

What the Zapatistas Can Teach us About the Climate Crisis

Written by Jeff Conant

Wednesday, 11 August 2010 12:17



Source: [Foreign Policy in Focus](#)

With their 1994 battle cry, “*Ya basta!*” (“Enough already!”) Mexico’s Zapatista uprising became the spearhead of two convergent movements: Mexico’s movement for indigenous rights and the international movement against corporate globalization.

Skip to 2010: the movements for indigenous rights and against corporate globalization have converged again, this time globally, in the climate justice movement. Following the widely acknowledged failure of the climate negotiations in Copenhagen last December, the greatest manifestation of these converging movements took place this past April at the World People's Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth in Cochabamba, Bolivia.

While political forces have conspired to make the Zapatistas largely invisible both inside Mexico and internationally, their challenge has always been to propose a paradigm of development that is both just and self-sustaining. It seems fair, then, to see if *Zapatismo* can shed any light on the muddle of politics around the climate crisis. Can the poetic riddles of Zapatista spokesperson Subcomandante Marcos serve as signposts on the rough road toward just climate solutions?

One No and Many Yeses

Soon after the Zapatistas appeared to the world in 1994 as an armed insurgency, they put down their weapons and revealed that alongside their “One NO” — the rejection of imposed authority, whether by the Mexican government or by the global institutions that govern trade, investment, development and security policy — they stood for “Many Yeses.” Yes, for the Zapatistas, signified the careful, conscious, and painstaking development of alternative forms of governance and resource use: multilingual schools, community clinics, seed banks, sustainable agriculture, accessible and affordable water and basic sanitation, and, above all, organized experiments in direct democracy.

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When 30,000 members of civil society from 140 countries, including 56 government delegations, gathered in Cochabamba in April, they asserted clearly and forcefully that the climate crisis, with its attendant impacts of drought, flood, crop loss, increased disease burden, displacement, and widespread instability, has one essential root cause. In the words of the People's Agreement forged in Cochabamba, "The corporations and governments of the so-called 'developed' countries, in complicity with a segment of the scientific community, have led us to discuss climate change as a problem limited to the rise in temperature without questioning the cause, which is the capitalist system."

Whatever climate solutions we consider, the Southern social movements say, they must be rooted in the acceptance of social and ecological limits to growth. Recognition of such limits is what the Zapatistas would call "the No."

The many "yeses," meanwhile, come in the form of the best demands of the climate justice movement: strengthening local economies, practicing ecological agriculture and rights-based governance; drastically reducing consumption and waste by Northern countries and Southern elites in order to improve quality of life for the billions of marginalized and exploited; protecting forests, biodiversity, culture, and those among us who are most vulnerable; investing in and attending to women, youth, and those who've earned the right to be called "elders." The many yeses, for climate justice, are the manifold paths toward mitigation and adaptation, equity and justice. The "yeses" are embodied in a notion that has recently gained currency in development circles: grassroots resilience.

Justice with Dignity

Implicit in the surging forth of the indigenous people is their demand to be approached with the respect due to all human subjects. As Subcomandante Marcos wrote over a decade ago, "The powerful with all their money don't understand our struggle. The power of money and pride cannot understand, because there is a word which does not walk in the understanding of the great sages who sell their intelligence to the rich and the powerful. This word is dignity."

Dignity, it turns out, is central to the climate negotiations. "Development," with its implicit assumption that the health of a society is best measured by its level of consumption, comes, precisely, at the cost of human dignity. Southern climate campaigners make clear that the North, burdened by overconsumption to the point of obesity, needs to reduce consumption, while much of the South, in the face of perennial scarcity, needs to increase it. Sara Larrain, director of an NGO called Chile Sustentable, [writes](#), "The objective of human dignity

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surpasses the objective of overcoming poverty, and refers to the negotiation of environmental space and social equity between the North and South.”

The "Line of Dignity" that Larrain formulated, in concert with groups from Brazil, Uruguay and Chile, is essentially a proposal to replace the poverty line — an austere and denigrating economic metric based on only the most fundamental human survival needs — with a measure that takes into account cultural, political, and environmental rights. “The Line of Dignity,” Larrain writes, “is a convergence point that fosters lowering the consumption of those above, and raising that of those below. This permits the assurance to the population of the levels of access to environmental space necessary for subsistence and dignity.”

The Line of Dignity proposes that equity between North and South can only be reached when the Northern notion of environmental sustainability (preservation of resources for planetary needs and future generations) is matched with the Southern demand for social sustainability (equity, and full social, environmental, political and cultural rights). Thus, in order to raise the standard of living of the billions who currently live below the line of dignity, a certain measure of environmental space (carbon sinks, fisheries, and open grazing land, for example) must be surrendered by the North. The wealthy must reduce their use of resources. They must commit to degrowth.

Rather than manage the climate catastrophe, as the neoliberal establishment is attempting to do, the climate justice movement chooses to use the crisis as an opportunity — perhaps the last opportunity — to construct dignity.

Everything for Everyone, Nothing for Us

Probably the most commonly asked question of people just arriving at a deep concern for the ecological crisis is, “What can I, as an individual, do to make things better?” The simple answer, which I learned from living among Zapatista villagers, is *nothing*. Because we have to stop acting as individuals if we are to survive; the Earth won't be affected by our individual actions, only our collective impact.

The Zapatistas' slogan, "*Para todos todo, para nosotros nada*" ("Everything for Everyone, Nothing for Us") rang true in the mid-1990s and still rings true today. But this slogan has a certain mystery. The demand “nothing for us” runs so counter to anything any of

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— the resource-hungry individuals of the so-called First World — would ever think of demanding. As the saying goes, no one ever rioted for austerity. Yet, without feeling cheated, we need to build our capacity to live by another old saying: Enough is better than a feast.

The proposals of Bolivia's President Evo Morales for a Climate Debt Tribunal and a Universal Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth put equity and ecology (as opposed to, say, technical fixes or market-based solutions) at the center of climate negotiations. Such proposals are, at bottom, radical expressions of an ethic that demands everything for everyone, nothing for us. Such proposals also require a radical rethinking of what "development" means. Inspired by the Andean notion of *"el buen vivir"* — living well, as opposed to living better — the emerging climate justice movement posits that, this close to the brink of ecological collapse, development and progress should be understood not in terms of accumulation, but in terms of sharing.

A World in Which Many Worlds Fit

The Mexican establishment perceives the Zapatista project as a threat to the very integrity of the nation-state. This threat lies in the Zapatistas' demand for the formal recognition, within state boundaries, of diverse ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and religious groups. In the Andean region, and in Bolivia in particular, this is called (in its cultural dimension) pluriculturalism, or (in its political dimension), plurinationality — a nation in which fit many nations. The notion of pluriculturalism differs significantly from the U.S. concept of "multiculturalism," for it goes beyond multicultural education to include respect for collective claims to territory and for collective rights.

The world is in the middle of the greatest mass extinction since the twilight of the dinosaurs. Half of all species on Earth are expected to vanish within 100 years. The major ecosystems (including the Amazon), the world's freshwater systems, and the coral reefs are all approaching a "tipping point" from which they may never recover. As such, scientists and social movements tend to agree: Diversity as a basis for decision-making is at the heart of both ecological and cultural survival. The Zapatista push for "A World in Which Many Worlds Fit," much more than a call for mere "tolerance," is a clear recognition that what science has recently come to call "biocultural diversity" is a bottom line.

Rather than seeking to divide resources to serve an atomized multitude, the climate justice movement envisions multiplying resources to serve the common good. For peasants and

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indigenous peoples, by and large, this means merging age-old traditions and systems of ownership and authority with the modern practices that complement, foster, and enhance them. In other words, a just transition to a post-carbon world requires precisely the kinds of strategies that have sustained land-based peoples for millennia, accompanied by the best sustainable technologies current science has to offer: organic subsistence agriculture plus fair trade; seed sovereignty ensured by genetic testing of seed stocks; locally produced electricity via wind, solar, and biogas; collective (public) transportation powered by waste oil; zero waste practices and small-scale, clean production; and local water stewardship enhanced by low-cost water treatment. To respond to a crisis with diverse, local manifestations in a way that achieves a world in which many worlds fit demands diverse, local, people-powered solutions.

The Earth Is for They Who Work It

The Zapatistas' struggle has been, above all else, for territory. They want the simple right to work the land that they consider historically to be theirs. In this, their struggle has many parallels throughout the indigenous world.

While fighting for the Earth, the Zapatistas have never identified themselves, even incidentally, as "environmentalists." Nor do they talk much, in their voluminous decade-and-a-half of communiqués, about "ecology" or "conservation." And yet, as poet Gary Snyder once said, "The best thing you can do for the environment is to stay home." As indigenous peasant farmers struggling for territorial autonomy, the Zapatistas' struggle is precisely to "stay home."

One of the controversial topics in the UN climate negotiations, hotly contested in Cochabamba and denounced outright by many segments of the climate justice movement, is the program called Reduction of Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation (REDD). REDD seeks to reward governments, companies, or forest owners in the South for keeping their forests standing, to act as carbon sinks, instead of cutting them down. Liberal NGOs tend to support the essentially corporate REDD program because it provides a mechanism for protecting forests. But this mechanism also provides polluting industries with the right to continue polluting. In addition, REDD's version of "forest protection" may well be one of the largest land grabs in history.

Tom Goldtooth, director of the U.S.-based Indigenous Environmental Network, calls REDD "a corruption of the sacred." Forests, especially for those who live in them, are not mere carbon

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sinks. “Lungs of the Earth” or not, they are forests first. The Earth, as Emiliano Zapata urged, is for its true stewards. Yes, urges the climate justice movement, keep forests standing — and pay to do so if necessary. But rather than putting distant economic interests in charge of forests in order to save them, as REDD proposes, why not encourage the kind of valuation that land-based peoples have always practiced? We should reduce the pressures on forests by keeping out those who don’t directly steward them — *that is, most of us.*

In denouncing REDD and other carbon offset schemes, climate justice activists argue that the market can’t resolve a crisis of its own making. The Stern Review on the Economics of Climate Change, released in Britain in 2006, described climate change as “the biggest market failure in history.” Yet, at the same time, carbon markets became the only solution advocated by governments and the corporations and NGOs close to them. When the European carbon market [failed](#), with the price of a ton of carbon dropping dramatically below the range at which renewables can compete with fossil fuels), there was barely a whisper. The Obama administration continued to push for cap-and-trade, the UNFCCC continued to press for REDD and other offsets, and the atmosphere continued to be for those who wanted to pay to pollute it.

Walk by Asking Questions

In many of his communiqués, Subcomandante Marcos uses stories of the old gods, those who were there before the world was the world, to show how the struggle to reinvent society is linked to the moment of creation. One lesson these stories return to time and again is that those who created the world did so by “walking while asking questions.” It is a powerful poetry.

Yet, in the midst of growing climate crisis, we barely have time to ask the questions. Can the massive numbers of landless, small landholders, fisherfolk and indigenous peoples be given incentives — and support — to stay on their land rather than migrate to overcrowded and overheated cities? Can we reasonably stop the burning of coal, oil, crops, and waste, and still live well? Is another development possible? These questions don’t have easy answers. But in asking them as we walk, quickly, we may — we must — find the answers emerging.

In [The Value of Nothing](#), Raj Patel cites “walking by asking questions” as a fundamental principle of democracy. “The mistakes that get made along the way are part of the process,” he nevertheless acknowledges. In challenging a broken system, it’s essential to enter uncharted territory. Actually engaging the most affected people in the process of fixing the climate disaster is part of this territory. And yes, mistakes will be made.

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But in order to prevent mistakes from becoming disasters, interventions must be made at a human scale. It was mistakes — big ones — that got us here. Oil companies like BP, for instance, drilled far beyond their capacity to prevent or clean up accidents. More spectacular failures are in the pipeline, such as geo-engineering. When BP Vice President David Eyton announced in 2008 that BP was getting onboard with geo-engineering, he [said](#), “We cannot ignore the scale of the challenge.” Unfortunately, we also cannot afford the scale of the disaster to follow. If anything goes wrong (and it will), it will go wrong, like the BP experiment in deepwater drilling, in a big way.

As we walk by asking questions, we should repeat the following mantra: big questions, small mistakes.

Ya Basta!

As profound as any of their other poetic slogans, the Zapatistas’ initial battle cry of “Enough already!” defines the urgency with which we must approach the climate crisis. This year will likely mark the hottest summer on record. The hurricane season is predicted to be more catastrophic than ever. The BP spill is now recognized as the worst environmental disaster of all time. And the [latest predictions](#) from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration show that the Arctic could be free of summer ice in 30 years. Governments play politics as usual, and corporations eye huge profits from carbon markets. But scientists and activists agree: We can’t alter the physical limits of climate devastation with market fixes.

In 1994, the Zapatistas clearly told the world that we had exhausted all other options. In the teeth of climate catastrophe, every living thing on the planet is now backed against the same wall. Change takes time, argues every prudent voice. But after centuries of toxic industry, decades of climate change denial, and years of playing politics as if there were winners and losers, time has run out. In a drawn-out competition against the climate crisis, there can be only losers. As Bolivia’s ambassador to the UN, Pablo Solón, said recently at the U.S. Social Forum in Detroit, “We are only going to have one chance in this century to fight climate change. And that time is now.” In these words can be heard the echo of the Zapatistas: Ya Basta!

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Jeff Conant's book [*A Poetics of Resistance: The Revolutionary Public Relations of the Zapatista Insurgency*](#) (AK Press) was released this month. He is an independent journalist, educator, and lead author of *A Community Guide to Environmental Health* (Hesperian, 2008), a grassroots educational manual currently being translated into 20 languages. He is a contributor to *Foreign Policy In Focus*.