

What do you learn at the Zapatista School?

by Jorge Alonso, Envio Journal

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The Zapatistas invited me to enroll in their school, but health problems prevented me from participating. I did join one of the collectives that got the videoconferences and I also received the books. Later they invited me to join their magazine's editorial board. In addition I interviewed several students from the school and reviewed the chronicles of those from Mexico and abroad. Out of 500 pages filled with all this information, here's a brief version of a novel political experience.

Jorge Alonso

In the middle of last year the Zapatistas invited people to participate in what they called “the Zapatista School.” The quota planned for August—1,500 people who would visit their communities to see how they live—filled very quickly.

Subcomandante Marcos wrote that because there were more applications than expected they had decided to repeat the school's first course in both December 2013 and January 2014. Since then 2,250 more have signed up. The Zapatistas prepared themselves for the work while charging that in response to the school the government had reactivated the paramilitaries to cause confrontations.

The first course: What is freedom?

Marcos announced there would be three teams of teachers. The first team would be in charge of housing the participants; the second team would serve as guardians to accompany and care for the visitors; and the third team would teach the courses. For the students who had signed up but were unable to travel they promised the courses as a videoconference. The first course was called “Freedom according to the Zapatistas.” It was explained in various statements that their fellow classmates would be those who had preceded them and fallen in the struggle along the unfinished road to liberty. In an early communiqué they referred to “the land of liberty” i.e. the only nation without borders.

Among those unable to attend were many prisoners who had been invited to symbolize how absurd it is to try to lock up freedom since self-respect isn't controlled by guardians, walls or bars. The invited prisoners responded that a day would come when the doors of the prisons would open for them and the cells would fill with bankers. The Zapatistas promised the prisoners would get the class materials.

The Zapatistas listed not only those who were invited, but also those not invited. Among the latter were legislators who had been on the Harmony and Pacification Commission, the presidents of the registered political parties, heads of the legislative boards and coordinators of the parliamentary benches, the Secretariats of Defense and the Navy, the government surveillance and espionage body, the attorney general, the National Security Commission, the Secretariat for Social Development and the Supreme Court. Also on the not-invited list were the US State Department, the CIA, the FBI and “those who really direct the above agencies to whom they bow and scrape.” If these officials had attended the classes, they would have been able to confirm the persistence of what they have tried so hard to destroy: indigenous autonomy.

Those who attended the course would have “the best in the world” as classmates, although they would

miss many who have been and are very important to the Zapatistas because they've always accompanied, guided and taught the Zapatistas by their example. These are the people in all parts of the world who aren't EZLN but walk the same path. If someone attending the school were to ask why other native peoples of Mexico and the world aren't in the class, the Zapatistas would tell them they weren't invited t's because they are already teachers and the Zapatistas have nothing to teach them. Their very existence already shows that they are the professors of the great world school and don't need lessons. In fact, the Zapatistas have much to learn from these native peoples.

The profile of the student body

Of the 1,500 people who applied for the first class, just over half were men and 1,400 were adults, more than 200 older than 50 and 2 older than 90. Another 200 would attend the course in San Cristobal de las Casas and 200 more would take the course through the videoconferences. The students were from all over the world, among them 34 with doctorate degrees, more than 50 professors and university researchers with published writings translated into 15 languages. More than 100 were actors, directors, musicians, writers, producers, painters, cartoonists, editors, photographers, cultural workers, politicians, lawyers, union organizers and social activists.

Among other characteristics, according to the Zapatistas, the students "have led their lives with complete disregard for power in any form, have been repudiated by their respected social circles for their stubborn nonconformity, have gone against both the accepted consciousness and the police with their actions, have repeatedly shown their rebelliousness and passion for liberty without regard for the consequences and have fought based on their conscience rather than the prevailing mores."

Profile of the faculty

Other communiqués were issued before the first round of classes. The Zapatistas said "the rebellious masses really like to bring everyday happenings to the fore and when the supposed champion of freedom and democracy from up north, i.e. the United States, spies with impunity or commits some atrocity around the planet, the network becomes an irreverent hand that knocks down the scenery hiding power's great obsession to control everything." They reminded people that those on top have learned to cover one scandal with a bigger one, "but haven't figured out that what they're trying to govern no longer exists."

The Zapatistas explained that the only thing one needs to be a disciple in the school is a willingness "to look and learn." The community will be the teaching-learning place. In this school there's no teacher in the old concept but there is a collective that teaches, shows and prepares. Thus a person learns in the community and with the community, and in turn, teaches others.

The Zapatistas recommended that people not expect the traditional school model. They explained that while in the community each student would live with a family who welcomes them and with them would go work in the fields and cook and eat whatever the family has. They reminded the students that Zapatistas are a people who not only have defied the powerful and remained in rebellion and resistance for 20 years, but above all have succeeded in defining Zapatista indigenous freedom as "to govern and be governed in agreement with one's ways, within one's geography and by one's calendar."

The students wouldn't find a model to follow or a manual for how to construct freedom. What they would see is how the Zapatistas live now, knowing that new generations will come and build their own

paths because the concept of freedom “doesn’t hand down slavery.” For the Zapatistas freedom is exercising the right to build one’s own destiny without anyone being in charge and saying yes or no. Freedom is built on rebellion and self-respect knowing that there are other worlds and other ways of doing things and that everyone is going to construct their own identity, which is to say their own sense of self-worth. The students would be distributed in the communities but would always find someone in the Caracoles [their movement’s civilian government, health, educational, sports, political and gathering places, one for each of Chiapas’ five geographic and ethnic zones] who would try to answer questions that arise from their experience.

The crucial role of the “votán”

In their communiqués the Zapatistas kept explaining the role of what they call the “votán” in the school: the backbone of the education, “the guardian and heart of the people.” Each student would be assigned a votán, or tutor, to help him or her understand what freedom is according to Zapatista thinking. The votán would explain the history, what the Zapatistas are doing and want to do, their successes and errors. Together with the votán each student would study the assigned books. At the end, the evaluation wouldn’t be an exam. Reality will do it with a single question: What is freedom according to each student?

They also clarified many other issues, such as the fact that the families they live with wouldn’t accept personal gifts because it destabilizes the community. Anyone who wanted to make a donation should leave it with the main office of the University of the Earth in San Cristobal de las Casas, which would distribute it among the Good Government Boards.

Also, the students hadn’t been invited so they could be recruited but so they could share in the life of the Zapatistas. They suggested that when the students returned from their studies they might say “the Bossy One’s wall is missing a crack.” The students should grasp the organizational strength of such a school that housed, fed and gave them each a votán. This draws attention to the fact that light is born and grows from below and isn’t the product of a leader, boss, caudillo or sage, but of common people.

In these communiqués the Zapatistas also spoke of those they called “the exempt ones,” people who never demanded that the Zapatistas submit to others or abandon their principles. Although they were sometimes critical of the Zapatistas, they were always supportive, showing that support isn’t subordination. They gave as examples of “the exempt ones” some who have died such as Tomás Segovia, José Saramago, Mario Benedetti, Carlos Montemayor, Manuel Vázquez Montalbán and Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez. Among those still living they mentioned Raúl Zibechi, Pablo González Casanova, Luis Villoro, Eduardo Galeano, Daniel Viglietti, Immanuel Wallerstein, Adolfo Gilly, Bishop Raúl Vera, Ernesto Cardenal and various others.

Teaching by narrating life

In their videoconferences for those who couldn’t attend, three women and three men from the base Zapatista communities gave talks based on the four notebooks the Zapatistas prepared for this course with narrations by Zapatistas from the five Caracoles about their daily life and problems, how they resolve these problems and how day by day they are building another world outside of capitalism and the State.

These narrations are of two types—those that synthesize in general terms and those that detail many

cases having to do with all aspects of their lives of resistance and building autonomy.

The Zapatistas are convinced that freedom isn't going to come from the other side and certainly not from corrupt governments because freedom that comes from above is a lie and bad governments talk about a deceptive freedom. By governing themselves autonomously the Zapatistas experience the freedom to propose, study, analyze, discuss and decide. Freedom exists when people can do all that based on their own experience. By governing themselves, everyone decides how to live and no one says what one has to do. It's a collective government that thinks about what it must do for the people and defines and decides this with the direct intervention of the people themselves. The other aspect of freedom among Zapatistas was learning to know what coordination is. They teach that there's a difference between finding freedom and making freedom. They say that until you understand freedom you can't win it.

They teach that freedom has a woman's face and that they've acquired it through equality. In the homes men work together with women and women in the autonomous government don't feel pressured by household obligations. All this is part of the narration-lessons.

7 principles and 13 demands

The autonomous government that the Zapatistas have been building has three levels: communities, autonomous municipalities and the Good Government Boards.

In these three levels they share opinions, debate and make decisions keeping in mind their seven principles: 1) obey rather than order (follow the people's opinion), 2) represent rather than replace (the representative takes into account what people say), 3) go down the ladder of power rather than up (authorities are simply that), 4) serve the people rather than yourself, 5) convince rather than overpower (authorities should analyze the proposals they bring before presenting them to the people), (6) build rather than destroy (be careful with your words), and 7) propose rather than impose (study and analyze before proposing and call assemblies to make decisions).

To these seven principles they add two big inspirations: aspire to cooperate in building a world within which many worlds fit, and follow the principle "everything for everyone and nothing for ourselves." They know their struggle is to benefit everyone.

These seven principles are the governing guide for the autonomous government's three institutions. They are the law, so the government doesn't do what bad ones do, which is the opposite of these principles.

The Zapatistas keep their 13 demands in force: earth, work, food, housing, freedom, independence, democracy justice and peace. Their main governing principle is to rule by obeying and encourage people to join the collective government.

Education, health and agro-ecology

In the autonomous government education is safeguarded but autonomous education doesn't follow official plans. They have kept mathematics and reading and writing, but added environment and integration. The people appoint the education promoters. The first ones receive training then train those who follow. There's also what they call "leveling" which means there are no exams because knowing is

proven in the doing.

Another important area for the autonomous government is health, where women play important roles, and there are herbalists, midwives and a sort of massage-healer. They've revived these traditions so they don't depend on the medicines of bad governments, which are just a business. But the most important aspect of health is prevention of illness. There are trained health promoters. They have clinics, laboratories, workshops where they even make dentures, micro-clinics and central clinics, all of which are coordinated. They've created an autonomous bank to give credit for health care and the governing boards make very low-interest loans. Whoever can't pay pays with sweat equity.

They have an area of autonomous agro-ecology. The governing boards promote collective work to support the authorities, who aren't paid, so they can attend to other needs. Fair trade is privileged in the marketing of coffee and there are artisan coops. The local authority coordinates with the municipal governments which in turn coordinate with the Good Government Boards. All is controlled by a combination of the three levels of government for the benefit of the people.

This is democracy and this is resistance

The fundamental aspect of Zapatista democracy is that the autonomous authorities are appointed by assemblies, which are also where many of the ideas come from, not all of which can be implemented. Although the best method is to decide by consensus, if that's not possible it's done by vote. The winning proposal is adopted and those who promoted the losing proposal accept it.

Zapatistas know that the idea that doesn't win wasn't because it's no good. And if the adopted idea doesn't work, they can look again at what solution to follow. There are processes and changes and they can end up trying all proposals. This happens at all government levels. Democracy is built from the smallest elements. All along one can offer ideas and make decisions. The assemblies are often protracted due to the time needed to reach agreement. Both the authorities and the people know they can make mistakes and also correct them.

There's autonomous social, economic, ideological, psychological, cultural and political resistance. There's resistance to the military presence, paramilitary attacks and economic attacks by the bad government that encourages splits in the communities. The Zapatistas say political parties are made to divide so peoples can't have an opinion on how they want to live. They say parties put forth the ideology of voting so people will think that even if there's just the vote it's democracy. They believe that change doesn't come from government but from people at the grassroots level when they decide what they want to do. This is participatory democracy and so they resist.

The Zapatistas posit that bad government wants to make people believe that the new governing officials will do what the previous government failed to do. But it's all pretense because "their heart isn't with the people." What's important to them is money and power. They're convinced that the three official branches of government serve to destroy resistance in the country by coopting and weakening social struggles. The Zapatistas have thus organized themselves in resistance.

The Zapatistas don't need big buildings to build a government in resistance. When they began, some municipalities had borrowed houses or a roof without walls. They didn't have the capacity to build. Even today their offices are humble and small. They don't need a grand site or a salary. Officials of the

autonomous governments make their own food and wash their own clothes. Bad government thinks it must give orders and its authority figures come across as well-cared for and powerful. They use public policies to control people. The Zapatistas tell the bad government its programs are deceitful and tell the parties they don't want their programs.

They do for themselves

The narrations we heard in the Zapatista School show how they've been exercising living autonomous power with no need to relate to bad government. They've used the solidary support they've received from outside, but have done most everything themselves. The outside support has allowed them to build some schools and clinics. The autonomy is so people will have the power to decide what form of political, economic, ideological and social organization they want with a dynamic that comes from the bottom up.

While land is a commodity in capitalism, the Zapatistas defend it and with their collective work both survive and give their autonomy life. They resolve everything with direct action. They want nothing from the government and have demonstrated that they do what they propose. Half the results of their work is for the collective and the other half is for each family. After so many years of capitalism they are resisting it, which is hard, but they're making progress.

This is justice

In the Zapatista School they share how autonomous justice works. There are some minor crimes in their areas such as stealing of animals. When that happens, the offended party comes to the autonomous authority and a solution is reached, which is either returning the stolen animal or paying for it. There are also problems of alcohol, domestic violence and infidelity. In all cases they seek solutions through agreements. The authorities aren't ruled by cronyism. If a family member of an official commits an offense, the authority figure can't take that person's side. Zapatistas are careful that justice not be corrupted or bought. The guilty party is punished, but through collective work, not money.

There are no written regulations. Each zone has its own forms of justice. The only thing common to all the zones is the seven principles. Punishment depends on the size of the crime. The autonomous municipalities are where they take care of problems that can't be resolved locally. They know everything has a solution so you just have to look for it. The most important aspect is to investigate what happened. The parties are called and the authority witnesses the agreement. No cruel punishments are handed down and care is taken not to affect the families and to ensure that human rights always prevail. The authorities learn from each case presented, aware that they might be wrong. If the case isn't analyzed well, it's amended.

How they're facing government harassment

The bad government attacks Zapatista land and seeks confrontation in order to throw them off it. It pressures them by taking away their water. Official public land authorities pressure them to pay land and electricity tax and if they don't they are persecuted and thrown out of their communities.

The bad government's programs cause confrontations in the communities. It gives out alcoholic

beverages in the communities to make both the Zapatistas and non-Zapatistas consume them and provoke fights. It tries to destroy the shared life of the communities and incite invasions of their lands, and it seeks to sell off the natural resources and the biodiversity. Despite the provocations, the Zapatistas always seek nonviolent solutions.

A path of trial and error

The Zapatistas have been experimenting in their autonomous government and have made tiered changes so as not to lose experience. The presence of women has been increasing in the Good Government Boards. Some proposals don't turn out well because their consequences weren't calculated. In everything, they've adopted a process of trial, error and correction of errors through collective discussion.

The Zapatistas recognize failures needing correction and the path they need to travel. But some who become discouraged on that path go back to the bad government. That's a particular problem in communities where there are few Zapatistas and they become disheartened in their resistance.

The Zapatista communities make self-respect and dignity a priority. There are traditions they preserve and others—such as the subjugated role of women—they don't. While at first they wanted to take power by arms, they quickly realized that people can build everything they need. They are continuing on the nonviolent path not because they're afraid but because they want life. As a whole the Zapatistas haven't responded to the provocations of the bad government. Their experience demonstrates that another way of living and resisting is possible.

In the classrooms of living together

In the school there was mutual learning; the students learned about the Zapatistas' daily life and those who were in contact with the students asked questions about their visitors' life. It was a fellowship of social organization, their surroundings and mother earth. The testimonies were very profound and one didn't perceive any coercion or submission in the man-woman-nature relationship. An in-depth way of thinking, imagining and acting was validated. There was a palpable atmosphere of freedom. People shared knowledge, life lessons, experiences and feelings and learned about the Zapatista geography. They were able to grasp the Zapatista organization with its idea of freedom that comes from autonomous resistance, family self-reliance projects and expenses for running the three levels of autonomous government.

The Zapatistas aren't interested in convincing those above of the importance of their project but they do want to share with those from below like themselves how they confront and resolve problems. Those who attended this experience tasted Zapatista freedom and in the process became aware of radical democracy and practices outside of capitalism. Learning came about through living and sharing life.

They learned that autonomous power comes from collective acts. Those who attended the school understood that the Zapatista view of freedom comes from their history, culture and the land they live on and care for. They are free because they are owners of their organizational models and their decisions, which are made through consensus, little by little, with everyone's input and with patience and experimenting in a horizontal manner without imposing ideas.

They propose, discuss and hammer out agreement with everyone participating at each governmental level. In this freedom they resolve their main demands and needs for food, housing, education and health. In this freedom what is difficult becomes possible, sadness and happiness are shared and the distance between those who give orders and those who obey disappears in favor of new forms of relations.

Through the looking glass

In November 2013 a new magazine was announced in which the Zapatistas' evaluation of the School would be published. They promised there would be words by guardians, teachers and families expressing their thoughts and feelings about those who came to learn.

The first edition of *Rebeldía Zapatista* appeared with the Zapatistas' words this February. In it support bases, guardians and teachers in the school from the five Caracoles reflected on the experience and evaluated the performance and work of the students who had come to the Zapatista territory.

They were also preparing another magazine that will be called *A través del Espejo* (Through the Looking Glass). Instead of a writing committee they would have a body of "associates against capitalism," a mixed group that would encourage the building of a tool that in these dark times would show the existence of a thinking other than that which leads to resignation and grief. After the school the idea of mirrors was no longer sufficient; one had to go through them. The first edition of the magazine gathered the chronicles, feelings and analyses of the meaning of the Zapatista School.

A different educational and political logic

Prior to the appearance of this magazine Raúl Zibechi, who participated as a student in the Zapatista School, reflected that the school's logic is opposite that of traditional political culture given that it's not about listening to leaders but rather about sharing daily life with ordinary people.

Each student could formulate the most varied questions in the daily life they shared. There will be a before and an after of this school with a slow impact that will make itself felt in a few years. It was a non-institutional educational experience in which the community was the subject that educated. Selecting seeds to scatter around, their germination can't be planned. It was a different way of learning.

An unprecedented experience

Zibechi underscored his realization that the Zapatistas had beaten the counterinsurgent social policies used to divide, co-opt and put down rebel peoples and saw beside the Zapatista communities the pro-government ones that had succumbed to government gifts. What is relevant is that thousands of families are continuing to move forward without accepting anything from the government. Knowledgeable about many Latin American processes, Zibechi stressed that he knew of no other movement on the continent that would have been able to neutralize the government's social policies with such firmness and ability to sacrifice. This teaches us that it's possible to defeat dependence-creating social welfare policies. He perceived a comprehensive autonomy and testified to the fact that the Zapatista families live their lives outside the world of capital and the State.

He also verified that collective work is the motor for the process. He saw men cooperating in domestic work and the care of their children when the women had to do their work as officials. He admired the affectionate and respectful family relationships filled with harmony and good feelings. He didn't detect violence or aggressiveness in the home. He was amazed by the great number of young Zapatistas. He verified that those who rule obey the people's wishes and noted that it's the first time a revolutionary movement has achieved an experience of this type, as up to now revolutionaries have reproduced academia's intellectual molds with an above and a below. The students lived this experience with the Zapatista families and learned firsthand, with all their senses.

The pedagogy of accompaniment

The world can never be the same for those coming out of the school. Neil Harvey highlighted several lessons learned: the Zapatistas had shown him how one can respond in an inclusive and creative manner to the problems one is facing. They showed him that rehabilitation is the best justice for establishing greater security and avoiding corruption because rehabilitation based on collective work and learning a trade allows for reintegration into the community and stops the continuation of crimes.

For Miguel Concha the School was full of experiences, learning and hope. He appreciated the opportuneness of the course since movements, collectives and social organizations need to keep weaving together their knowledge with peoples in resistance. The school demonstrated to him that another world is possible. In one week of encounters the people who attended were able to verify the advances of the Zapatista struggle through the pedagogy of accompaniment, care and humility.

No recipes

What stood out the most in this complex horizontal educational process was that there were no recipes for copying these experiences. Rather one saw how the Zapatista communities are creating autonomy in their daily lives and showing this is possible by living their freedom.

The Zapatistas invited those from very different parts of the country to reflect creatively on their own collectives and how they can inspire the building of another world that is not only possible but already exists.

Jorge Alonso is a researcher for CIESAS West and the envío correspondent in Mexico.