

Zapatista Children and the Secrets of War

“Children can make wars and loves, meetings and misunderstandings”

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La Realidad, Chiapas, Mexico: The children of the Zapatista-sympathizing autonomous municipalities of Chiapas seem introverted, but they live in freedom and equality. They look extremely timid, but are really sociable and caring. They appear to be unfriendly, but they are both affectionate and dignified. At their young age, they already know war... but also love.

In the rebel towns of the Mexican state of Chiapas, there are dozens, hundreds, thousands of boys and girls struggling among war and poverty. They are an active part of the Zapatista revolution.

“We live in a bit of poverty, a little bit,” Hugo, 12, told us in this Zapatista village. “But the important thing is that we are happy and free, the same as our parents.”

This boy has lived alone with his mother since he was three. Still very young, he took on an adult role in the family, cutting firewood, clearing paths and grinding coffee, and participating in communal work. All families here, as in other Zapatista towns, must send representatives to help in communal projects.

During part of the year, he must attend school as well.

Now, however, is the time of the year when people in these autonomous lands sow their fields, especially their cornfields, and classes are suspended.

While the youngest are on vacation, high-school students attend classes to learn to be teachers. Soon, they will be teaching the youngest children.

Subcomandante Marcos, in his 2001 communiqué [“The Devils of the New Century \(The Zapatista Children in the Year 2001, Seventh Year of the War Against Oblivion\).”](#) wrote:

This is not a political text. It is about Zapatista boys and girls, about those who were, about those who are, and about those who are to come. It is, therefore, a text of love... and war.

Children can make wars and loves, meetings and misunderstandings. Unpredictable and unwitting magicians, children play and go about creating the mirror which the world of adults avoids and detests. They have the power to change their environment, and to turn, for example, an old frayed hammock into a modern airplane, into a cayuco, into a car in



Zapatista boys riding on the roof of a bus from the autonomous municipalities.
Photo: Alex Contreras Baspineiro, D.R. 2004

order to go to San Cristóbal de Las Casas. A simple doodle, traced with the pencil which La Mar provides them with for these occasions, gives them the artillery for recounting a complicated history in which “last night” can encompass hours or months, and “in a bit” could mean “the next century,” in which (is anyone in doubt?) they are heroes and heroines. And they are, but not just in their fictitious histories, but also, and above all, in the fact of their being indigenous boys and girls in the mountains of the Mexican southeast.

Nine are the circles of Dante’s inferno. Nine the prisons which confine indigenous children in Mexico: hunger, ignorance, illness, work, mistreatment, poverty, fear, forgetting and death.

– Subcomandante Marcos, “Los Diablos del Nuevo Siglo,” translated by Irlandesa

The Indigenous Culture

Most of the Zapatista children walk barefoot; very few of them wear sandals. They are hard workers, and expert swimmers in the rivers. While the girls help wash clothes at the river, the boys catch crayfish.

They learn to ride horses at an early age. “They are our toys. Like other kids have bicycles, we have horses,” a boy named Ramón told us.



Children drawing in a reporter’s notebook, in La Realidad.

Photo: Alex Contreras Baspineiro, D.R. 2004

When Zapatista children see an “outsider,” they don’t talk to him or her at first, as their parents and the community have instructed them. Later, they will approach to ask the visitor for all of his or her personal details, and rush to tell their parents the result of their little interrogation.

After staying for several days in this town in the Lacandon Jungle, a group of children and I sat drawing in my reporter’s notebook.

“Where do you come from?” asked Luciana, a girl of about 10.

“From Bolivia,” I answered, “do you know where that is?”

“Ah! Where ‘Che’ Guevara lived,” she said.

“No,” Hugo corrected her, “where Ernesto Guevara died.”

The Zapatista children get a very different education from the formal education system. Indigenous culture, math, health, history and the rights of the poor are the priorities. They do not have the programs of the federal and state governments in mind.

Once they start talking, the children will stealthily start to offer visitors crafts, bags, shirts, snail shells (“caracoles,” popular souvenirs from the main Zapatista support communities, also called *caracoles*), and other things handmade by Zapatista women. They are talented salespeople.

The children in La Realidad cannot take anything from someone from outside the community – especially not food, drink or candy. They know that they are in a war.

“Strangers from the bad government could give us something that does bad things to us, that is why we

don't accept anything," said a girl named Matilde.

Although almost all the children who live in La Realidad are indigenous Tojolabal people, the education they receive is in Spanish. The goal is that they learn to fend for themselves in the world.

A Dramatic Situation

Before the Zapatista uprising, the children of Chiapas were the primary victims of "poverty diseases." Intestinal, respiratory and skin infections, combined with the lack of medical care, took many lives.

"Now the situation has improved," Nayoly, secretary of health for the La Realidad Good Government Council, told us. "We have our own micro-clinics, where natural and [western] medicine are combined. We have healthcare in the five *caracoles* and we are improving."

In the indigenous communities of Chiapas, childhood malnutrition reaches 80%. 72% of the children do not even manage to complete the first year of primary education. And, in all indigenous homes, boys and girls, from the age of 4, must cut down and carry fire wood in order to eat. In order to break those circles, they must fight very much, always, even from the time they are children. They must fight fiercely. Sometimes they must make war, a war against the forgetting.

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Not only in this nomadic village, but in all Zapatista communities, boys and girls are growing up and becoming youngsters and adults in the midst of a war. But, contrary to what might be thought, the teachings they receive from their towns are not of hate and vengeance, even less of desperation and sadness. No, in the mountains of the Mexican southeast, the children are growing up learning that "hope" is a word spoken collectively, and they are learning to live dignity and respect for the different. Perhaps one of the differences between these children and those from other areas, is that these are learning from the time they are little to see the morning.

More and more boys and girls will continue to be born in the mountains of the Mexican Southeast. They will be Zapatistas, and, as such, they will not manage to have a guardian angel. We, "poor devils," will have to care for them until they are big. Big like us, the Zapatistas, the most small...

– Subcomandante Marcos, "Los Diablos del Nuevo Siglo"

The boys and girls that were five or ten years old when the revolutionary process began are now teenagers and adults. Many have their own families, and share their experiences with their children.

A Quiet Role

Although women have the most quiet role in the autonomous rebel towns, Comandante Bernal told us that their participation is vital – not only in the family, but in the community as well.

The work of a Zapatista woman usually begins before four in the morning, and ends only before she goes to bed. In



Girls in the village of Elambó Alto, part of the municipality of Zinacantán.

Photo: Alex Contreras Baspineiro, D.R. 2004

Chiapas, indigenous women are very reserved. But as Zapatistas, they also fight for their own rights as women. Speaking about dignity and courage, they often directly confront the military and police.

The families in the town of La Realidad are often very large. They have an average of seven children. A male of 16 or 17 and a female of 14 or 15 are considered old enough to be married.

“In these communities, we are all equal,” said Bernal. “We need to set an example for our children not only with words but with deeds. It is most important that they see this, and follow our example.”

The Zapatistas consider their children an important pillar of their communities for the work and activities they do. At the end of the day, the children are benefiting from this difficult process of change, and in a revolution there is nothing more important than that.

As we were leaving La Realidad, on one of the busses of the autonomous municipalities, Hugo, the little boy of 12, came running towards us. He called out to me and, very solemnly, presented me with a *caracol* – a snail shell.

“It will bring you luck,” he said.