

The Art of Building a New World: Freedom According to the Zapatistas

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As the media stopped paying attention, many believe that the Zapatista rebellion no longer exists. Quietly, away from the spotlight and cameras, they have deepened their autonomous construction to the point that one can now speak of a different society, governed by rules, codes, and laws distinct from those of the mainstream world.

At his six-year old height, Carlos Manuel hugs his father's waist as if he'll never let go. He looks up at the ceiling and smiles. Julián, his father, tries to escape.

The child gives up, but stays close to his dad. Irma, his eight year-old sister, observes from the kitchen corner where their mother, Esther, is working over a woodstove, flipping the corn tortillas that are still the staple food of rural families. The three other children, including the oldest, 16 year-old Francisco, observe the scene that is repeated like a ritual at every meal. The kitchen is a place for talking, for chats that spread slowly like the smoke that rises above the zinc rooftop. The words are as frugal and flavorful as the food: beans, corn, coffee, bananas and some vegetables, all planted without chemicals and harvested and processed by hand. Chicken raised out in the open countryside has a different flavor, like all of the food in this Tojolabal community.

Upon finishing, they all wash their own plates and spoons, even the father, who at times helps prepare the food. I ask if this is normal in these parts, and they tell me that it is customary in Zapatista communities. But not in the communities of the "bad government," those they call the "PRI brothers" without sarcasm. The communities that bear a red star over a black background receive food and vouchers from the government. The government builds brick

houses with floors for them.

Throughout the week there wasn't a single gesture of aggression between mother, father, and children. Not even a grumpy or reproachful one. It seems the prohibition of alcohol softens human relations. The women are the ones who most enjoy the changes. "I can tell the Zapatistas by the way they carry themselves, especially the women," journalist Hermann Bellinghausen remarks.

The day the world ends

This new chapter in the Zapatista history began December 21, 2012, a day marked by the media as the end of the world, and for the Maya, the beginning of a new era. Tens of thousands of EZLN support bases amassed in the five Caracoles, or local government seats, in Chiapas, the same ones taken over January 1, 1994. The reappearance of the Zapatistas shocked a large part of Mexican society. Not only had they not disappeared, but they had resurfaced with more force, showing they were able to mobilize a significant amount of people in military formation, without weapons.

In a December 30 communiqué, Subcomandante Marcos assured that "over the years we have gotten stronger, and we have significantly improved our living conditions. Our standard of living is higher than those of indigenous communities who receive handouts from the government and waste them on alcohol and other useless things." He adds that unlike what happens in communities linked to the PRI, in Zapatista communities, "women are not sold as merchandise, "and that "indigenous PRI members go to our hospitals, clinics and laboratories because there isn't any medicine, equipment, doctors or qualified personnel in those run by the government. "

Some of this could be substantiated by those who attended the Zapatista Little School from August 12-16. Only "fellow travelers" were summoned to the school, which is a profound shift in Zapatista methods of relating to civil society.

“From now on, our word will be selective in its destination, and, except on limited occasions, will only be able to be understood by those who have, and who continue to, walk without surrendering to current media trends,” the communiqué reads.

Subcomandante Marcos adds that “very few will have the privilege” of coming to know the other way of doing politics. In a series of communiqués titled “Us and Them,” the Zapatistas emphasized the differences between the culture of the political system and Zapatista “culture from below,” asserting that they are not proposing “to build a large organization with a governing center, a centralized command, or a boss, whether individual or group. ”

The Zapatistas emphasize that unity of action should respect diversity in ways of doing things. “Any attempt at homogeneity is nothing more than a fascist attempt at domination; in this way it’s concealed under revolutionary, esoteric, religious, or other language. When speaking of ‘unity,’ they don’t tell you that that ‘unity’ is under the command of someone or something—individual or collective. At the fallacious altar of ‘unity,’ differences are sacrificed and the persistence of all of the small worlds of tyranny and injustice we suffer is hidden.”

To understand this approach, which led the Zapatistas to pioneer “The Little School” (La Escuelita) in August, you have to understand the problems they came across in relations with the electoral Left, and also with people who, in their opinion, “appear when there are soapboxes and disappear when it’s time for the silent work.” The logic of the Little School is the opposite of that political culture. It is not a matter of going to listen to the *comandantes* or Subcomandante Marcos, but rather, to share everyday life with ordinary people. It’s not a matter of a rational discursive transmission of codified knowledge. It’s something else: experiencing a reality that can only be accessed through the ritual of

commitment, or being and sharing.

A new life

“We don’t have difficulties anymore,” says Julian, sitting on a rustic wood stool in his tin roofed house with wooden walls and an earthen floor. He says this casually, opposite someone who has been sleeping on wood panels, barely covered by a light blanket for four days. Julian joined the clandestine organization in 1989. Marcelino, my guardian, or *Votán*, joined earlier, in 1987. They speak with delight of the clandestine meetings in remote mountain caves, dozens of Zapatistas arriving by night, while the bosses and their *capangas* slept. They would walk all night, barely returning at dawn to start the workday. Women would make them tortillas in the dark so that they wouldn’t arouse suspicion. All things considered, he’s right when he says that the worst is behind them—the *hacendado’s* whip, humiliation, hunger, violence, and the rape of daughters. On January 1, 1994, the *hacendados* fled, and the *capangas* ran behind them. The *8 de Marzo* community where I arrived with fourteen other student-outsiders (half of them Mexican, a 75 year old Yankee, one from France, one from Colombia, two Argentines and a Uruguayan) is on land that was one day occupied by Pepe Castellanos. His brother, Absalón, was Lieutenant Colonel, ex-Governor, and the owner of fourteen estates usurped from indigenous people. His abduction in that distant January was the spark that set off the flight of landowners.

The community has more than a thousand hectares of good land; they no longer have to farm the arid, stony hillsides. They grow traditional food as well as fruits and vegetables on the recommendations of the *comandancia*. Not only did they liberate themselves from the whip—they are better fed and are able to save in a very particular way. Julian harvests six sacks of coffee (some 300 kilos), leaves one for family consumption, and sells the rest. Depending on the

price, he is able to buy between two and three cows per harvest. “The cows are the bank, and we sell them if there’s a necessity.”

By “necessity” they mean health problems. His oldest son had to undergo medical treatment, and to cover it, he sold a bull. The community applies the same logic. In communal lands, they carry out collective work in coffee plantations, and buy horses and cows with the harvest. Between the animals of the families and the communal ones, they have some 150 horses and 200 cattle.

Days before the students arrived, the water filter broke and to repair it they decided to sell a cow. They fund the health room, the school, and transportation and lodging-related expenses for the community members in the same way—all in order to perform the duties of the three levels of self-government: the local community, the autonomous municipalities, and the Good Government Board. Women also have community projects. In 8 de Marzo, they had a coffee plantation, with which they bought six cows and a chicken coop with fifty birds. They use the savings from these for transportation and spending for women holding appointments or attending courses.

The few goods they don’t produce (salt, sugar, oil, and soap) are purchased by families in the municipal seats, in Zapatista stores installed on properties occupied after the 1994 uprising. There is no need to go to the market. Their entire economy remains within a circuit they control, self-sufficient, linked to the market, but not depending on it. Commune members tend the stores on a rotating basis. Julian explains that every so often he has to spend a month in the store at Altamirano (located an hour away from his community), which requires him to be away from home. “In that case, the community keeps up your cornfield for fifteen days, and I help out those that have to go the store in the same way.” Esther held a position on the Board in the Morelia caracol a half

hour away from the community, and her duties were covered in the same manner. We can call this reciprocity.

Health and education

Every community, however as small as it might be, has a small school and a health post. In 8 de Marzo, there are 48 families, almost all Zapatistas. The assembly elects its authorities, half men and half women, the teachers, and those in charge of health. No one can turn these down, for it is service for the community.

The school runs out of the living room of the mansions abandoned by the *hacendado*. The iron gate he used to pay his peons through still remains. They could barely see the hand that dropped the coins, as the boss's face remained shrouded in darkness. Early in the morning, the children gather on the basketball court in front of the mansion. They march in military step, in line, guided by a young person of the community not over 25 years old.

Zapatista education suffers from a lack of infrastructure; the classrooms are rickety, as are the benches and the rest of the furniture. Teachers do not receive a salary, but are sustained by the community, the same as the health workers.

This has enormous advantages for the students: the teachers are members of the community—they speak their language and are their equals—while in state schools (those of the Bad Government), the teachers aren't indigenous, but mestizo. They don't speak their language (and even look down on it), they live far from the community, and maintain their distance vertically from the students. The climate of confidence in the autonomous schools enables more horizontal bonds and facilitates the participation of students and their parents in school management. Children participate in many of the community tasks, including supporting the school and their teachers. There is no gap between school and

community here; they are part of the same network of social relations. If government schools have a hidden curriculum through which they transmit values like individualism, competition, the vertical organization of the education system and the superiority of teachers over students, Zapatista education is the reverse. The curriculum is built collectively, and aims for the students to take ownership of their community's history to reproduce and sustain it. Since students typically work in teams, and much of school time is spent outside of the classroom in contact with the same elements that configure their daily lives, transformation and critique are permanent features of building collective knowledge. What in state schools is separation and hierarchy (teacher-student, classroom-playground, knowing-not knowing) is complementary integration in the autonomous schools.

In the small health post, medicines produced by large pharmaceutical companies coexist with a wide variety of medicinal plants. A very young girl is responsible for processing syrups and ointments from those plants. There is a bonesetter and a midwife, who together comprise the basic health team for all Zapatista communities. In general, they tend to deal with relatively simple situations. When it's something more complicated, they move the patient to the *caracol* clinic. If the issue can still not be resolved, they go to the state hospital in Altamirano.

Health and education are divided on the same three levels as the autonomous power of the Zapatistas. The most advanced clinics, including one with a surgical unit for operating, are usually located in the *caracoles*.

The *caracoles*, which house the Good Government Boards, also tend to house the autonomous secondary schools.

The Little School

It takes seven hours to traverse the 100 kilometers that separate San Cristóbal and the Morelia *caracol*. The caravan (containing thirty cars and trucks) left late

and advanced at a tortoise pace. Around 2:00 am, we arrived at the *caracol*, and a maze of buildings that house the institutions of the autonomous region, made up of three municipalities, twelve regions, and dozens of communities governed by the Good Government Board. There is also a secondary school, a hospital under construction, clinics, amphitheatres, stores, dining halls, a shoe store, and other productive enterprises.

Despite the late hour, a long line of men and another of women await us, all wearing their bandanas. We divide up by gender and, one by one, we get to know our *Votán*. Marcelino extends his hand and asks me to accompany him. We go straight to the enormous assembly room, and fall asleep on the hard benches.

In the morning—coffee, beans, and tortillas. The members of the Board then speak, explaining how the Little School will work. In the afternoon, almost evening, we leave for the community. Among the students were Nora Cortinas of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, and Hugo Blanco, the Peruvian peasant leader and ex-guerrilla, both nearing eighty.

We arrive at the community around midnight after a half hour of jolts on the back of a small truck. The whole community, organized in lines of masked men, women and children, receives us with fists in the air. They welcome us, presenting students to their host family. Julián introduces himself, and once everyone has a family, we are off to bed.

First surprise. They divided the house with a partition, leaving one room for the guest with its own door, and the seven family members piled up on the other side. They wake us at first light for breakfast. Then we head off to work clearing the family coffee plantation, machetes in hand, until mealtime. On the second day, we lasso cattle to be vaccinated. On the third, we clear the communal coffee plantation. So it went each day, work combined with detailed

explanations of community life. In the afternoons, we read the four notebooks handed out on Autonomous Government, Autonomous Resistance and the Participation of Women in Autonomous Government, all with stories by indigenous people and the authorities.

Students could ask the most varied questions, which does not mean they were always answered. We could live alongside a political culture different than the one we know—when a question was asked, they would look at each other, quietly converse, and finally, one would answer for everyone. It was a wonderful experience of learning by doing, sharing, and savoring the daily lives of people who are building a new world.

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