

Communiqué: Voices from the Jungle

Subcomandante Marcos and Culture

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It is reasonable, just, and necessary in Latin America that suddenly in the hills, among the oaks of the forest, on the mountain, desperate men and women from the deepest reaches of the jungle, from the deepest reaches of abandonment, rifles held high, cry out that Indians and peasants also have the right to live. Latin America is at war, a war of the poor against the rich. It is a muffled, latent, dark, primitive war, the continuing awful struggle of those who have been forgotten, a war interspersed with long years of truce. The poor have a limitless endurance; they helplessly observe the way they are pushed aside, until one day one of them or someone on their side stands up and says, "enough, no more, better to die." It is only when this mass becomes dangerous that its existence is recognized.

In Mexico the past is not past; the past never dies. Every day we experience the Conquest in the flesh. Five hundred years have not elapsed since the arrival of the Conquistadors. In 1995, Indigenous Latin Americans are treated just as they were in 1519; they share the same exact living conditions. Our country is racist, sexist, classist. In *Resistencia y Utopía: 1528-1940 (Resistance and Utopia)*, Antonio García de León, a historian of Chiapas, writes the same story that was written by the first bishop of Chiapas, Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, in his *Breve Crónica de la Destrucción de las Indias Occidentales (A Brief Chronicle of the Destruction of the West Indies)*. Don Samuel Ruiz, the current bishop and worthy successor of Fray Bartolomé, is mocked in Mexico as well as in the Vatican for his defense of the Indians. On the streets of Mexico City and in the larger cities of Chiapas, they put up posters with his photo: "Dangerous Criminal" and "Wanted For Betraying His Country." There have never been such campaigns of harassment against anyone else in the country. He is hated by the rich Chiapanecans, who say that he is the comandante of the Zapatista forces, and that Marcos is his subcommander. Since 1960, when he was assigned the diocese of San Cristóbal by Pope John XXII, Samuel Ruiz has chosen to work on behalf of the poor--and in Latin America to choose to work with the poor is a crime; liberation theology has been demonized. In 1993 Samuel Ruiz was investigated by the Vatican on the initiative of Bishop Bernard Gantin, a black African from Zaire (of all people), head of Latin American Affairs in the Vatican, but it wasn't until 1995 that *L'Osservatore Romano* admitted that all Bishop Ruiz had done was to concern himself with "the fair demands of the poor exploited masses of his diocese."

Time has not passed in Chiapas. B. Traven, the German writer who lived in Mexico for many years until his death in 1969, could write the same novels today that he wrote in the 1930s, not to mention his *Estudio Antropológico de Chiapas (An Anthropological Study of Chiapas)*. His six books about the jungle, *Gobierno (Government)*, *La carreta (The Cart)*, *Marcha a la montería (The March to the Hunt)*, *Trozcos (The Logs)*, *La rebelión de los colgados (The Rebellion of the*

Hanged), El General (The General), Puente en la selva (A Bridge in the Jungle) are terrifyingly current. Nothing has changed--nothing. Well, something has happened: the rain forests have been nearly annihilated by fortune hunters, timber dealers, cattle ranchers looking for pasture, coffee growers, and landowners, who, unlike the Indians, have no close relationship with nature--they use heavy machinery, they don't know how to grow cacao in the shade of larger trees, they don't know how to live in the jungle without destroying it, they don't take care of the jungle flora and fauna.

Since 1519 Mexico has gone through a long process, a confrontation between two equally great cultures. Yet, one of these cultures did everything in its power to annihilate the other, tear it out by its roots, destroy its temples, break its back. Since then Mexico has not ceased to be a colonized country. The Church of Nuestra Señora de los Remedios, one of the largest churches in the state of Puebla, was constructed on top of a pyramid larger than that of Kofú in Egypt. It measured 488 meters wide by 62 meters tall; its splendor covered an area of 17 hectares. The Spanish church mounted the Aztec temple as Cortez mounted Malinché, but Nature was wise enough to preserve underground the vestiges of our splendid past. The gods still throb under Mexican soil, and Coatlicue and Huitzilopochtli compete with the other saints: but when we want rain we all pray to Tlaloc. The Zócalo, with its National Palace and Cathedral, was built in the sixteenth century on top of the Templo Mayor, and the latest excavations further confirm (as if further confirmation were possible) the legitimacy and validity of pre-Columbian Mexican society.

Colonization is perhaps the worst thing that can happen to a people, though it is now said that we Mexicans use this as an excuse for not succeeding, for acting like underage children, for lying, cheating, and not being able to solve a single one of our problems. Our huge country, instead of becoming greater, has lost territory. We sold Texas and California to the United States and nothing happened, nobody rose up in arms (in spite of the fact that we lost our best and most fertile land). After two hundred years of independence, we are inferior to our past--not because we lost the land, but due to a condition we share with the rest of Latin America: we are in debt. There is violence behind each Latin American state, ancestral violence and economic violence. We are living on borrowed money, and this gives our life a sense not shared by other lives, the sense of punishment. Our metaphysical insecurity dates from the Conquest and today is transformed into our condition as debtors, as men and women who walk in chains.

For the past sixty-five years, we Mexicans have been guided by our Holy Revolution, our Blessed Revolution, our Enlightened Revolution. Revolutionary rhetoric has permeated not only the predictable, cardboard speeches of the ruling party, it has permeated our entire lives. In our newspapers the term "Mexican Revolution" appears as often as the word "Mexico." It's true, we can't say "Mexico" without saying "Revolution." Nevertheless, the minute there is a revolutionary uprising, official condemnation is unanimous; the Zapatistas turn out to be the cause of all our evils. Among other evils is our punishment by "big money": Mexico began its last presidential administration with two billionaires, it ended up with fourteen. The country of revolution is the land of the big fortunes.

The fortunes of Brazil and other Latin American countries pale next to the large Mexican fortunes. Only the Arab oil fortunes are greater.

In response to official history, there were grass-roots uprisings (the student movement of 1968 had a profound influence on the political life of Mexico, giving rise to a number of grass-roots movements), and popular heroes emerged. First it was Zapata, with his cry of "Land and Liberty" in the revolution of 1910. Emiliano Zapata distributed the land of Morelos in 1910 after building an army out of a bunch of peasants. The land belongs to the farmer, he said to all the poor and to the hacienda owners. Hated by the rich, venerated by the poor, Zapata died without knowing that he had begun one of the most far-reaching movements in Mexico--Zapatismo--or that eighty-five years later, in Chiapas, a group made up almost entirely of Indians would show that Zapatismo is still alive.

On January 1, 1994, a leader emerged who combined the roots and characteristics of previous leaders--Emiliano Zapata, Rubén Jaramillo, Lucio Cabañas, Genaro Vázquez Rojas--but who took on areas the others never mastered. First, he had a whole series of modern resources the others never dreamed of, such as modern information technology. Insurgent Subcomandante Marcos, he calls himself. The figure of Ché Guevara fertilized the field, and a new caudillo has arrived, not mounted on horseback but borne on a great flood of romanticism. The name "Marcos," they say, is made up of the initials of the towns in Chiapas that the Zapatistas took on the 1st of January: Margaritas, Altamirano, La Realidad, Chanal, Ocosingo, and San Cristóbal. One hundred combatants of the Zapatista army stationed themselves in the Plaza de las Armas. They took the National Palace, destroyed its files of land ownership, and finished off its bureaucracy. Unlike Zapata, Marcos has his own news agency. There in the deepest Lacandón Jungle or somewhere in the mountains of the southeast, as he himself describes his location, he knows everything, he reads everything, from T. John Perse to Shakespeare, whose sonnets he quotes in the original English by heart. He has found a way to not only be better informed than his predecessors, but even better informed than city dwellers, and he sends his communiqués by modem to selected newspapers. A ski mask is an essential part of his charisma. It serves less to conceal his face than to reveal his character. His critics say that Ché Guevara always showed his face, but the Subcomandante shows his face through his letters, his famous communiqués, which reveal much more than if we were able to see his nose, which we know is large, his beard, which we know is thick, his eyes, whose loving expression we have all seen, his pipe, and his very recognizable voice. In Mexico the police know everything, and what they don't know they ask the FBI or the CIA, who usually know ahead of time what will happen in our country. After January 1st Marcos became the most charismatic man in Mexico: nobody can match his ability to convoke an audience for an event. On his own, with his one-man news agency, he uses instruments of communication and persuasion, which in his hands acquire an aspect of the "ideal," becoming instruments at the service of a cause--not because they are owned by Marcos but because they put cybernetics at the service of those who have never had anything, who have never seen a computer in their lives. Computers, thanks to the "Sub," as they call him, turn out to be a democratizing factor. It seems to me that putting modern technology within reach of the poorest people is, in a way, an advancement of the cultural process;

with Marcos, the much bandied-about "modernity" sought by Mexico through NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) first began to penetrate the Mexican jungle.

What is Marcos's language? Accused of being sentimental, kitsch, simplistic, a pamphleteer, of writing soap operas, Marcos tells stories in a language everybody can understand. Sometimes he reminds us of Saint-Exupéry. He talks to those around him--the children, old Antonio, the peasants, the men and women who followed him to the mountains to become Zapatistas--and his writing reflects their thoughts. His stories are stories of the soil. Helping the poorest and most downtrodden to be heard is an act of culture, and that is what revolution is about these days. There is an essential book about Chiapas, Juan Pérez Jolote by the anthropologist Ricardo Pozas, but we have learned almost nothing since that book--not withstanding Rosario Castellanos's *Balún Canán*, *Oficio de Tinieblas* (Mass for the Dying) and *Ciudad Real* (Royal City). For the world to suddenly flood into such a state as abandoned as Chiapas is a cultural revolution.

The Zapatistas are also echoed in the media, mainly in the Mexican newspaper *La Jornada*. Marcos, allowing himself the luxury of censorship (and to the applause of many), has refused access to the most powerful television monopoly of the country: Televisa. It would seem that, thanks to Subcomandante Marcos, a cleansing is taking place of Mexico's often corrupt communications media, and Mexican journalists, inspired by the process, are trying to redeem their media. For a few months romanticism ranged the copy desks of a number of Mexican newspapers, and many reporters returned from Chiapas to Mexico City in an exalted state, saying their vision of the world and of themselves had been turned upside down.

Marcos's language is the language of a man who has survived the jungle and knows it well, a man who has eaten snakes when he could get them, a mestizo who gets sick to his stomach and has had an enormously difficult time getting used to the tropics. His language is new in Mexican politics; it is the beginning of a new way of doing politics--which is certainly a cultural phenomenon. Far from resorting to the usual calumnious political rhetoric, nothing in Marcos's speech reminds us of the speech of senators and congressmen. The language of Marcos, a mestizo, can clearly be understood by everyone; he shares the language of the men, women, and children of Chiapas. Marcos is familiar with the bites of the Chechem fly, or "evil woman," which causes delirium in its feverish victims; he knows about the dangerous Bac Ne snake, or "four noses." He knows how to find a path through the jungle in the rain where the branches of the trees form an immense green umbrella; he knows about walking for hours at a stretch carrying a forty-kilo backpack on his shoulder; he knows how to pitch a tent and tighten his belt for days; he knows how to live with other people; and he especially knows how to think. His language is the language of hard daily life, life connected to the soil, the language of survival. The language of politicians, from local representatives to the president of the republic, is the language of bureaucracy. Marcos writes from the soil and constantly speaks of his relationship with the trees, with the sunset, with the cold early morning hours, with the zacate estrella (star grass), with old Antonio, with Moi, Tacho, Monarca, Durito, with the

inhabitants of Chiapas. He talks to the mountains and the tall trees, to crickets and beetles, and that is why we feel his words resonate inside us and we hear them to be true.

The Zapatista demands as expressed in their Lacandón Jungle Declaration were cultural: work, land, housing, food, health, education, independence, freedom, democracy, and peace. They asked that all Indigenous languages be declared official Mexican languages, and that the teaching of these be required in primary, secondary, and high schools as well as in the universities; they also asked that their rights and dignity as Indigenous peoples be respected, and that their cultures and traditions be taken into consideration. They want the discrimination and contempt they have suffered for centuries to stop. They demand the right to organize and govern themselves autonomously, because they do not want to be subject to the will of powerful Mexicans and foreigners. They want their justice to be administered by the Indigenous people themselves, according to their customs and traditions, without intervention from illegitimate, corrupt governments.

Can a handful of poorly armed men and women (two thousand, three hundred Zapatistas) change the cultural system of a country, educate that country and make it grow?

In a country hungry for figures worthy of looking up to, the element of ethics in Marcos's identity is definitive. He has not only taken power, he has made our young people grow up, he has raised our society's consciousness, he has made that society participatory. Thanks to him, and I don't blush to say it, I think we are better people. At least Marcos hasn't lied to us, he has not betrayed anybody, and he has lived according to his ideas, which seems to be a lot to ask in our country. He stayed in the jungle for eleven years, he has shared and continues to share the Indians' living conditions, he means what he says, and he keeps his word. His war is sui generis, as he said himself on March 6th in a letter addressed to Miguel Vásquez, a boy from La Paz, Baja California:

One fine day we decided to become soldiers so that some day soldiers would not be necessary. That is, we chose a profession which is suicidal, since its objective is to disappear: soldiers who are soldiers so that one day nobody would have to be a soldier. Obvious, no?

The Zapatistas chose to start their war on January 1st, 1994, the day the North American Free Trade Agreement took effect. They took over the Plaza de Armas in San Cristóbal de las Casas without frightening the tourists on their Christmas holidays--this was so much the case that Marcos told some tourists who were going to the beach at Cancún that he hoped they would have a good time, and he told some others who planned to go to the archeological site at Palenque that the road was closed and, not without humor, added: "Excuse the inconvenience, but this is a revolution."

The fact that the tourists had not noticed means that the tranquility of San Cristóbal was not disturbed to an alarming degree by armed men in ski masks, wearing crossed bandoliers, and even carrying small machine guns. From the first

moment, Subcomandante Marcos's style was not to kill whoever stood in his way. His guerrilla warfare was distinguished as being more political than military.

The government responded to the Zapatista offensive with violence. The war lasted twelve days, the army going so far as to drop bombs; afterward, they razed the land to get rid of any supplies with which civilians might support the Zapatistas. The international press discovered that Mexico was not a First World country but still remained in the Third World. The truth of the Zapatistas penetrated deeply into public opinion. Demonstrations by students, professors, housewives, and poor people were what stopped the army's genocidal attacks against the Zapatista Indians. Responding to public pressure, President Salinas said he would pardon the rebels. Subcomandante Marcos replied with one of the most impressive of his communiqués (which have crossed oceans and received answers from Germany, the United States, Canada, Spain, Italy, France, England, El Salvador, Switzerland, Brazil, Holland, Chile, Norway, Japan, Puerto Rico, Panama, South Africa, and Ireland):

Why should we ask for pardon? What are they to pardon us for? For not dying of hunger? For not being quiet about our misery? For not humbly accepting the gigantic historic burden of contempt and abandonment? For having taken up arms when all other ways were closed to us? For ignoring the Penal Code of Chiapas, the most absurd and repressive penal code in living memory? For having demonstrated to the rest of the country and to the whole world that human dignity is alive and can be found in its poorest inhabitants? For having prepared ourselves well and conscientiously before we began? For carrying guns into battle instead of bows and arrows? For having previously learned how to fight? For all of us being Mexicans? For most of us being Indians? For calling on Mexicans to fight in every way possible to defend what is theirs? For fighting for freedom, democracy and justice? For not following the patterns of previous guerrilla groups? For not giving up? For not selling out? For not betraying each other?. Who should ask for pardon, and who is to grant it?. . . Those who filled their pockets and their souls with declarations and promises? The dead, our dead, so mortally dead of a "natural" death--that is, of measles, whooping cough, dengue, cholera, typhoid, mononucleosis, tetanus, pneumonia, malaria and other gastrointestinal and pulmonary delights? . . . Those who treat us like foreigners in our own land and ask us for our papers and our obedience to a law of whose existence and justice we know nothing? Those who tortured us, put us in jail, murdered us or made us disappear for the serious "infraction" of wanting a piece of land, not a big one, just a piece of land on which we could produce something to fill our stomachs?. Who should ask pardon, and who is to grant it?

One of Subcomandante Marcos's proposals to Mexican citizens was the creation of a cultural space: a library in the jungle. Marcos and his Zapatistas provided the labor and the raw material, the citizenry supplied the maintenance and continuity.

Through collection drives, young people contributed several thousand books, and a number of university students traveled in caravans to the Lacandón Jungle to work as librarians. Now the library has ceased to exist; it was burned by the Mexican army. What harm was there in a library? Why not leave it for the people of Guadalupe Tepeyac, to whom it belonged? Were they trying to erase a symbol, the symbol of the Zapatistas?

Those who join the Zapatista National Liberation Army have to have finished elementary school. Zapatistas know how to read and write. If they read slowly in public, or if they stumble over certain words when giving a speech or reading a statement to the press, this is due to the fact that their first language is Tzeltal or Tzotzil. Education is a required topic of discussion for them, since one of their main proposals is to achieve literacy among the population--but they want to be the ones who teach the population to read and write. Our book-learned education is characterized by its removal from reality. For example, Mexican children are currently taught that every child should sleep in a room with the window open. Knowing as we do that 40 million Mexicans live (with their families) in two-room dwellings, whose only opening is a door onto the street--who are the children targeted by the official textbook? The last thing to be taught in rural schools is "know-how," and many children drop out of school by the third grade precisely because their schools have no relationship with their reality.

The most important cultural phenomenon brought about by the Zapatistas is their new attitude toward Indian women. For both young Indigenous women and those over thirty-five years old (because at thirty-five they are already old), to become a Zapatista is their best life option. Among the Zapatistas they feel respected. They used to work as maids, weavers, or embroiderers, and they were not paid half what their work was worth. Subcomandante Marcos has said:

We take good care of our women because, since they are malnourished, we don't want them to lose too much blood when they have their periods. Here in the Zapatista Army, the penalty for rape is the death penalty. A man who rapes a woman is sentenced to death by firing squad. Fortunately, we have not yet had to send anyone to be shot.

Zapatista women can choose the man they want to marry. Before, they were the ones chosen. They have the right to control their own bodies, and use a variety of methods of contraception, since they can't have children in the jungle. They can now look their husbands in the eye; they have become true partners.

Rosario Castellanos once told how on one of her journeys to Chiapas she met an Indian returning from the forest with his bundle of firewood, riding on a burro. Behind him, also with her bundle of firewood, his wife followed on foot. Rosario asked him:

"--So, why do you travel comfortably seated, while your wife follows behind you, on foot?"

Unperturbed, the Chiapanecan answered:

"--Ah, that's because she doesn't have a burro!"

We could say now that, thanks to the Zapatistas, the Indian women of Chiapas finally have a burro.

Translated from Spanish by Ellen Calmus