

7 Lessons for Social Justice Activists from the Zapatistas

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I found myself on the eve of 2014 in [San Cristobal de las Casas](#) in the southernmost Chiapas state of Mexico, just above the border with Guatemala. The colonial city's name itself betrays a kind of solidarity with the native peoples of this land: [Bartolomé de las Casas](#) was Christopher Columbus's lesser-known companion, the first Bishop of Chiapas, and a fierce defender of indigenous peoples against enslavement and killing by the colonizers. [When indigenous activists seized this city on January 1st, 1994](#) - the day the NAFTA treaty went into effect – they found the town cheering on their arrival including the [Bishop Samuel Ruiz](#), a modern-day de las Casas.

The [Tzeltal](#) and [Tzotzil](#) peoples call this place *Jovel*, the place in the clouds.

Tonight, the air smells of sparklers and fireworks, mixed with fresh tamales and [ponche de piña](#) made and served in little street carts by poor street vendors. A light-skinned woman wearing pearls and a Happy New Year tiara laughs deeply from inside a corner restaurant. Extravagance and misery commingle in the cool mountain evening.

The Zapatistas are not here in town but rather deep in the [Lacandon Jungle](#) surrounding us, and they've convened a Zapatista Freedom School on the 20th anniversary of their uprising to show activists, journalists and academics from around the world how they've progressed in building their *Gobierno Autónomo* in Chiapas. After the armed uprising of '94 and the success of the Zapatistas in reclaiming and defending huge swaths of land from *rancheros* (Mexican ranchers, or large land-holders), the Mexican government began a strategy of low-intensity military and economic warfare to attempt to isolate, divide and ultimately conquer the growing rebel insurrection. The Zapatistas responded by shifting strategy from armed conflict to non-violent civil resistance, while bolstering and tightening their organizational structures “with a civil and peaceful movement”, as they proclaimed in their [2005 Sixth Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle](#). This movement, in all of its intricate detail, is what I have come down to see in action.

Ten days later, I emerge from the jungle and return to San Cristobal de las Casas with a new perspective on this bold community-building work. And while *Gobierno Autónomo* - truly autonomous and independent structures of governance – may not be the exact aim of every social justice activist, good government undoubtedly begins with governing oneself and then one's local community. Here are 7 lessons I humbly submit to you, based on the very [Principles of Good Government](#) of the Zapatista rebels:

1 -- Lead by Obeying / Obedecer y no Mandar

One of the most unfortunate consequences of living in a society that expends so much money and energy on election campaigns is that political “leaders” become cult figures. The cult of personality has been recognized for centuries to be a threat to real democracy, and is what led the ancient Greeks to establish the [ostrakismos \(ostracism\) that banned overly influential Athenians from society for 10 years](#). Politics should not be a fashion show or a popularity contest. It should be an unglamorous but essential civil service job.

The Zapatistas believe that political leaders are at best public servants, installed on a rotating basis at the local level to serve those particular needs of the local and regional community that can't be fulfilled without collaboration. There are no campaign periods because these jobs are not glorified or lucrative: often times people are elected to positions of authority without them requesting it, and the job never pays a salary. This is not seen as an imposition or burden, because every Zapatista knows they have an obligation to serve their community through their unpaid *trabajo colectivo* (collective work). This work, however, will never take up more than half of their time, so they can focus on their equally-important *trabajo individual* (individual work) in order to provide for their families and themselves.

Imagine if our local political leaders worked only part-time as unpaid public servants and still held jobs to provide for their families. Imagine if they saw their role not as *deciding for us* how we should best live our lives – in consultation, of course, with their corporate masters - but rather *helping us* organize ourselves better to plan initiatives and confront inevitable problems that arise. The most qualified candidates for these jobs would be identified by the entire community in neighborhood assemblies and voted into office democratically. I imagine politicians wouldn't have to spend most of their time campaigning for the next election if the job were framed this way.

2 -- To represent; not replace / Representar y no suplantar

There has been an endless amount of digital pixels splattered on screens in our movement about representative democracy and its failings. I do not know for certain whether representative democracy, or direct democracy, or even democracy in any form, is the best system of governance. I do know that any system that serves the people must be based on the [consent of the governed](#), and that requires trust. When we proclaim “You don't represent us!” I suspect that some of us mean “*You aren't representing us!*” and some of us mean “*You can't represent us!*” I believe both groups have something to learn from the Zapatistas.

The Zapatistas system of governance is based upon the notion of obedience, as described above, and is grounded in the collective trust of the community that all manner of civil conflicts can be resolved within the community by means of dialogue and honest mediation. This shared trust is bolstered by the elders and teachers of the *pueblos* (villages), who remind us that “before the *conquistadores* arrived we indigenous people knew how to govern ourselves”. Self-governance is in their DNA.

Zapatistas take self-governance extremely seriously, as I quickly learned when I arrived to the jungle.

An anecdote:

1/3/14 The [Occupied Wall Street Journals](#) I brought have created a bit of a problem for my *Guardian* – the Zapatista young man who has been put in charge of watching over me during the *Escuelita* (Freedom School). When I gave a copy to him he accepted it, but was concerned that he shouldn't be taking a gift from me without consulting with his superiors first. (Almost all of his superiors, all the way up to the *Junta de Buen Gobierno* – the highest office the *Zona* – are women.)

Today, after breakfast, a woman with a pad of paper tells him to take the gift and any extra copies to the *Junta*. We walk into the *Junta*'s office, which has two large desks and a seating area of benches. It looks strikingly like a NY Courtroom. Almost all women in charge. They take down my name and my organization, three women writing diligently in triplicate. Then, they ask me to come forward and explain myself. It all has a very official feel to it, only slightly betrayed by the quiet, warm grins of the women.

I hand them the 10 copies I have and cautiously leave with my *Guardian*. He tells me they'll take a look at them and then distribute them around the different *Zonas* in order to make sure nobody is left out. I breathe a sigh of relief as I survive my first encounter with the *Junta*.

The Zapatistas understand that the only alternative to the 500+ years of oppression by Europeans is to form their own *Gobierno Autónomo* and not have to depend on the colonists for their well-being. They see good governance and representing the people as key to this strategy. As the sign welcoming us into their territory reads:

YOU ARE IN ZAPATISTA TERRITORY

Here the People Govern and the Government Obeys



3 -- To work from below and not seek to rise / Bajar y no subir

Each Zapatista I spoke to described their *trabajo colectivo* with an almost-religious dedication. The doctor in the health clinic in my *pueblo* described meticulously the pharmacy and each of the herbal medications contained in it. When I asked him about the most common ailments, he responded: fever, stomach aches, and diarrhea. He said he travels by car to nearby *pueblos* to give talks about sanitation and boiling water to remove bacteria. He is unsalaried, and works 8 days a month at the clinic. His travel costs, and all of the costs of the clinic, are not covered by charging patients for healthcare nor adding a premium to the *precio justo* (literally “just price”, at-cost price) of medications. The clinic operates transparently from the profits of a .5 peso premium on all the items sold in the nearby Zapatista store on the main road. If I don’t believe him, I can just look at the clinic’s entire accounting, which is done on a chalkboard in the waiting room of the clinic.

There is a dentist as well – say *Dentista Zapatista* five times fast! – with a state-of-the-art dentist chair in this humble clinic. The dentist did not take out hundreds of thousands of dollars in student loans to earn his career, but was selected by the community to participate in a training program with a visiting Swiss general practitioner five years ago. Today, he does regular cleanings, cavities and other dental work for 20 pesos per visit. That’s about \$1.50 in U.S. dollars. If you’re not a Zapatista, it’s 30 pesos. (I tried unsuccessfully to explain to the Dentist why it costs about 30,000 pesos to treat a cavity in the USA. If in the future I find myself in need of dental work it might be more economical for me to come to him, airfare and 3-hour ride through the jungle all factored in.)

Each of these professionals is doing their *trabajo colectivo* (collective work), and sees it less as a career than an obligation to their community. When I asked if the *mal gobierno* (literally bad government, the term used to refer to the Mexican federal government) had tried to lure them out of their jobs with promises, they acknowledged that this is always happening. Scholarships for young indigenous students, drainage systems, more lucrative jobs, and all manner of alluring offers appear regularly from the *mal gobierno*, but most Zapatistas turn them down out of a very grounded feeling of commitment to their *compañeros/as* (loosely ‘comrades’). Their non-Zapatista neighbors, called *hermanos/as* (brothers/sisters), seem to benefit from this kind of low-intensity economic warfare as the recipients of the many federally-funded schools, roads, hospitals, and other services that otherwise may not have been provided had the Zapatistas not been there vying for their allegiance.

4 -- To serve; not self-serve / Servir y no servirse

Everything for everyone. Nothing for ourselves / *Para todos todo, para nosotros nada*
- Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) slogan

There is a deep culture of mutual aid and support in the Zapatista community, not just in governance but at the local and familial level. A vibrant barter economy and sharing economy exists within the *pueblos*. If a visitor comes to your home during mealtime, it is customary to invite them to eat as well. Hard work is highly-valued, and those who work their *milpa* (your parcel of land to grow corn, beans, etc.) diligently are held up as role models to the youth. “The land belongs to those who work it” is a coveted saying here. By upholding personal responsibility to one’s family and one’s *pueblo*, the Zapatistas ensure that people can take care of themselves and won’t have to rely on the Mexican government for peso-paying jobs or scholarships.

This principle of serving others is not to be construed as self-abdication or some kind of religious asceticism. If anything, it’s the opposite: Zapatista culture revolves around balancing one’s collective and individual work so as to optimize the benefits of both. Tasks that are best done by groups of *compañeros/as* are designated as *trabajo colectivo* and the benefits of this work are shared equally

amongst the community. There's a bakery collective, a health collective, a sheep collective, a livestock collective, even music collectives that organize *mariachi* or traditional music bands. Still, Zapatistas recognize that your collective work should never overrun your life – a lesson many an activist I know can take to heart.

The balaclava masks that *compañeros/as* wear – they call them *pasamontañas*, are another symbol of the unity of the Zapatistas, and are worn whenever travelling or in large Zapatista public gatherings like the *Escuelita*. The masks makes visible one's deep commitment to the organization, and by hiding the face also serves to engender intrigue and hopefully empathy from would-be supporters.

[Subcomandante Marcos](#), one notable and famous Zapatista militant, once told a reporter that his mask was “a mirror” reflecting back to the viewer. To the wearer, the mask also serves to [‘decolonize’ the mind](#) and differentiate the indigenous peoples from their oppressor.

1/13/14 - At lunch my *Guardian* took off his mask to eat. Now I see his young face, probably my same age. His indigenous eyes looked wise and old behind his mask. Now he appears young and vital.

“That’s my cousin over there,” he says to me as he points to a young woman across the way. She has taken off her mask as well and is strikingly beautiful. I wave and she smiles, pointing to my *Guardian* and I can see her mouthing “Mi primo.” My cousin.

5 -- To convince; not conquer / Convencer y no vencer

One corollary of the concept of consent of the governed is that good governance is not imposed by force but grown bottom-up by debate and convincing people. This idea has nearly been lost in many of our so-called “democratic” communities. Elected, or appointed, officials hold sham “public meetings” where they pretend to listen to parents, students, teachers, workers, farmers affected by chemical spills, or some other natural constituency. Then they pull out their BlackBerry and text their friend at the most powerful nearby corporation to let them know that they’ll be safe to keep profiting off of us peons. [It’s no wonder that countless school board meetings keep showing up on YouTube with indignant parents being dragged off by security thugs](#). They’re not listening, let alone trying to convince us!

The thing is it’s easier to conquer than it is to convince. Convincing takes logical argument, consideration of many viewpoints, discussion, debate, revision, reflection, and a good dose of humility. It is far easier to bypass all of that messy democracy stuff and just steamroll through the will of the people. For Zapatistas, that isn’t even an option.

Each new project or proposal in the community triggers a community assembly, where men and women alike gather to discuss pertinent issues. These don’t have to be tiresome, 4-hour meetings, and are often merged with *convivios* (social gatherings, literally “living together”) that include delicious food with leftovers going into family pots for later consumption at home. The spirit of *Resistencia* is what propels these meetings, and as many of learned at Zuccotti Park: consensus is easier to achieve when people are *trying* to agree.

6 -- To construct; not destroy / Construir y no destruir

Anti-exploitation is at the heart of the Zapatista mindset. From the Zapatista hymn:

Nuestro pueblo exige ya / Our people demand now

acabar la explotación / An end to exploitation

nuestra historia dice ya / Our history says now

lucha de liberación / Struggle for liberation!

1/5/13 - My *Guardian's* father and I are standing atop a hill overlooking the village I am staying in. Hundreds of acres of fertile land, once owned by a single *ranchero* who put only his family and friends on it. Now, hundreds of indigenous people – some Zapatistas, others not – live on the land. The elder tells me about an oil company that was preparing a drill rig on the edge of this land in 1994 when the uprising began. After hearing that the Zapatistas had taken over the ranch and the land, the company packed up and left without even a fight. They didn't want to be anywhere near Zapatistas.

The non-destruction principle applies as much to human relationships as to land, as evidenced by the Zapatista's unique justice system. It bears a resemblance to restorative justice, the alternative to a retributive (or punitive) justice system. It sees crime as an offense against an individual or community rather than the state, and seeks to resolve conflicts by restoring justice for all parties injured by the act. (This includes the offender, who has unmet needs as well.)

Alcohol and drugs are prohibited in Zapatista communities, and stigmatized as tools of the *mal gobierno* to keep people down and confused. These stories become mildly believable when one considers the rampant alcoholism in Western society, among all strata of society and also among indigenous [Native Americans](#).

Education is central in Zapatista culture, and autonomous schools exist in each *pueblo* to teach youngsters about their long history of *Resistencia* and self-governance. This is a particular point of pride for Zapatistas, who often recount the story of a Zapatista youth who went through autonomous schooling and then left the region for a non-Zapatista school. Her teacher in this new school was amazed at how proficient she was in all subjects, and knew that she must have come from a Zapatista school. One of the biggest threats to the Zapatistas, however, is the luring away of students from the community with promises of scholarships to state schools. This exploits the Zapatista's highly non-coercive culture, which does not compel people to remain in the organization but rather tries to convince them of its value.

7 -- To propose; not impose / Proponer y no imponer

The last, and perhaps most important, lesson to be learned from the Zapatistas is their breath-taking humility. This derives from a culture of debate and self-reflection rather than steamrolling forward without vision or contemplation. To propose a path forward, and not to impose one, is the ideal of the Zapatista. A common phrase heard around the Freedom School

“Un mundo en que quepan muchos mundos / A world in which many worlds fit”

Is this a [populist](#) movement? A [separatist](#) movement? Neither? Both?

I asked my host uncle this very question at the dinner table, as I could sense he was both up on current events in the world and politically-inclined. The look in his eyes communicated to me that I was unnecessarily complicating the issue. He reminded me of the Zapatista mantra

Here the People Govern and the Government Obeys

This is both populist – the noble ‘people’ versus the elite few – and separatist. But neither term does it justice, and the 21st-century Zapatistas don't view themselves in an insulated bubble but rather as part of a global movement for real democracy and climate justice. They don't aim to take down the

Mexican government, but rather to lift up (or perhaps ground down, in the humbling language of the Zapatistas) the people of Mexico to a grander ideal of living in harmony with each other and the land.

All of this reminds me of the [Declaration of the Occupation of New York City](#), a document which one of its authors described as “a document, like a structure, with space inside for all of us.” It’s a deeply pluralistic movement like ours, bounded only by a commitment to preserving the 500-year tradition of its people against the often-overwhelming onslaught of misinformation and propaganda slung toward it by the destabilizing colonialist forces. It’s a meta-movement, a movement of local movements.

1/6/14 – *La Despedida* / The Goodbye It’s called a *convivio* when people get together like this to just spend some time together, eat, talk, pass the mic, you know.

This *convivio* has *atole*, sweet corn water, and each family comes up to get their bucket-full. *Tamales* too, filled with mashed black beans. We sit with our families as the mic is passed around the crowd for departing words, each mini-speech followed by a short cadence from a live mariachi band stationed at the corner of the open-air auditorium.

“I hope we come to see each other again, but if not, we will be together in heaven,” says the elder of the *pueblo*.

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