

*The following is excerpted from Zapatista by Jose Saramago, translated from the Portuguese by Gregory Rabassa, Foreword to Our Word is Our Weapon: Selected Writings of Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos, edited by Juana Ponce De Leon. Published by [Seven Stories Press](#).*

In 1721, with a feigned innocence that couldn't conceal his tart sarcasm, Charles-Louis de Secondat asked: "Persians? But how is it possible for someone to be Persian?" It's been almost three hundred years now since the Baron de Montesquieu wrote his famous *Lettres Persanes* and even today we haven't succeeded in putting together an intelligent answer to this most essential of all questions found on the historical agenda of human relationships. As a matter of fact, we still can't understand how it was ever possible for someone to have been a "Persian," and furthermore, as if such a peculiarity were not out of the question, to persist in being one today when the picture the world lays before us seeks to convince us that the only desirable and profitable thing to be is what in very broad and artificially conciliatory terms is customarily called "Western" (Western in mentality, fashions, tastes, habits, interests, manias, ideas...), or, in the all too frequent case of not succeeding in reaching such sublime heights, to be "Westernized" in some bastard way at least, whether the results were attained through force of persuasion or in a more radical way, if there was no other solution through persuasion by force.

To be "Persian" is to be someone strange, someone different, in simple terms to be the "other." The very existence of the "Persian" has been enough to disturb, confuse, disrupt, and perturb the workings of institutions; the "Persian" can even reach the inadmissible extreme of upsetting what all governments in the world are most jealous of: the sovereign tranquility of their power.

The indigenous were and still are "Persians" in Brazil (where the landless now represent another type of "Persians"). The indigenous in the United States once were but have almost ceased to be "Persians." In their time Incas, Mayas, and Aztecs were "Persians" and their descendants were and still are "Persians," wherever they have lived and still live.

There are "Persians" in Guatemala, Bolivia, Colombia, and Peru. There is also an overabundance of "Persians" in that painful land of Mexico, where Sebastiao Salgado's inquiring, rigorous camera drew shudders from us with the challenging figures facing us. They ask: How can it be that you "Westerners" and "Westernized" people to the north, south, east, and west, so cultured, so civilized, so perfect, lack that modicum of intelligence and sensibility necessary to understand us, the "Persians" of Chiapas?

It is really only a matter of understanding, understanding the expression in those looks, the solemnity of those faces, the simple way of their grouping together, feeling and thinking together, weeping the same tears in common, smiling the same smile, understanding the hands of the sole survivor of a slaughter that are held like protective wings over the heads of her daughter, understanding this endless stream of living and dead, this lost blood, this acquired hope, this silence of someone who has borne centuries of demanding respect and justice, this suppressed anger of someone who has finally wearied of hoping.

Six years ago, changes were introduced in the Mexican Constitution in obedience to the neo-liberal "economic revolution" directed from without, and were mercilessly applied by the government to bring agrarian reform and redistribution to an end. This reduced to nothing the possibility for landless peasants to have a parcel of land to cultivate. The indigenous thought they could defend their historic rights (or simply their common-law ones, in case it was assumed that indigenous communities had no place in the history of Mexico...), by organizing into civic societies which were characterized, and still are, in the singular matter of renouncing any kind of violence, starting with the one that was their due.

These societies had the support of the Catholic Church from the beginning, but that protection was of little use to them. Their leaders and representatives kept being jailed, the systematic, implacable, and

brutal persecution by the powers of the State and the large landowners increased in conjunction with and under the shadow of the interests and privileges of both. They continued the violent acts of expulsion from the indigenous' ancestral lands, and the mountains and jungle, many times over, became the last refuge of the people displaced. There in the dense mists of the heights and the valleys the seeds of rebellion would germinate.

The indigenous of Chiapas aren't the only humiliated and offended people in this world. In all places and at all times, regardless of race, color, customs, culture, religious belief, the human creature we are so proud to be has always known how to humiliate and offend those whom, with sad irony, he continues to call his fellows. We have invented things that don't exist in nature: cruelty, torture, and disdain. By a perverse use of race, we've come to divide humanity into irreducible categories: rich and poor, master and slave, powerful and weak, wise and ignorant. And incessantly in each of these divisions we've made subdivisions so as to vary and freely multiply reasons for disdain, humiliation, and offense.

In recent years Chiapas has been the place where the most disdained, most humiliated, and most offended people of Mexico were able to recover intact a dignity and an honor that had never been completely lost, a place where the heavy tombstone of an oppression that has gone on for centuries has been shattered to allow the passage of a procession of new and different living people ahead of an endless procession of murders. These men, women, and children of the present are only demanding respect for their rights, not just as human beings and as part of this humanity, but also as the indigenous who want to continue being indigenous. They've risen up most especially with a moral strength that only honor and dignity themselves are capable of bringing to birth and nursing in the spirit even while the body suffers from hunger and the usual miseries.

On the other side of the heights of Chiapas lie not only the government of Mexico but the whole world. No matter how much of an attempt has been made to reduce the question of Chiapas to merely a local conflict, whose solution should be found within the strict confines of an application of national law-hypocritically malleable and adjustable, as has been seen once again, according to the strategies and tactics of economic and political power to which they are surrogate-what is being played out in the Chiapas mountains and the Lacondona Jungle reaches beyond the borders of Mexico to the heart of that portion of humanity that has not renounced and never will renounce dreams and hopes, the simple imperative of equal justice for all.

As that figure, exceptional and exemplary for many reasons, whom we know by the name of the Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos has written, "a world where there is room for many worlds, a world that can be one and diverse," a world, I might add myself, that for all people and all time declares untouchable the right of everyone to be a "Persian" any time he or she wants to and without obeying anything but one's own roots...

The mountainous highlands of Chiapas are without a doubt one of the most amazing landscapes my eyes have ever seen, but they are also a place where violence and protected crime hold forth.

Thousands of indigenous, driven from their homes and their lands for the "unpardonable crime" of being silent or open sympathizers with the Zapatista Front of National Liberation, are crammed into camps of improvised huts, where there is a lack of food, where the little water available is almost always contaminated, where illnesses like tuberculosis, cholera, measles, tetanus, pneumonia, typhus, and malaria are decimating adults and children. All this is happening in full view of the indifferent authorities and official medicine.

Some sixty thousand soldiers-no more nor less than a third of the permanent strength of the Mexican army at present-occupy the State of Chiapas under the pretext of defending and assuring public order.

The factual reality, however, gives the lie to this justification. The Mexican army is protecting one part of the indigenous population; it is not only protecting it but at the same time is teaching, training, and arming these indigenous who are generally dependent upon and subordinate to the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which for sixty years has been exercising uninterrupted and practically absolute power. These indigenous are-not by any extraordinary coincidence-the ones who make up the various paramilitary groups organized with the sole objective of undertaking the dirtiest work of suppression: the attack, rape, and murder of their own brothers and sisters.

Acteal was one more episode in the terrible tragedy that begun in 1492 with invasion and conquest. All through the five hundred years the indigenous of Ibero-America (and I use this term intentionally so as not to let escape judgment of the Portuguese and later on the Brazilians, who continued the genocidal process that reduced the three or four million Indians existent in Brazil during the period of discovery to little more than 200,000 in 1980) were passed, in a manner of speaking, from hand to hand. They were handed from the soldier who killed them to the master who exploited them, while in between there was the hand of the Catholic Church, which made them exchange one set of gods for another, but which in the end was unsuccessful in changing their spirit.

After the butchery of Acteal there began to be heard over the radio words that said "We're winning." Some unaware person might have thought that it was a matter of an insolent and provocative proclamation by murderers. He would have been mistaken. Those words were a message of hope, words of courage which like an embrace over the airwaves united the indigenous communities. While they wept for their dead-another forty-five added to a list five-centuries old-the communities stoically lifted their heads and said to each other "We're winning," because it really could only have been a victory, and a great one, the greatest of all, being capable of surviving humiliation, offense, disdain, cruelty, and torture in that way. This was a victory of the spirit.

Eduardo Galeano, the great Uruguayan writer, tells how Marcos went to Chiapas and spoke to the indigenous, but they didn't understand him. "Then he penetrated the mist, learned to listen, and was able to speak." That same mist which prevents one person from seeing is also the window that opens onto the world of the other, the world of the indigenous, the world of the "Persian"... Let us look in silence, let us learn to listen, perhaps later we'll finally be able to understand.

A video interview with Jose Saramago, shot by Michael Eisenmenger, may be seen [here](#).