

Klein on Marcos

As the Zapatista rebels march on Mexico City demanding rights for the country's indigenous people. Naomi Klein describes the appeal of the Zapatistas and their 'voice' Marcos

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I've never been to Chiapas. I've never made the pilgrimage to the Lacandon jungle. I've never sat in the mud and the mist in La Realidad. I've never begged, pleaded or posed to get an audience with Subcomandante Marcos, the masked man, the faceless face of Mexico's Zapatista National Liberation Army. I know people who have. Lots of them. In 1994, the summer after the Zapatista rebellion, caravans to Chiapas were all the rage in north American activist circles: friends got together and raised money for secondhand vans, filled them with supplies, then drove south to San Cristobal de las Casas and left the vans behind. I didn't pay much attention at the time. Back then, Zapatista-mania looked suspiciously like just another cause for guilty lefties with a Latin American fetish: another Marxist rebel army, another macho leader, another chance to go south and buy colourful textiles. Hadn't we heard this story before? Hadn't it ended badly? Last week, there was another caravan in Chiapas. But this was different. First, it didn't end in San Cristobal de las Casas; it started there, and is now criss-crossing the Mexican countryside before the planned grand entrance into Mexico City on March 11. The caravan, nicknamed the "Zapatour" by the Mexican press, is being led by the council of 24 Zapatista commanders, in full uniform and masks (though no weapons), including Subcomandante Marcos himself. Because it is unheard of for the Zapatista command to travel outside Chiapas (and there are vigilantes threatening deadly duels with Marcos all along the way), the Zapatour needs tight security. The Red Cross turned down the job, so protection is being provided by several hundred anarchists from Italy who call themselves Ya Basta! (meaning "Enough is enough!"), after the defiant phrase used in the Zapatistas' declaration of war. Hundreds of students, small farmers and activists have joined the roadshow, and thousands greet them along the way. Unlike those early visitors to Chiapas, these travellers say they are there not because they are "in solidarity" with the Zapatistas, but because they are Zapatistas. Some even claim to be Subcomandante Marcos himself - they say we are all Marcos.

Perhaps only a man who never takes off his mask, who hides his real name, could lead this caravan of renegades, rebels, loners and anarchists on this two-week trek. These are people who have learned to steer clear of charismatic leaders with one-size-fits-all ideologies. These aren't party loyalists; these are members of groups that pride themselves on their autonomy and lack of hierarchy. Marcos - with his black wool mask, two eyes and pipe - seems to be an anti-leader tailor-made for this suspicious, critical lot. Not only does he refuse to show his face, undercutting (and simultaneously augmenting) his own celebrity, but Marcos's story is of a man who came to his leadership, not through swaggering certainty, but by coming to terms with political uncertainty, by learning to follow.

Though there is no confirmation of Marcos's real identity, the most repeated legend that surrounds him goes like this: an urban Marxist intellectual and activist, Marcos was wanted by the state and was no longer safe in the cities. He fled to the mountains of Chiapas in southeast Mexico filled with revolutionary rhetoric and certainty, there to convert the poor indigenous masses to the cause of armed proletarian revolution against the bourgeoisie. He said the workers of the world must unite, and the Mayans just stared at him. They said they weren't workers and, besides, land wasn't property but the heart of their community. Having failed as a Marxist missionary, Marcos immersed himself in Mayan culture. The more he learned, the less he knew. Out of this process, a new kind of army emerged, the EZLN, the Zapatista National Liberation Army, which was not controlled by an elite of guerrilla commanders but by the communities themselves, through clandestine councils and open assemblies. "Our army," says Marcos, "became scandalously Indian." That meant that he wasn't a commander barking orders, but a subcomandante, a conduit for the will of the councils. His first words said in the

new persona were: "Through me speaks the will of the Zapatista National Liberation Army." Further subjugating himself, Marcos says that he is not a leader to those who seek him out, but that his black mask is a mirror, reflecting each of their own struggles; that a Zapatista is anyone anywhere fighting injustice, that "We are you". He once said, "Marcos is gay in San Francisco, black in South Africa, an Asian in Europe, a Chicano in San Ysidro, an anarchist in Spain, a Palestinian in Israel, a Mayan Indian in the streets of San Cristobal, a Jew in Germany, a Gypsy in Poland, a Mohawk in Quebec, a pacifist in Bosnia, a single woman on the Metro at 10pm, a peasant without land, a gang member in the slums, an unemployed worker, an unhappy student and, of course, a Zapatista in the mountains."

"This non-self," writes Juana Ponce de Leon who has collected and edited Marcos's writings in *Our Word Is Our Weapon* (see extracts on pages 14-16), "makes it possible for Marcos to become the spokesperson for indigenous communities. He is transparent, and he is iconographic." Yet the paradox of Marcos and the Zapatistas is that, despite the masks, the non-selves, the mystery, their struggle is about the opposite of anonymity - it is about the right to be seen. When the Zapatistas took up arms and said *Ya Basta!* in 1994, it was a revolt against their invisibility. Like so many others left behind by globalisation, the Mayans of Chiapas had fallen off the economic map: "Below in the cities," the EZLN command stated, "we did not exist. Our lives were worth less than those of machines or animals. We were like stones, like weeds in the road. We were silenced. We were faceless." By arming and masking themselves, the Zapatistas explain, they weren't joining some Star Trek-like Borg universe of people without identities fighting in common cause: they were forcing the world to stop ignoring their plight, to see their long neglected faces. The Zapatistas are "the voice that arms itself to be heard. The face that hides itself to be seen."

Meanwhile, Marcos himself - the supposed non-self, the conduit, the mirror - writes in a tone so personal and poetic, so completely and unmistakably his own, that he is constantly undercutting and subverting the anonymity that comes from his mask and pseudonym. It is often said that the Zapatistas' best weapon was the internet, but their true secret weapon was their language. In *Our Word Is Our Weapon*, we read manifestos and war cries that are also poems, legends and riffs. A character emerges behind the mask, a personality. Marcos is a revolutionary who writes long meditative letters to Uruguayan poet Eduardo Galeano about the meaning of silence; who describes colonialism as a series of "bad jokes badly told", who quotes Lewis Carroll, Shakespeare and Borges. Who writes that resistance takes place "any time any man or woman rebels to the point of tearing off the clothes resignation has woven for them and cynicism has dyed grey". And who then sends whimsical mock telegrams to all of "civil society": "THE GRAYS HOPE TO WIN. STOP. RAINBOW NEEDED URGENTLY."

Marcos seems keenly aware of himself as an irresistible romantic hero. He's an Isabelle Allende character in reverse - not the poor peasant who becomes a Marxist rebel, but a Marxist intellectual who becomes a poor peasant. He plays with this character, flirts with it, saying that he can't reveal his real identity for fear of disappointing his female fans. Perhaps wary that this game was getting a little out of hand, Marcos chose the eve of Valentine's Day this year to break the bad news: he is married, and deeply in love, and her name is La Mar ("the Sea" - what else would it be?)

This is a movement keenly aware of the power of words and symbols. Rumour has it that when the 24-strong Zapatista command arrive in Mexico City, they hope to ride downtown on horseback, like indigenous conquistadors. There will be a massive rally, and concerts, and they will ask to address the Congress. There, they will demand that legislators pass an Indigenous Bill of Rights, a law that came out of the Zapatistas' failed peace negotiations with president, Ernesto Zedillo, who was defeated in recent elections. Vincente Fox, his successor who famously bragged during the campaign that he could solve the Zapatista problem "in 15 minutes", has asked for a meeting with Marcos, but has so far been refused - not until the bill is passed, says Marcos, not until more army troops are withdrawn from

Zapatista territory, not until all Zapatista political prisoners are freed. Marcos has been betrayed before, and accuses Fox of staging a "simulation of peace" before the peace negotiations have even restarted. What is clear in all this jostling for position is that something radical has changed in the balance of power in Mexico. The Zapatistas are calling the shots now - which is significant, because they have lost the habit of firing shots. What started as a small, armed insurrection has in the past seven years turned into what now looks more like a peaceful, and mass movement. It has helped topple the corrupt 71-year reign of the Institutional Revolutionary Party, and has placed indigenous rights at the centre of the Mexican political agenda.

Which is why Marcos gets angry when he is looked on as just another guy with a gun: "What other guerrilla force has convened a national democratic movement, civic and peaceful, so that armed struggle becomes useless?" he asks. "What other guerrilla force asks its bases of support about what it should do before doing it? What other guerrilla force has struggled to achieve a democratic space and not take power? What other guerrilla force has relied more on words than on bullets?"

The Zapatistas chose January 1, 1994, the day the North American Free Trade Agreement (Nafta) came into force, to "declare war" on the Mexican army, launching an insurrection and briefly taking control of the city of San Cristobal de las Casas and five Chiapas towns. They sent out a communiqué explaining that Nafta, which banned subsidies to indigenous farm co-operatives, would be a "summary execution" for four million indigenous Mexicans in Chiapas, the country's poorest province.

Nearly 100 years had passed since the Mexican revolution promised to return indigenous land through agrarian reform; after all these broken promises, Nafta was simply the last straw. "We are the product of 500 years of struggle . . . but today we say Ya Basta! Enough is enough." The rebels called themselves Zapatistas, taking their name from Emiliano Zapata, the slain hero of the 1910 revolution who, along with a rag-tag peasant army, fought for lands held by large landowners to be returned to indigenous and peasant farmers.

In the seven years since, the Zapatistas have come to represent two forces at once: first, rebels struggling against grinding poverty and humiliation in the mountains of Chiapas and, on top of this, theorists of a new movement, another way to think about power, resistance and globalisation. This theory - Zapatismo - not only turns classic guerrilla tactics inside out, but much of leftwing politics on its head.

I may never have made the pilgrimage to Chiapas, but I have watched the Zapatistas' ideas spread through activist circles, passed along second- and thirdhand: a phrase, a way to run a meeting, a metaphor that twists your brain around. Unlike classic revolutionaries, who preach through bullhorns and from pulpits, Marcos has spread the Zapatista word through riddles. Revolutionaries who don't want power. People who must hide their faces to be seen. A world with many worlds in it.

A movement of one "no" and many "yesses".

These phrases seem simple at first, but don't be fooled. They have a way of burrowing into the consciousness, cropping up in strange places, being repeated until they take on this quality of truth - but not absolute truth: a truth, as the Zapatistas might say, with many truths in it. In Canada, where I'm from, indigenous uprising is always symbolised by a blockade: a physical barrier to stop the golf course from being built on a native burial site, to block the construction of a hydroelectric dam or to keep an old growth forest from being logged. The Zapatista uprising was a new way to protect land and culture: rather than locking out the world, the Zapatistas flung open the doors and invited the world inside. Chiapas was transformed, despite its poverty, despite being under constant military siege, into a global gathering place for activists, intellectuals, and indigenous groups.

From the first communiqué, the Zapatistas invited the international community "to watch over and

regulate our battles". The summer after the uprising, they hosted a National Democratic Convention in the jungle; 6,000 people attended, most from Mexico. In 1996, they hosted the first Encuentro (or meeting) For Humanity And Against Neo-Liberalism. Some 3,000 activists travelled to Chiapas to meet with others from around the world.

Marcos himself is a one-man-web: he is a compulsive communicator, constantly reaching out, drawing connections between different issues and struggles. His communiqués are filled with lists of groups that he imagines are Zapatista allies, small shopkeepers, retired people and the disabled, as well as workers and campesinos. He writes to political prisoners Mumia Abu Jamal and Leonard Peltier. He is pen-pals with some of Latin America's best-known novelists. He writes letters addressed "to the people of world".

When the uprising began, the government attempted to play down the incident as a "local" problem, an ethnic dispute easily contained. The strategic victory of the Zapatistas was to change the terms: to insist that what was going on in Chiapas could not be written off as a narrow "ethnic" struggle, and that it was universal. They did this by clearly naming their enemy not only as the Mexican state but as the set of economic policies known as "neo-liberalism". Marcos insisted that the poverty and desperation in Chiapas was simply a more advanced version of something happening all around the world. He pointed to the huge numbers of people who were being left behind by prosperity, whose land, and work, made that prosperity possible. "The new distribution of the world excludes 'minorities'," Marcos has said. "The indigenous, youth, women, homosexuals, lesbians, people of colour, immigrants, workers, peasants; the majority who make up the world basements are presented, for power, as disposable. The distribution of the world excludes the majorities."

The Zapatistas staged an open insurrection, one that anyone could join, as long as they thought of themselves as outsiders. By conservative estimates, there are now 45,000 Zapatista-related websites, based in 26 countries. Marcos's communiqués are available in at least 14 languages. And then there is the Zapatista cottage industry: black T-shirts with red five-pointed stars, white T-shirts with EZLN printed in black. There are baseball hats, black EZLN ski masks, Mayan-made dolls and trucks. There are posters, including one of Comandante Ramona, the much loved EZLN matriarch, as the Mona Lisa.

It looked like fun, but it was also influential. Many who attended the first "encuentros" went on to play key roles in the protests against the World Trade Organisation in Seattle and the World Bank and IMF in Washington DC, arriving with a new taste for direct action, for collective decision-making and decentralised organising. When the insurrection began, the Mexican military was convinced it would be able to squash the Zapa- tistas' jungle uprising like a bug. It sent in heavy artillery, conducted air raids, mobilised thousands of soldiers. Only, instead of standing on a squashed bug, the government found itself surrounded by a swarm of international activists, buzzing around Chiapas. In a study commissioned by the US military from the Rand Corporation, the EZLN is studied as "a new mode of conflict - 'netwar' - in which the protagonists depend on using network forms of organisation, doctrine, strategy and technology." This is dangerous, according to Rand, because what starts as "a war of the flea" can quickly turn into "a war of the swarm".

The ring around the rebels has not protected the Zapatistas entirely. In December 1997, there was the brutal Acteal massacre in which 45 Zapatista supporters were killed, most of them women and children. ANext week, rebels will march on Mexico City demanding rights for the country's indigenous people. But they will not fire a single shot, for this is a new kind of revolution. Naomi Klein describes the appeal of the Zapatistas and their 'voice' Marcos and the situation in Chiapas is still desperate, with thousands displaced from their homes. But it is also true that the situation would probably have been much worse, potentially with far greater intervention from the US military, had it not been for this international swarm. The Rand Corporation study states that the global activist attention arrived "during a period when the United States may have been tacitly interested in seeing a forceful crackdown on the

rebels".

So it's worth asking: what are the ideas that proved so powerful that thousands have taken it upon themselves to disseminate them around the world? A few years ago, the idea of the rebels travelling to Mexico City to address the congress would have been impossible to imagine. The prospect of masked guerrillas (even masked guerrillas who have left their arms at home) entering a hall of political power signals one thing: revolution. But Zapatistas aren't interested in overthrowing the state or naming their leader, Marcos, as president. If anything, they want less state power over their lives. And, besides, Marcos says that as soon as peace has been negotiated he will take off his mask and disappear.

What does it mean to be a revolutionary who is not trying to stage a revolution? This is one of the key Zapatista paradoxes. In one of his many communiqués, Marcos writes that "it is not necessary to conquer the world. It is sufficient to make it new". He adds: "Us. Today." What sets the Zapatistas apart from your average Marxist guerrilla insurgents is that their goal is not to win control, but to seize and build autonomous spaces where "democracy, liberty and justice" can thrive.

Although the Zapatistas have articulated certain key goals of their resistance (control over land, direct political representation, and the right to protect their language and culture), they insist they are not interested in "the Revolution", but rather in "a revolution that makes revolution possible".

Marcos believes that what he has learned in Chiapas about non-hierarchical decision-making, decentralised organising and deep community democracy holds answers for the non-indigenous world as well - if only it were willing to listen. This is a kind of organising that doesn't compartmentalise the community into workers, warriors, farmers and students, but instead seeks to organise communities as a whole, across sectors and across generations, creating "social movements". For the Zapatistas, these autonomous zones aren't about isolationism or dropping out, 60s-style. Quite the opposite: Marcos is convinced that these free spaces, born of reclaimed land, communal agriculture, resistance to privatisation, will eventually create counter-powers to the state simply by existing as alternatives.

This is the essence of Zapatismo, and explains much of its appeal: a global call to revolution that tells you not to wait for the revolution, only to stand where you stand, to fight with your own weapon. It could be a video camera, words, ideas, "hope" - all of these, Marcos has written, "are also weapons". It's a revolution in miniature that says, "Yes, you can try this at home." This organising model has spread throughout Latin America, and the world. You can see it in the anarchist squats of Italy (called "social centres") and in the Landless Peasants' Movement of Brazil, which seizes tracts of unused farmland and uses them for sustainable agriculture, markets and schools under the slogan "Ocupar, Resistir, Producir" (Occupy, Resist, Produce). These same ideas were forcefully expressed by the students of the National Autonomous University of Mexico during last year's long and militant occupation of their campus. Zapata once said the land belongs to those who work it, their banners blared, WE SAY THAT THE UNIVERSITY BELONGS TO THOSE WHO STUDY IN IT.

Zapatismo, according to Marcos, is not a doctrine but "an intuition". And he is consciously trying to appeal to something that exists outside the intellect, something uncynical in us, that he found in himself in the mountains of Chiapas: wonder, a suspension of disbelief, myth and magic. So, instead of issuing manifestos, he tries to riff his way into this place, with long meditations, flights of fancy, dreaming out loud. This is, in a way, a kind of intellectual guerrilla warfare: Marcos won't meet his opponents head on, but instead surrounds them from all directions.

A month ago, I got an email from Greg Ruggiero, the publisher of Marcos's collected writings. He wrote that when Marcos enters Mexico City next week, it will be "the equivalent of Martin Luther King Jr's March on Washington". I stared at the sentence for a long time. I have seen the clip of King's "I have a dream" speech maybe 10,000 times, though usually through adverts selling mutual funds, cable news or computers and the like. Having grown up after history ended, it never occurred to me that I

might see a capital-H history moment to match it.

Next thing I knew, I was on the phone talking to airlines, cancelling engagements, making crazy excuses, mumbling about Zapatistas and Martin Luther King. Who cares that I dropped my introduction to Spanish course? Or that I've never been to Mexico City, let alone Chiapas? Marcos says I am a Zapatista and I am suddenly thinking, "Yes, yes, I am. I have to be in Mexico City on March 11. It's like Martin Luther King Jr's March on Washington." Only now, as March 11 approaches, it occurs to me that it's not like that at all. History is being made in Mexico City this week, but it's a smaller, lower-case, humbler kind of history than you see in those news-clips. A history that says, "I can't make your history for you. But I can tell you that history is yours to make."

It also occurs to me that Marcos isn't Martin Luther King; he is King's very modern progeny, born of a bittersweet marriage of vision and necessity. This masked man who calls himself Marcos is the descendant of King, Che Guevara, Malcom X, Emiliano Zapata and all the other heroes who preached from pulpits only to be shot down one by one, leaving bodies of followers wandering around blind and disoriented because they lost their heads.

In their place, the world now has a new kind of hero, one who listens more than speaks, who preaches in riddles not in certainties, a leader who doesn't show his face, who says his mask is really a mirror. And in the Zapatistas, we have not one dream of a revolution, but a dreaming revolution. "This is our dream," writes Marcos, "the Zapatista paradox - one that takes away sleep. The only dream that is dreamed awake, sleepless. The history that is born and nurtured from below."