Reflections and learnings about Zapatismo…

Posted by Kelly on Jan 1, 2013

On the 21st of December (a couple of weeks after our departure), the start of the new Mayan era (Bakhtun), over 40,000 Tzotzil, Tzeltal, Tojobal, Chol, Mam and Zoques indigenous peoples – men, women and children, all of whom are representatives of a much larger Mayan community across Mexico and Central America – assembled and silently marched, without weapons and wearing black ski masks, into seven cities in Chiapas, the poorest state of Mexico. These 40,000+ people are all Zapatistas – the white number stuck to each of their masks representing their particular Zapatista community. It was the first public statement in over 18 months – the message, although silent, was loud and clear: “Did you hear? It is the sound of your world collapsing/ it is our world coming back…”

What are these different worlds that the Zapatistas are referring to? How is their world coming back – and how is our world collapsing? What place does Zapatismo have in the world today – how can we understand it, learn from it and apply it into our own lives?
These were the exact questions being asked in the Zapatismo seminar we attended on our first day visiting Unitierra. This particular week’s seminar that had been advertised across Oaxaca, through email, Unitierra’s blog and through flyer, was focusing on the 19th anniversary of the Zapatista uprising, critically engaging with the question of, *What does Zapatismo mean today?*

The answer to this question emerged over two and a half hours of critical discussion, debate and emotional statements – different historical narratives – coming from more than 40 people in the main room at Unitierra – Oaxacans – Mixtecs, Zapotecs, Mestizos... Europeans, Americans – from the age of 18 to nearly 80. I was lucky enough to have simultaneous translations provided for me by a friend.

At the beginning of the Unitierra seminar, Gustavo helped to provide a stronger background of the Zapatistas. The three people (2 men and a woman) who initially went to the Lacandon jungle (in northeast Chiapas) as guerilla activists in 1983 to begin organizing an indigenous uprising were not indigenous themselves. They had each been politically active during the 1960s and the 1970s and had endured varying degrees of violence (torture and incarceration) at the hands of the state. Clearly these years of violence did not encourage them to discontinue their involvement. Rather, it stirred an even deeper commitment. Living in the Lacandon jungle – especially as a shift from living in an urban center, is no easy task. For more than 10 years, these three people slowly mobilized – without any knowledge to the outside world – thousands of indigenous peoples from different Mayan communities, within Chiapas.
Gustavo told us that aside from learning about survival in the jungle, the biggest learning for these non-indigenous activists was about listening and communication. When they initially came to discuss current problems – and histories of oppression – with local indigenous Mayan peoples in villages, they were not understood. They were still talking forcefully through their ideals as guerilla activists. They had to become more humble, bring their thinking ‘down to Earth’ – and instead, to listen. This required a complete shift in learning – toward dialogue (that prioritizes listening) and forms of encounter and assembly.

These two notions – encounter and assembly – are still the two key principles for the Zapatistas. The third is to create. Encounter. Assembly. Create. To encounter, is to engage with the other, through an ethic of opening up oneself even, or especially at the risk of losing yourself. It is to listen (radically). As they see it, encounters cannot be exhausted – listening should never stop. Assemblies are created through collective decision-making bodies through a perception and practice of power that is atypical to what is normally practiced in politics (our current forms of democracy). The Zapatistas are re-creating (and re-claiming) indigenous forms of leadership that have otherwise been lost over the past several hundred years. These assemblies are not about taking power, rather they are about sharing it. It is about learning how each one of us can exercise power in ways that does not support the current ‘Empire of Money’ – but rather learning how to create other worlds outside. This is where create comes into the picture – creating autonomous forms of education, health, justice, government, food cultivation that is through shared decision-making. It is currently through the formation of caracoles (slow moving snails) that governing occurs within Zapatista communities.
There is much to consider from what the Zapatistas are advocating. One of their main challenges is for us to change our perceptions of power. The Zapatistas tell us that we need to equip ourselves with ‘inverted periscopes’. This means that instead of trying to understand what is going on ‘above’ in the ‘halls of power’ we should be looking way down below, on the ground, in the spaces that tend to be ignored. Power is not only with those ‘up there’ – those ‘in power’ – power that is exercised over people. Another way of understanding this is that there is power everywhere, we all can exercise power in multiple ways –through people and with people – also with the Earth, alongside non-human species. It is entirely possible to exercise power without taking it. We may not believe it is so, but this is exactly what the Zapatistas are trying to do.

The shift in learning – towards listening and toward ‘becoming common’ – that occurred between 1983 and 1994, helped to organize thousands of people – Tzotzils, Tzeltals, Tojolabals, Chols, Mams and Zoques – all united for the first time in insurrection as Zapatistas. To become united they learned new ways of communication and more critical understandings of historical experiences. They also learned how to arm themselves and how to stand up for themselves following over 500 years of oppression at the hands of (primarily) the Spanish, the Church, the Mexican government and now, multi-national corporations. The learning continues… from letting go of arms (fire) that were used more strongly in the early days and instead building dialogue through encounters that prioritize communication (the word).
The decision by the Zapatistas, the EZLN, to surprise the world and occupy buildings across Chiapas on the 1st of January, 1994 was no accident. It was a war that begun out of desperation (and it was through the use of arms that the primary source of controversy is centered). The Zapatista emergence into public visibility was carefully calculated. It was the same day that NAFTA was signed. The Zapatistas knew well that such a law would affect themselves – as indigenous peoples – more than anyone else (see my previous post on Maize and Milpa for more discussion on NAFTA). Their initial demands of housing, land, work, health, education, food freedom, independence, justice, democracy and peace have essentially turned into demands for autonomy, for self-sufficiency through which they are able to provide these demands for themselves. They continually have to struggle for the recognition of these demands. There is a long history of struggle and reactions between the Zapatistas and the Mexican Army and government that continues today.

Sign for Oventic outside of village gates, Chiapas, photo taken by Kelly

My first encounter with the Zapatistas – virtually – was in Pakistan when I became acquainted with Assim Sajjad Akhtar who was then dividing his time between leading the Peoples Rights Movement (PRM) in their support for landless peasants in Pakistan, teaching (post)colonial history at the Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS) and writing as a journalist for Pakistani media – The Nation, Dawn, etc. (Aasim is now a professor at Qaid-e-Azam University in Islamabad and continues to publish as a journalist and assist PRM). In Pakistan, through Aasim’s knowledge, I learned about the Zapatista’s existence, what they were trying to do and how they were trying to do it (and how it related to what PRM was doing in Pakistan). My learning was expanded further when I returned to London, participating in the European Social Forum (the regional World Social Forum event) in 2004, where there was an abundance of literature available about the Zapatistas and people speaking about them – people who had spent time with them in Chiapas and other parts of Mexico. Although the work and struggle of the Zapatistas is located in Chiapas, they have been hugely successful in assembling international solidarity – inspiring imaginations, creating new visions and igniting controversy and debate through an intensity of dialogue that has emerged in various forms and in various places.
Between the WSF London and this trip to Mexico, I had been incorporating the Zapatistas into my teaching at the University of Bath – particularly in two units: *Researching Social Change* and *Education and International Development*. The insights about the Zapatista orientation and cosmovision as associated to social movements (what they are and can be) and the learning that goes on in them (expectedly and unexpectedly) are immensely engaging and controversial which adds more flavor to critical discussion and learning.

To help me incorporate the example of the Zapatista movement into my teaching, I used a particularly inspiring book that I had encountered in 2009, *The Fire and the Word: A History of the Zapatistas* (by Gloria Rumoz Martinez – 2008) at the Solidarity Economy conference in Hampshire, Massachusetts. From the social research perspective, what I find most interesting about the book *The Fire and the Word* is the way that Gloria presents the ‘histories’ of the Zapatistas – as a series of narratives and images. She prioritizes photography, sketches, diary entries, interviews and her own analyses. These are all woven through the book equally – all modes of representation predominate. I have always hoped that encountering such a diversity of representations helps to create further debates about the politics of representation – in research – and also what counts as research in the first place. And, what stories are the ones that matter? How can historical experience be represented?

My learning about the Zapatistas since 2004 has been in stops and starts, fragmented and intermittent. The time we have just spent in Mexico enabled a tremendous surge of learning more about the Zapatistas through many events and encounters – the Unitierra Zapatismo seminar, reading more literature (from the shelves of Unitierra) and visiting Chiapas – watching historical documentaries about the Zapatistas (at the cultural centre such *Cronica de una Rebelion* and *A Place Called Chiapas*) and visiting Oventic, one of the Zapatista communities – or caracoles (which they are called – see Udi’s posting on Art of Rebellion 2). There is more I could say (much of which engages with the
controversies of the Zapatistas not explored in this post) and a substantial amount that has been written, documented and debated about the Zapatistas. One particular insight I learned from the Zapatistas stands out for me.

This insight is the statement by the Zapatistas that there is currently a total war occurring – in every corner of the world. The Zapatistas call this total war the ‘Fourth World War: The Empire of Money” that is against all of humanity and the Earth (the idea of 4th as following from WWI, WWII and then the Cold War as WWIII). This “Empire of Money” prioritizes extracting and pursuing profit at the expense of everything and anything blocking it. In the Zapatista perspective, this is a war of no fronts – there is no nation against nation, group of nations against another group of nations… it is about imposing an ideology across the entire world – of profit and capital, into every corner of the world. The enemy is everyone – any person or group can be, or is considered an enemy any time that the ‘Empire of Money’ is threatened (the recent media and state resistance to the ‘Occupy Movement’ comes to mind). The Zapatistas explain that within this current war, states (government) are being reduced to puppets of privatization and the multi-national corporate world. Armies are fighting to uphold the strength and spread of this empire – rather than protecting their own nations within their own boundaries. Through globalized forms of exploitation and extortion of profit the ‘Empire of Money’ seeks to capture and control all territory (land) and labour to expand and construct new markets. The ‘Empire of Money’ seeks to destroy any way of life that defies this orientation and organization – anything that allows individuals and communities to exist outside of capital must be destroyed or reduced to a quantifiable exchangeability – cultures, languages, histories, memories, ideas, dreams… The new world/s the Zapatistas are creating threaten the Empire of Money. It is through non-capitalistic (non-profit orientated or non-quantifiable) forms of self-sufficiency, autonomy, hospitality and comunaldad – that is practiced, promoted and studied at Unitierra that this ‘Empire of Money’ is also directly challenged.
the Zapatista insight of a Fourth World War. For example, Gustavo commented toward the end of the seminar that ‘War is everywhere now’. And engaging with the repeated questions of ‘What do we do – what should we do?’ Gustavo commented — ‘The Lacondon jungle is inside of us – we are already in it…’

Many of the young people in the Uniterra seminar room had spoken of their involvement in social and political change – profound frustration with the present challenges and a lack of coherent vision for the future. I remember how several spoke of their lack of knowledge and understanding of political activities prior to the Zapatistas, how wonderful it was for people like Gustavo who were older and had such a rich history of experiences and knowledge. Several also spoke of the importance of ‘searching for light’ — ‘looking for examples that inspire us to invoke the world through thinking of it, imagining it. It is also about acting out of love, hospitality and friendship’.

I remember something very wise that Edgar (Edi) the young Zapotec learner at Uniterra we had met first earlier that day, said during the Zapatismo seminar. He said that Zapatismo is about looking into the mirror at ourselves, seeing our own path, our own choices. It is about looking at the responsibilities that we face and that we choose each and every day.

I left the seminar, my head and my heart full – yet also hungry for more of these encounters, these assemblies, to inspire my imagination to create….