

Why We Loved the Zapatistas

by Bhaskar Sunkara



Illustration by Daniel Haskett

At the age of twenty-two, creeping towards a bachelor's in something practical, Ian Harris looked destined to join the ranks of the smug and overpaid—maybe as a marketing manager, podiatrist, or motivational speaker. His plans changed abruptly when he, by chance, attended a Progressive Student Network conference in Washington. The theme of the gathering was the hemisphere's emerging people's movements. Ian insists that his activist bona fides didn't run much deeper than owning a Rage Against the Machine album, but it's clear he had a sense of history. There were just and noble stirrings of the exploited and he was on their side. The year was 1994; Larry Hunter was drafting a Contract with America, Vanilla Ice was sporting dreadlocks, and Ian Harris was off to Chiapas.

“Zapatourism” saw thousands of activists descend on the southern Mexican state. Merchants in places like Tierra Adentro sold revolutionary knickknacks and handcrafts to international adventurers, while graduate students back home sold M.A. theses about “mobilizing frames under transitional conditions” and “countermovement synergy” to tenure tracks. The global climate and local conditions couldn't have been more different, but those who actually made it to Mexico were in the tradition of the Venceremos Brigade and the North Star Network. Far from passive observers, activists delivered aid, performed human rights observations, installed irrigation, and repaired infrastructure, generally conducting themselves like model internationalists. Still, Ian's stories from the front are mostly about chronic diarrhea and mosquitoes. And today, a partner in a law firm, he is by his own admission smug and overpaid.

Context

During the Cold War-era, even for many leftists critical of the Soviet Union, attempts to pull societies in the periphery out of poverty and underdevelopment evoked romantic sentiments. Faith in the historic potential of the universal class, the proletariat, was sidelined. The Maoist exalted the peasantry; the Fanonite praised the *lumpenproletariat*. Photogenic Latin American guerrillas, Chinese provincials, and mid-level military officers across the rest of the Third World seemed poised to offer a shortcut to modernity and progress. Socialist enclaves were to compete with, and eventually supersede, capitalism from without.

Even before the Eastern Bloc's collapse, the luster had faded from Third World nationalism. Julius Nyerere's decentralized “African socialism,” based on village cooperatives, turned Tanzania from the leading exporter of agricultural products on the continent to its largest importer. The region's classically Stalinist development schemes—in Angola, Mozambique and Ethiopia—suffered more calamitous fates. Lauded revolutionaries in Vietnam and Cuba lost their mystique as well. In Vietnam, victory against the United States proved to be Pyrrhic. Left to rule over a poisoned landscape, with millions dead, national liberation forces sought rapprochement with both international capital and their former adversaries. In Cuba, the fervor and charisma of the early stages of the revolution transmuted itself into something indistinguishable from the quiet repression and stagnation of Brezhnev's Russia.

With the fall of the Berlin Wall and the avowal of an end to History, another bonfire of illusion spread through the breadth of the Left. Eurocommunists shed all pretense and fully embraced liberalism. Postcolonial states abandoned import substitution and fiendishly courted foreign investment. Venerable social democratic parties fell under the sway of Third Way modernizers. All, whether with delight or remorse, recognized there was no systemic outlook on the world stage to rival free market capitalism. Perry Anderson put it bluntly, “Whatever limitations persist to its practice, neoliberalism as a set of principles rules undivided across the globe: the most successful ideology in world history.”

Those who clung to anti-capitalism looked for social forces to break this consensus. They again found inspiration abroad. For a new wave of Western activists, rejecting Stalinism meant resigning Marxist analysis and “Old Left” patterns of organization in favor of post-operaismo and anarchism. John

Holloway's *Change the World Without Taking Power* replaced Vladimir Lenin's *The State and Revolution*. To this audience the Zapatista Army of National Liberation's (EZLN) 1994 rebellion in the southern Mexican state of Chiapas took on, disproportionate to its actual import, the significance the Petrograd rising had to earlier generations.

The history of Chiapas is a tragic one. The 16th century Spanish conquest cut the Mayan population in half. Not passive victims, the natives fought back—most notably in a 1712 revolt—but they were burdened by disease and faced violent repression. In time, elites from the north would descend on the region, establishing self-sufficient estates with limited links to the world market. A shift occurred around the turn of the 20th century, under the dictatorship of Porfirio Diaz, when Mexico embraced a model of export-oriented growth. Industrialization in Europe produced demand for food stuffs and raw materials in the periphery. A modernized elite with a taste for imported manufactured goods commanded a more centralized state and new commercial sectors and advanced social classes appeared.

The ensuing Mexican revolution's land reform barely impacted the region, but during the 1930s presidency of populist Lázaro Cárdenas the indigenous became organized within *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI) dominated labor unions and peasant organizations. Nonetheless, large landowners continued to consolidate estates, leaving a growing local population with dwindling parcels of land.

Elsewhere, Mexico City was an epicenter of the worldwide student and worker upsurge of 1968. Progressives organized strikes and boycotts against the party-state and came close to toppling the government. State authorities clamped down mercilessly, murdering hundreds in the Tlatelolco Massacre just days before the opening of the Summer Olympics. Faced with new levels of repression, activists went underground to take up the mantle of urban guerrilla.

Conditions within the country lead young revolutionaries down a lonely path—facing an unpopular government, but disconnected from the working class. After a period of intense activity in the early 70s, the insurgency was suppressed. Over a thousand were killed, many more simply “disappeared.” Prominent guerrilla groups like the Maoist *Fuerzas de Liberación Nacional* (FLN) vanished as quickly as they had appeared.

In Chiapas, however, militancy was on the uptick. An “Indigenous Congress” was established in the mid-70s and by 1979 over two dozen peasant organizations would declare themselves autonomist. The ruling class responded with a new campaign of violence and state terror. It was under these conditions that Subcomandante Marcos and a handful of comrades from the FLN arrived in the Lacandon Jungle in 1983. Within a decade they would forge ties with the local indigenous communities and swell their ranks to hundreds of armed members.

In the early 1990s with the ratification of NAFTA and the amendment of the revolution-era constitution to rollback land reform and allow for widespread privatization, Zapatista communities approved a military offensive. On January 1, 1994, coinciding with NAFTA's implementation, 3,000 EZLN cadre occupied towns and ranches through the state.

Post-modern, Post-marxist, Post-material

After a brief armed revolt, the revolutionaries shifted their focus to alternative forms of resistance. Central to their effort was outreach to Western activists. The rebels produced communiqués and hosted chic guests. Thousands attended their first *encuentro* in 1996. Outfitted with a black ski mask, pipe, laptop, and a taste for pithy aphorisms, the group's enigmatic spokesperson captured the imagination of hero-starved radicals. *No Logo* author Naomi Klein, a star of the postmodern Left in her own right,

wrote:

[Subcomandante] Marcos, the quintessential anti-leader, insists that his black mask is a mirror, so that ‘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 10 p.m., a peasant without land, a gang member in the slums, an unemployed worker, an unhappy student and, of course, a Zapatista in the mountains’. In other words, he is simply us: we are the leader we’ve been looking for.

Their ambiguous pluralism and overtures to the politics of identity seemed a perfect counter to the “one-size fits all” ideologies and monochromatic leaders of the Old Left.

Considered in context the EZLN’s tactics made perfect sense. The *foquismo* model was discredited. Where guerrilla movements still—nominally at least—contended for state power, in Colombia and Peru, the struggle had degenerated into violence against the masses themselves or wanton criminality. The Zapatistas knew they were outclassed by the army and isolated from Mexican society at large. Hoisting the red and black in the capital was not on the agenda. Their goals were ambitious, but also simple and immediate—they wanted to create an autonomous zone free of state repression and neoliberal reforms. They planned to link their struggles with other groups from across the political spectrum to oust the PRI, an ouster that would give them more room to operate. They knew that solidarity from abroad and favorable media coverage could help blunt the military’s retaliation and buy them time.

Why the *encuentros* had such an effect on the international Left is harder to understand. Certainly the Zapatistas’ ethos was compatible with allies increasingly skeptical of both industrial growth and, after the nightmare of official Communism, state power. Revolutionaries at the turn of the 20th century sought to overturn class cleavages, a social fixture since the Neolithic Revolution. A century later, their successors aspired only to “resist” and free space from concentrated power—to negate, not create. The enemy was no longer capitalism; it was neoliberalism. Its gravedigger, not an organized working class, but a fragmented “multitude”:

On the ground, the results of these miniature protests converging is either frighteningly chaotic or inspiringly poetic — or both. Rather than presenting a unified front, small units of activists surround their target from all directions. And rather than build elaborate national or international bureaucracies, temporary structures are thrown up instead: empty buildings are hastily turned into ‘convergence centres’, and independent media producers assemble impromptu activist news centres. The ad hoc coalitions behind these demonstrations are frequently named after the date of the planned event— J18, N30, A16, S11, S26 — and when the date is passed, they leave virtually no trace behind, save for an archived website.

Klein collides with the truth by accident. After an “inspiringly poetic” protest, the movement she champions “leave[s] virtually no trace behind.” There is an unmistakable enamoring of pageantry as opposed to concrete social transformation—that which can be examined empirically. The new, post-ideological, Left, marred by anti-intellectual and anti-modernist ethos, drifted in a disconnect from both working class politics and structural critiques of capitalism. It was sustained by sentiment alone.

Sentiment also provided the lens through which movements in the global South were viewed. Not quite the liberated paradise the imagination invites, Chiapas is a deeply impoverished region without much to show for almost two decades of revolution. Illiteracy stands at over 20 percent, basic public services

like running water, electricity, and sewage are luxuries, and infant mortality runs double the national average. It would be absurd to admonish the Zapatistas for failing to overcome generations of poverty in a single sweep, but is it too much to ask their privileged supporters abroad to pay more attention to the material conditions in Chiapas and less on the innovative ways they use their laptops to conjure “resistance”?

Resistance is, after all, a futile, symbolic act unless it leads to material change. The frequent appearance of the black bloc, a tactic in which activists don black masks to engage in ritualistic property destruction, alienating the larger mass of protestors in the process, epitomizes the new spirit. The irony is that, whatever their faults, the FLN cadre from the cities that traveled to the Lacandon Jungle took care to understand their surroundings and the local population. Yet many of those whom they’ve inspired have formed elitist cliques, engaging in the paramilitary nihilism, fetishizing physical confrontation with the police, preferring personal acts of rebellion in the here and now over the unglamorous job of organizing a conscious class movement. “Educate, Agitate, Organize” has faded into “Agitate, Agitate, Agitate!”

The abandonment of Marxism had more than academic consequences. With it we lost a post-capitalist vision and began to see the world in a vacuum of time and space. We lost the organizations it had taken generations to build. We spoke of the working class in the past-tense or with contempt. We took a noble struggle and turned it into a model for action.

We loved the Zapatistas, because they were brave enough to make history after the end of History. We loved the Zapatistas, because we were afraid of political power and political decisions. We loved the Zapatistas, because we thought we could do without a century and a half of baggage. But we could have done far more for the Zapatistas if we mounted a better challenge to the system that shackles us all — neoliberalism. I mean capitalism.

¹ Naomi Klein, “Farewell to the End of History: Organization and Vision in Anti-Corporate Movements,” *The Socialist Register*, vol. 38 (2002): 3.

² Klein, *Ibid.*, 5-6.