, the local and particular, reverberating in the echo of great magnitude, the intercontinental and galactic. The echo that recognizes the existence of the other and does not overpower or attempt to silence it. The echo that takes its place and speaks its own voice yet speaks the voice of the other. The echo that reproduces its own sound yet opens itself to the sound of the other. (The Zapatistas 1998: 47–48)

The tree of tomorrow: politics in the absence of certainty

Importantly, the echo of the other cannot reverberate within the violent grounds of a new Law. It can only be heard if we recognize that there are no guarantees, that proximity is a relationship of openness, of alterity. As Levinas has put it, '[it is] a relation with an alterity, irreducible to a common genus where, already in a logical community, it would only have a relative alterity. Peace independent, then, of any belonging to a system, irreducible to a totality and refractory to synthesis' (1996: 165). In articulating their demands for a future Mexico, the Zapatistas have self-consciously

avoided the projection of a new 'system' or 'synthesis' (De Angelis 2000; Gallaher and Froehling 2002; Holloway 1998; Jeffries 2001). Their goal has never been one of taking power over the state, but instead of transforming the very nature of the state so that a form of democratic politics might become possible: 'this is not about the taking of Power or the imposition ... of a new social system ... we are not proposing an orthodox revolution, but something even more difficult: a revolution which will make a revolution possible' (Marcos 1995b).

In this way, the Zapatistas have focused their attention more on opening a political process than on reaching any set goals. This processes is one of dialogue and engagement, the outcome of which is ambiguous. As John Holloway (1998: 187) has put it, 'openness and uncertainty are built in to the Zapatista concept of revolution'. This lack of certainty, far from being politically paralysing, is posed as a new form of optimism, one in which the possibilities of political engagement and transformation are dramatically multiplied. As Marcos has put it, 'it is hope which obliges ... [us] to seek new forms of struggle, new ways of being political, of doing politics. A new politics, a new political ethics is not just a wish, it is the only way to advance' (quoted in Holloway and Peláez 1998: 10–11).

In this sense, the vision of the EZLN embodies a deconstructionist ethos, one that recognizes the always open and negotiable nature of politics, 'where foundations or norms or universal prescriptions only exist to be put into question as a permanent feature of the process of democratization' (Slater 1997: 69). Derrida has described this kind of political sensibility as *la démocratie à venir* (democracy to come)—a democracy that can never be fully actualized in the present, but must remain always deferred, prompting in us a vigilance to act upon an impossible responsibility awakened in the face of the other. Gustavo Esteva (1999: 174) has described the Zapatistas in similar terms, suggesting that 'instead of illusory futures, alienated to bankrupt ideologies, the Zapatistas suggest the construction of a future to be (*a porvenir*), defined by the people, by ordinary men and women, in their pluralism and diversity'. Drawing on a Mayan parable, Marcos has described this future space as the tree of tomorrow:

in that tree of tomorrow, a space where everyone is, where the other knows and respects the other others, and where the false light loses its last battle. If I were pressed to be precise, I would tell you that it is a place with democracy, liberty and justice: that is the tree of tomorrow. (Marcos 2001i: 282)

Conclusion: the echo of the other

Taken together, the writings of Subcomandante Marcos and the EZLN have articulated more than simply a set of political demands or proposals; they also suggest new ways of thinking about subjects, politics and the space of democracy. 'We are so radical', Marcos has said, 'that we do not fit in the parameters of "modern political science" ... is there anything more radical than to propose to change the world?' (quoted in Jeffries 2001: 133). Such sentiments undoubtedly embody a certain utopianism. But they are no more utopian than the modernist political ethos that is their target, and its faith in universal norms and codes. The Zapatistas are projecting a utopian spirit of hope, rather than certainty, by promoting an opening of the political in which the future is still to be made, underpinned by an ethical imaginary that would re-establish a relationship of responsibility toward different and distant others.

I would read this optimism as one small component of a larger social, cultural and

philosophical movement that is questioning the infrastructure of modernity, and seeking to promulgate a new kind of citizenship, one that Derrida has located at the intersection of geography and ethics:

from the heart of Nazi Europe to the former Yugoslavia, from Zaire all the way to California, from the Church of St. Bernard to the thirteenth arrondissement in Paris, Cambodians, Armenians, Palestinians, Algerians, and so many others call for a change in the socio- and geo-political space—a juridico-political mutation, though, before this, assuming this limit still has any pertinence, an ethical conversion. (Derrida 1999: 71)

A double injunction, then, at once political and ethical.

The first challenge is to bring about a 'mutation' that would alter the ways in which we understand the Law, politics and space. I have tried to suggest that this requires a deconstructive ethos, capable of opening new sites of political negotiation, and thereby activating our sense of responsibility. As Derrida puts it, 'each time a responsibility (ethical or political) has to be taken, one must pass … by way of a sort of experience of the impossible … an imperative injunction to which one must finally respond *without norm*' (1995: 359, 362). But still, we must respond:

in a singular way, in the speech and the responsibility *taken* by each person, in each situation, and on the basis of an analysis that is each time unique… [Otherwise] we could simply unfold knowledge into a program or course of action. Nothing could make us more irresponsible; nothing could be more totalitarian. (Derrida 1999: 115, 117)

Our ability to engage this responsibility, however, depends upon the parallel injunction of an 'ethical conversion'. Such a conversion would foster and cultivate new forms of subjectivity, which would acknowledge the ways in which our social, cultural and political identities are held hostage to the call of the face of the distant other, and established a relation of proximity: 'the proximity of the neighbor—the peace of proximity—is the responsibility of the ego for an other … proximity as the impossible assumption of difference, impossible definition, impossible integration' (Levinas 1996: 166–167). Perhaps then, rather than focusing our attention on the imperfect certainties of modernity, it is precisely these *impossibilities* that we must attend to. As Derrida has written, 'democracy, for me, is the political experience of the impossible, the political experience of opening to the other as possibility of impossibility' (1993: 227). As the Zapatistas so eloquently and insistently remind us, it is only by listening to the echoes of the face of the other that can we leave the ruins of an impossible modernity behind, and foster the creation of worlds where our encounters live up to our unconditional and infinite responsibility.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1 The essays and communiqués of Subcomandante Marcos and the Zapatistas have been disseminated in a wide variety of forms and through a range of media. English translations of some can be found in several edited volumes (Marcos 2001b; Marcos and the EZLN 1994, 1995; The Zapatistas 1998). In addition, numerous Internet websites contain material by and about the Zapatistas, although the titles and translations of their writings vary considerably between sites. A comprehensive guide to web resources can be found at Harry

Cleaver's 'Guide to the Zapatistas in Cyberspace' at: http://www.eco.utexas.edu:80/Homepages/Faculty/ Cleaver/zapsincyber.html. The most comprehensive collection of Marcos' writings that I am aware of is located at the website of the Irish Mexico Group at: http://flag.blackened.net/revolt/mexico/marcos_index.html. When referring to Zapatista writings unavailable in any of the edited collections, I have cited these pages.

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Abstract translations

Le visage de l'autre: Zapatismo, la responsabilité et les questions éthiques de la déconstruction

Des travaux publiés récemment soulignent l'importance des questions morales et éthiques à se poser lors de recherches en géographie sur l'espace et le lieu. Plusieurs d'entre eux sont formulés dans un esprit moderniste inspiré de conceptions universelles de la subjectivité et des droits légaux. Ces travaux tentent de reposer les fondations normatives de la conduite éthique sur une base solide. Dans cet article, je vais m'appuyer sur la théorie poststructuraliste pour élaborer une approche alternative aux questions éthiques de la spatialité. À l'instar des travaux menés par Emmanuel Levinas, je trace les grandes lignes d'une théorie de la subjectivité qui permettrait d'envisager nos rapports aux gens lointains sous forme d'une responsabilité inconditionnelle. Je suggère que notre capacité d'assumer cette responsabilité dépend d'une éthique déconstructiviste qui, en tenant compte de l'impossibilité de reposer la conduite éthique sur une base solide, ouvre l'horizon de l'engagement politique. Dans la seconde partie de cet article, je donne un sens au mouvement Zapatiste mexicain qui sert d'exemple à ce type d'éthique. À partir d'une évaluation des écrits du sous commandant Marcos, je soutiens que les Zapatistes ont exprimé une nouvelle formule d'engagement éthique et politique au service d'une cause qui transcende les frontières spatiale et identitaire en évoquant la notion de la responsabilité inconditionnelle.

Mots-clefs: questions éthiques, déconstruction, Levinas, Derrida, Zapatistes, sous commandant Marcos.

La cara del otro: el Zapatismo, responsabilidad y la ética de deconstrucción

Recientes estudios han destacado la importancia de cuestiones morales y éticas en las investigaciones de espacio y lugar en la geografía. Mucho de este trabajo ha sido expresado dentro de un marco modernista, haciendo uso de concepciones universalistas de subjetividad y derechos legales para tratar de cimentar las fundaciones normativas de conducta ética. En este papel hago uso de teoría pos-estructuralista para elaborar un enfoque alternativo de la ética de espacio. Refiriéndome al trabajo de Emmanuel Lavinas, trazo una teoría de subjetividad en la que nuestra relación con seres lejanos sería interpretada como una forma de responsabilidad incondicional. Sugiero que nuestra capacidad de cumplir con esta responsabilidad depende de una ética deconstruccionista que, al reconocer la imposibilidad de cimentar la conducta ética, extiende el horizonte de compromiso político. En la segunda parte del papel sugiero que el movimiento zapatista de México es un ejemplo de esta ética. Por un estudio de la literatura de Subcomandante Marcos, sugiero que los Zapatistas han articulado una nueva forma de compromiso ética y política, la cual trasciende las fronteras de espacio e identidad e invoca una responsabilidad incondicional.

Palabras claves: ética, deconstrucción, Levinas, Derrida, Zapatistas, Subcomandante Marcos.