

New Forms of Revolution (Part 1): The Lacandona Commune

Written by Gustavo Esteva

Tuesday, 31 December 2013 17:12



The main challenge in Mexico today is to resist a wave of violence that is dispossessing and oppressing people, and which may precipitate increasingly brutal state repression and even a vicious civil war. At the same time, we need to connect the points of resistance, giving them an organizational form adapted to their nature. What is needed is to build a political force that can stop the ongoing disaster, prevent its continuation, and begin to reorganize society from the bottom-up.

There are clear signs that such a scenario is already developing. Many initiatives are connecting desire to reality, and thus giving a joyful and effective sense to political action. An increasing number of people are ceasing to dance to the tune of the powerful, choosing instead to play their own song.

The primary catalyst capable of transforming society is emerging from the Lacandona Commune in Chiapas. For many analysts, both the Zapatistas and Subcomandante Marcos are history: they lost their opportunity, their time has passed, and they are increasingly irrelevant. The media have 'disappeared' them; they ignore the Zapatistas, except to disqualify them. Allies and sympathizers have begun to share this impression. However, for prominent thinkers like Chomsky, González Casanova, or Wallerstein, Zapatismo is today the most radical and perhaps the most important political initiative in the world.

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The Zapatistas were the first to challenge an intellectual and political mood in Mexico that had surrendered to neoliberal globalization. From that moment on, globalization represented a promise for some and a threat for others, but everybody took it very seriously. Since 1994, anti-systemic movements have acknowledged that the Zapatista uprising was a wake-up call that "Another World Is Possible," a slogan later coined by the World Social Forum, whose more vigorous and creative sectors were inspired by the Zapatistas.

The Zapatistas have been prominent in the public and media gaze for 20 years. In fact, as surprising as it may seem to those who insist on forgetting them and periodically burying them, no contemporary social or political movement has attracted as much public attention, in both quantitative and qualitative terms.

One of the reasons why so many seem to want to forget Zapatismo, to send it to the past or to reduce it to a few municipalities in Chiapas, is the depth of its radicalism. The Zapatistas challenge in words and deeds every aspect of contemporary society. In revealing the root cause of current predicaments, they tear apart the framework of the economic society (capitalism), the nation-state, formal democracy and all modern institutions. They also render the conventional ways and practices of social and political movements obsolete. In reconstructing the world from the bottom up, they reveal the illusory or counterproductive nature of changes conceived or implemented from the top down. Their path encourages resistance to globalization and neoliberalism everywhere, and inspires struggles for liberation.

Nothing about the Zapatistas is more important than their contribution to hope and imagination.

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According to the Mahabharata, the sacred Indian book, when hope – that sheet-anchor of every man – is destroyed, great grief follows, which is almost equal to death itself. For Ivan Illich, “the Promethean ethos has now eclipsed hope. Survival of the human race depends on its rediscovery as a social force” (Illich 1971, 105-6). It is precisely this rediscovery that the Zapatistas have accomplished.

Pandora, “the All-Giving”, closed the lid of her amphora before Hope could escape. It is time to reclaim it, in the era in which the Promethean ethos threatens to destroy the world, and the expectations it generated vanish one after the other. In liberating hope from its intellectual and political prison, the Zapatistas created the possibility of a renaissance, which is now emerging in the net of plural paths they have discovered. They are still a source of inspiration for those walking along those paths. But they do not pretend to administer or control such a net, which has its own impulses, strength, and orientation. We all are, or can be, Zapatistas.

Behind our black mask, behind our armed voice, behind our unnamable name, behind what you see of us, behind this, we are you. Behind this, we are the same simple and ordinary men and women who are repeated in all races, painted in all colors, speak in all languages, and live in all places. Behind this, we are the same forgotten men and women, the same excluded, the same intolaterated, the same persecuted, the same as you. Behind this, we are you. (The Zapatistas 1998, 24).



In 250,000 hectares of Lacandon Jungle, surrounded by thousands of troops, attacked constantly by paramilitary groups, demonized by the government and the political classes, isolated and disqualified by the “institutional” left, the Zapatistas persist in their remarkable sociological and political construction. They refused to accept government funds, not even for their schools and health centers. When civil society asked them to follow “the political way,” they obliged in a dignified manner and entered into dialogue with the government. They signed the San Andrés Accords with the government, which were consequently ignored and violated by successive administrations. But nevertheless, the Zapatistas adhered to the accords through the implementation of autonomy in the area under their control.

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A provisional evaluation

Here is a list of the Zapatistas' current achievements:

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The Zapatistas were a decisive factor in the dismantling of the oldest authoritarian regime in the world, Mexico's Ancient Régime (the Institutional Revolutionary Party held power for 71 years).

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They have created a political alternative to the dead end of globalization.

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The situation on the ground in Chiapas has changed dramatically: thousands of peasants, mostly indigenous, have obtained land they had long been struggling for, and a new balance of political forces is redefining the social fabric of the state.

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In spite of military encirclement and continual paramilitary threats, the Zapatistas have been implementing the changes they have advocated from the very beginning: having reclaimed their commons, they are regenerating their own forms of governance, and living and dying according to their own ways. They have been able to operate autonomously and to improve their living conditions, without receiving or accepting services or funds from the national government. They are, in fact, living outside the logic of the market and the state, beyond the logic of capital, and within a new social fabric. This does not imply, of course, that they have escaped the capitalist social fabric that defines Mexico and the world, the unravelling of which, as the Zapatista Sixth Declaration of the Selva Lacandona states, requires weaving another social and political fabric.

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Thanks to the political space opened by the Zapatistas, autonomous municipalities are flourishing in different parts of Mexico. In general, the Zapatista perspective is more widely understood.

All over the world, we can observe gestures, changes, and mobilizations that seem to be inspired by the Zapatistas. The most highly visible social movements against globalization, neoliberalism, and war support the Zapatistas and cite them as source of inspiration. Zapatista solidarity committees have been formed all over the world. Some are actively engaged in projects with or for the Zapatistas, while most are now involved in local or issue struggles: struggling for their own dreams, projects, and initiatives, or against a specific or general development or injustice, such as a dam, a road, a dump, a McDonalds, a war, a policy, or a government.

To find a political initiative with comparable global repercussions, one has to travel far back in history. As the Zapatistas themselves have already noted, what today looks like Zapatismo, walks like Zapatismo, speaks like Zapatismo, and appears as a form of Zapatismo, is no longer in the hands of the Zapatistas.

While the Zapatistas continue the long process of consolidating their political project, the country's three constitutional powers, as well as its political parties, are continually deteriorating. This spectacle is pathetic and painful, not so much because there are many things worth saving in what is breaking down, but because of the consequences of the mess it leaves behind. It was precisely this state of affairs to which the Zapatistas called our attention a few years ago:

The relentless and frenzied dismantling of the nation-state, driven by a political class lacking professional capacities and decency (clearly accompanied in no few occasions by some of the media and all of the juridical system), will result in a chaotic nightmare that not even primetime shows of suspense and terror could equal (La Jornada, 20-08-04).

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Mexico is already in that chaos and that nightmare. This is not an encouraging perspective, nor is it the breeding ground for a revolution. It is not about a necessary and sensible transformation with the progressive substitution of broken or useless parts in an obsolete machine. It is a turbulent and tense process, in which the fragments of the former Mexican political system try clumsily and uselessly to express themselves anew; or else politicians fight amongst themselves endlessly, guided by an eagerness to eliminate their rivals on a path which only leads upwards in the illusions of those involved.

As disintegration deepens, the Zapatistas continue to advance. Their Juntas de Buen Gobierno (Boards of Good Government) “are proof that Zapatismo doesn’t pretend to hegemonize or homogenize the world in which we live in either its ideas or its methods.” What they have been doing is proof that “in the Zapatista lands there is no aim to pulverize the Mexican nation. On the contrary, it is here that the possibility of its reconstruction is being born.” (La Jornada, 23-08-04).

All said and done, it is about not being afraid of continuing to create autonomy, because the indigenous villages should organize themselves and govern themselves, according to their own ways of thinking and understanding, according to their interests, taking into account their cultures and traditions (La Jornada, 10-08-04).

The Lacandona Commune, observes Luis Hernández:

Is not a regime, but a practice...a laboratory of new social relations...[that] recovers old aspirations of the movements for self-emancipation: liberation should be the work of those it benefits, there oughtn’t be authorities over the people, the subjects of the social order must have full decision-making capacity over their destinies. Their existence isn’t the expression of a moral nostalgia, but the living expression of a new politics (La Jornada 7-9-04).

In their own way the Zapatistas continue to test the speed of dreams with a liberating spirit, accompanied from time to time by those who come to learn and collaborate with them—which in the last two years has included people from 43 countries and many regions of Mexico.

The radical promise of the Zapatistas is not a new ideological construction of possible futures. It is continually self-fulfilled in their deeds, in their daily behavior, as a redefinition of hope. Their position is not equivalent to expectation, as the conviction that something will turn out well. It

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expresses the conviction that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out. "Hope is that rejection of conformity and defeat." Its name is also dignity: 'Dignity is that nation without nationality, that rainbow that is also a bridge, that murmur of the heart no matter what blood lives in it, that rebel irreverence that mocks borders, customs, and wars.'" (The Zapatistas 1998, 13)

They are fully aware that the expanding dignity of each man and each human relationship challenges existing systems. Their autonomy marginalizes the dominant economy and resists the modern and capitalist individualization promoted by both internal and external colonizers.

Rooted in dignity, the Zapatistas have been erecting some landmarks and signposts for what looks like a net of plural paths. Whoever walks these paths can see, with the diffuse and intense quality of a rainbow, a large range of political perspectives that herald a new social order, beyond the economic society (be it capitalist or socialist), and beyond formal democracy and the nation-state. Más allá (beyond) the current conditions of the world, as well as the intellectual, ideological, and institutional underpinnings of these conditions.

The Zapatistas are one of a kind, and at the same time typical. They come from an ancient tradition, but are immersed in contemporary ideas, problems, and technologies. They are ordinary men and women with extraordinary behavior. They are still mystery and paradox, and the best example of an epic grassroots initiative now traversing the world (Esteva y Prakash 1998).

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The Zapatistas are no longer the Zapatismo circulating in the world.

At the Intercontinental Encounter against Neoliberalism in 1996, the Zapatistas told all the participants that they did not get together to change the world – something quite difficult if not impossible – but rather to create a whole new world. The phrase was received with fascination and enthusiasm...but also skepticism: it appeared unfeasible and romantic. Step by step, however, to escape from the straightjackets of dominant ideology, they discovered in themselves a dignity similar to that of the Zapatistas; through this process they also discovered that the statement was in fact very pragmatic.

As the crisis grows, with its trail of disasters and dramas, battalions of discontent are multiplying. They are ever more organized and lucid, but often bear a peculiar uncertainty: the crisis of imagination. Many of them don't know what to do.

The Zapatista Escuelita - the new initiative

On December 21, 2012, some 40,000 Zapatistas marched in silence in a disciplined and peaceful way, in the same towns they had occupied during their uprising on January 1, 1994. They left a brief communiqué:

“Did you listen? It is the sound of your world falling apart. It is the sound of our world re-emerging. The day that was the day was night. And night will be the day that will be the day.”

A little later, a flood of communiqués announced that a “Freedom according to the Zapatistas” course would be held on August 11-16, 2013, in the autonomous zone. The communiqués explained that the teachers of this course would not be certified professionals, nor would any expert pedagogues be present. None of the formal requirements of a classroom or academic space would be met. The idea would be to learn, not about the world but from the world, and to learn from those constructing a new world. The teachers of the course would be those constructing a world without exploitation or social classes, without oppression or hierarchies, and in which the patriarchal and sexist mentality has been profoundly broken – a space that is no longer utopian because it exists in the real world.

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The most difficult aspect of the course would be its content: freedom.

The word produces an immediate association with those who have lost it, and generates solidarity with those in jail. We must, of course, care for them; many of them, perhaps most of them, are innocent. We must protest the profound injustice of their incarceration, while those responsible for the horror around us walk with impunity in the streets.

But the course would not be about that kind of freedom. A few years ago the poet John Berger observed that, if he were forced to use only one word to express the current condition of the world, he would use the word "prison." We are in it, even those of us who pretend we are free. The *escuelita* would attempt to show what freedom is for the Zapatistas. In that way, we might learn to see the bars of our own prisons.

Almost 1,700 people, from many countries and all parts of Mexico, were invited to attend the course. I was one of them. What we saw, smelled, tasted and experienced was a new world, with a new kind of human being: the Zapatista world, constructed over the course of the last 30 years. The people who started the movement in 1983 and organized the uprising in 1994 lacked everything, except dignity. In the 1970s and 1980s they were dying like flies from hunger and curable diseases, oppressed by a very violent and barbaric structure of power. Many of them were working as semi-slaves in private ranches, or as servants in the cities. "In the villages," Subcomandante Marcos said once, "there were very few children; most of them were dying". Since 1994, the Zapatistas have been continually exposed to harassment, physical and psychological aggression, paramilitary assaults, and an encirclement stricter than the Cuban embargo. They have constructed their new world from scratch, against all odds, and with no funds or social services from the government, starting with their bare hands. They have been on their own, accepting, on their own terms, some irregular solidarity from people around the world.

The structure of freedom

The structures of political and legal procedures are integral to one another. Both shape and express the structure of freedom in history. If this is recognized, the framework of due procedure can be used as the most dramatic, symbolic, and sociable tool in the political area. The appeal to law remains powerful even where society makes access to legal machinery a privilege, or where it systematically denies justice, or where it cloaks despotism in the mantle of

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show tribunals...Only the word in its weakness can associate the majority of the people in the revolutionary inversion of inevitable violence into convivial reconstruction (Ivan Illich 1973, 109-110).

The word reigns in Zapatista territory and it is openly used for the convivial reconstruction of society.

We observed a well-enforced state of law, and a solid, peaceful social order in which all forms of violence have basically vanished (except, of course, the violence of paramilitaries and other people surrounding the Zapatistas).

If we consider that a state of law exists only for those societies in which all members of the social body know and accept the norms ruling their lives, and in which those norms are universally enforced with fairness and justice, then we must acknowledge that no society lives today under a state of law. Except Zapatista society.

Zapatista norms are produced at three levels: the community, the municipality (a group of communities), and the caracol (a group of municipalities). Each of these bodies varies in size. A community can be a settlement of a few families; the bigger communities can have 600 or 700 families.



All members of a community participate in the decisions about the norms and accords governing life in the community. The norms are general rules of behavior and include the consequences for violating them. The accords establish the conditions to implement specific decisions concerning communal activities for the common good.

Norms and accords at the level of municipalities and caracoles are conceived and formulated by the common folk of the communities, who temporarily serve in positions of authority at these

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levels. The norms and most accords then cannot be enforced unless and until they are accepted at the level of the communities – a bottom-up and universally shared (rather than top-down and elite) structuring of decision-making and power relations.

There are norms for all Zapatistas: firstly, the seven principles of commanding by obeying, applied to all Zapatistas when they are in a position of authority, and, secondly, the revolutionary laws.

The seven principles are:

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To serve, not to serve yourself

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To represent and not to supplant

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To construct and not to destroy

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To obey and not to command

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To propose and not to impose

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To convince and not to win

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To go down and not to go up

These principles were conceived and formulated by Zapatista communities, widely discussed for a long time, and finally adopted consensually by the Zapatista organization.

The revolutionary laws regarding women and land were formulated clandestinely, before the uprising on January 1, 1994, and they were published on that day. Many people participated in their formulation and all Zapatistas know them pretty well, but it is not known how they were enacted. They are very simple and operate as general principles that are in continual revision. For example, the communities are currently discussing a proposal of 33 points about women, which will be a substitute for the 10 points of the current women's law, if and when everyone agrees on them.

Given these conditions, the real norms and forms of enforcement vary widely in different communities, municipalities and caracoles. All the decisions on important matters require consensus in order to take effect, but for minor decisions voting procedures can be used.

There are no police...and no need for them. The Zapatista communities, in spite of the external aggression they experience, are the safest place in Mexico, and amongst the safest places in the world.

Prior to 1994, alcoholism was a big problem in the communities, and so the Zapatista base decided to ban alcohol and drugs as the norm. The first time a person violates this norm, he or she gets a warning and some advice and support. The second time, he or she must do some community work and get more advice and support. The third time, more community work. Continued violation of the norm can lead to expulsion from the community.

People of the community form different commissions to oversee all functions of government and the implementation of communal projects. Transparency and accountability are totally ensured. A few cases of corruption have been discovered and punished.

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Domestic violence has been largely eliminated, whereas, prior to the uprising, beating women and children had been common. As a result of these community-led transformations, children are showered with love and are free to roam the community – a sense of freedom that is palpable when you visit a Zapatista village.

An experience of the escuela, August 2013

The first impression we had of the escuela was the remarkable degree of organization. The Zapatista organizers were waiting for us at the Unitierra Chiapas campus on the outskirts of San Cristóbal de las Casas. With some efficiency they gave us credentials identifying us as students of the escuela, and then directed us to the transportation to each one of the five caracoles – in some cases, more than ten hours drive from San Cristóbal. Upon arrival in each caracol, long lines of local Zapatistas clapped as we arrived. After a warm reception, every one of us got a *votán*, a guardian: a man or woman who would take care of us 24 hours a day, act as an interpreter (our hosts spoke in their own Indigenous languages), support our studies (guiding us in the reading of the textbooks, for example), and answer questions. They brought us to the homes that were going to host us, sometimes after a long walk, or even a boat ride.

The textbooks are a good illustration of the nature of the experience. The communities and municipalities, where people speak the same language and share the same culture, are characterized by frequent interaction and sharing. When the caracoles were created, however, they required a *lingua franca*: Spanish (which is not spoken by everyone), because in each caracol there are people from different cultures. Since the people of the communities orient the caracoles from below, differences between them started to emerge. They needed to share the experiences of the different caracoles and learn from each other. In an effort that lasted several years, people who had acted as authorities or fulfilled different functions in the communities, municipalities, or caracoles, began to openly share their experiences with others, examining mistakes and difficulties without fear, inhibitions, or reservations. There was a moment, after they had accumulated a lot of materials, in which someone imagined it could be useful to share these with others, in order to sow the seeds of autonomy beyond their territory. That is how the escuela was born.

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The whole experience of the *escuelita* was very intense, convivial, and joyful. We shared in the activities of the family, including their daily work – in which our lack of the pertinent skills and physical conditioning was often very evident and gave rise to much laughter. We had time to read our textbooks, comprised of a collection of interviews with members of the five *caracoles*

. We could ask any question and usually received enlightening answers. And of course we participated in many enjoyable activities, particularly the final *fiesta*.



In this course we completed only the first level (there will be more), but we learned a lot. We learned new categories created in the struggle for freedom. We learned that resistance, for example, was not something that started with the Zapatistas: their *abuelos* and *abuelas* (grandfathers and grandmothers) had been resisting for centuries, and they kept that experience in their hearts. We learned that there is a Zapatista way, entirely transparent but difficult to understand or define, because it is a very other way, which cannot fit well within our mentality or our common way of understanding. We learned how autonomy is constructed and how the projects are implemented. We learned that authentic resistance is not only to endure things, but rather to organize and construct something new.

There was the temptation to translate what we learned into a formal course, transforming the experience into a package of knowledge and skills to pass onto others. But such an exercise would imply a betrayal of the meaning, style, and intention of the *escuelita*. We were not invited to be educated in a doctrine, and even less to learn what to do. The Zapatistas shared a living experience with us, the substance of which can only exist in diversity, in a variety of forms.

Every community, every municipality, every *caracol*

, had evident differences, because they have been created in freedom by different communities of people. They have many things in common, but the specific shape of those “principles” or “forms” corresponds not only to the natural and cultural diversity of the places in which people’s lives have been organized, but also to the differential imagination of those participating in the process. The challenge is not to reduce the whole thing to a formal discourse, more or less

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technical, with some abstract categories, but rather to reproduce the experience in the personal style of every student through contagion. This requires, however, time to process the experience, and to prepare fertile soil in which the seeds of autonomy can prosper.

On Saturday, August 17, 2013 we witnessed the arrival of hundreds of delegates of the National Indigenous Congress for a meeting convened by the Zapatistas in San Cristobal de las Casas. Over a couple of days, indigenous people from across the country spoke about the reality of their situation, their problems, conflicts, and resistance. The Tata Juan Chavez forum, named in honor of an indigenous organizer and founder of the National Indigenous Congress, will be a kind of nomadic space, which can be organized in any place, to allow the voices of the indigenous peoples to be heard.

It was overwhelming to hear the never-ending enumeration of plunders and aggressions against indigenous people. The name of the protagonists and the substance of the plunder changed from one place to the other, but it was always the same crime: a war against subsistence waged by capitalist corporations, sometimes behind the façade of a local boss or a landowner, but always with the active participation and the open complicity of the government and political parties.

It was even more impressive to observe the common denominator of most presentations: a combative, articulated, and vigorous resistance, waged with spirit and dignity; a battle in which they are not only defending their territories, ways of life, forms of self-government, and traditions, but also struggling for the survival of all of us.

To conclude: exhausted after this intense, convivial, and joyful week that at times seemed interminable, overwhelmed by the weight of a learning that brings with it the moral obligation of sharing, we came back to our places full of hope. We also learned that every one of us, in his or her own way, can do what we need to do, which will be as diverse as our worlds. We can construct a world in which everyone will be included. Inertia, paralysis and fear will be banished. We have been set in motion.

- San Pablo Etna, September, 2013.

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