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‘The Dead, Our Dead’: Murals and Banners of the Zapatistas

12 October 1992 was the day chosen for the celebration of the 500th anniversary of Columbus’s landing. The streets of San Cristóbal de las Casas, in colonial times the capital of Chiapas, whose low, brightly coloured houses stand under continually spectacular skies, filled with 20,000 Indigenous people, marching in ranks. When they reached the main square, they dragged the statue of the local conquistador, Diego de Mazariegos, from its pedestal, and hauled it through the town, a rope tied around its neck, just as the conquistador had treated their ancestors in those same streets, centuries ago.

This action heralded more concerted resistance by Indigenous people in Chiapas, the poorest state in Mexico. In 1994, soldiers of the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN) which had been gathering support and resources in the mountains for a decade before it chose to act, took brief control of San Cristóbal and six other towns in the state. Up to now, in the struggle between the EZLN and the Mexican government, words have fortunately been more prominent than bullets. Vivid images, in Zapatista communiqués, in photographs and paintings, or acted out in performance, have had the force of arms. They bear upon situations far removed from Chiapas, just as Indigenous people’s resistance is directed beyond the local problems they face—the murderous White Guards in the pay of ranchers, and the enclosure of communal lands—to their general, enduring situation, condemned to malnutrition, to poor health without hope of medical care, to ignorance for want of education, to open and extreme economic exploitation. Their resistance is to the entire system that produces these conditions, and which embraces us all.

The government has not been able to physically destroy the EZLN, as it would have liked, and as the World Bank urged, because of the wide support they enjoy

throughout Mexican civil society, especially among strong community and workers' organisations, and also because of the delicacy of the Mexican economy and the nervousness of foreign investors. Now that Mexico is tied to its northern neighbour through the NAFTA accords, its economic health is a matter of importance to the capitalist world as whole. This is an example of globalisation, that much-vaunted opponent of radical action, actually giving a revolutionary movement increased leverage. In one Zapatista banner, Europe and Asia, personified as a woman, and trailing Australia in her wake, prance with the male spirit of the united Americas over the corpse of that deregulated, globalised and profit-seeking form of capitalism known as 'neoliberalism', gun and skull clutched in its dead hands.



In July and August 1996, the EZLN, as part of its attempt to build a civil society capable of reforming the state, and an international alliance to fight neoliberalism, ran an '*Encuentro*' in the areas they hold in the mountains and rainforest. This '*Intercontinental Encounter for Humanity and Against Neoliberalism*' was an extraordinary event for a rebel group to organise, driven as it has been into remote, unforgiving country by the army, encircled and continually threatened. For a week, between three and four thousand visitors from five continents were fed, housed and provided for. Entire communities, working for months, had built accommodation, meeting halls and arenas, toilets and showers in five different locations, called

‘Aguascalientes’.¹ Clean water and good food were provided by people who themselves often go hungry—or who subsist, malnourished, on corn, tortillas and beans. There was electric lighting, laid on by the Mexican electricians’ union, computers for the press, and in Oventic even a playground.



At the Aguascalientes I saw and photographed at Oventic and La Realidad, there was much visual art, paintings on walls and banners. Some of the paintings were made by or under the direction of single artists, others were evidently made collectively. All bear on central Zapatista concerns.

Emiliano Zapata, the renowned fighter for peasant rights from whom the movement takes its name, is, of course, a central and lively presence. In 1917 Zapata’s forces gained the inclusion in the Mexican Constitution of Article 27, the basis of land reform and the system of communal land tenure which broke up the largest estates and gave many peasants the chance to farm independently; Article 27 was itself ‘reformed’ in 1991, a victim of neoliberal doctrine, and this change was an important spur to the revolt. The story that Zapata had somehow survived the ambush at the Chinameca hacienda was often heard in the mouths of campesinos through the

¹ The Aguascalientes were named after the location of the Mexican revolutionary convention of 1914.

decades, and now his moustachioed visage and crossed bandoleers are seen everywhere. The dead have a lively presence in Zapatista art; like the living, they look the viewer directly in the eye, establishing a link between the then and the now, and bringing about remembrance.

The face of Che Guevara is also often seen. Régis Debray, who spent time with the guerrilla in Bolivia, has described the continuities between Che's struggle and that of the EZLN today,² though they are not those slackly commented upon by the Western mass media, which has dismissed the *Encuentro* as a politicised re-run of Woodstock, attempting to taint it with what they regard as the discredited spirit of the 1960s.

Rather, the EZLN are serious about educating themselves. Like Che, Subcommandante Marcos weighs down his pack with books, and like Che's Cuban and Bolivian guerrillas, the Zapatistas gather little libraries in the rainforest. Their fighters wear pens alongside bullets. What is more, with the Zapatistas, even more than with Che, there is an attachment to humanist virtues, which remain virtues despite their being made to seem fusty or ridiculous by a foundering culture in the West.

Again, like Che, Marcos teases the authorities and reminds himself to be humble with frequent references to *Don Quixote*. In a speech at La Realidad, however, Marcos said that the EZLN were fighting the giants, not the windmills, of international capitalism. The military alerts, and airforce planes buzzing the camps were evidence enough of that. Yet Marcos and many of his companions are aware of the Quixotic nature of their struggle for successful revolution has the suddenness of a phase change, and the conditions producing it are too complex for any mortal to reliably judge. So in Marcos's stories, he plays Sancho Panza to a beetle named Durito, mounted on a tortoise taken as its Rocinante.³ The strong current of irony in Marcos's writings is frequently directed at the author, who wears his ski mask, well aware that it is less magical helmet than barber's basin. Marcos is also a frequent presence in the pictures, with his trademark pipe sticking out from his ski-mask, appearing partly because of his self-mockery as a friendly figure despite his shotgun and bandoleer of cartridges.

² Régis Debray, 'A Guerrilla with a Difference', *New Left Review*, no. 218, July-August 1996, pp. 128-37.



But it is not the presence of a single martyr, or even a small pantheon, who accompanies the Zapatistas but a much more fundamental force:

The mountain told us to take up arms so that we would have a voice.

It told us to cover our faces so that we would have a face.

It told us to forget our names so that we could be named.

It told us to protect our past so we would have a future.

In the mountains, the dead live: our dead.

This passage was from the opening address to the *Encuentro*, read by Commandante Ana María to the delegates who gathered at night in the Oventic arena. Around us, thousands of Indigenous people listened, silent and still. We had been waiting there a long time for some special event to mark the opening of the *Encuentro*, which would be signalled, we had been told, by the extinguishing of the lights. We expected different things, some armed display of strength, perhaps, or the arrival of Marcos. Then the lights did vanish, and there was quiet for a time, while the moon came and

³ See Subcommandante Insurgente Marcos, *Conversations with Durito*, Austin, Texas 1996.

went behind fast-moving clouds. Eventually, from far up the hillside on which the camp at Oventic was built, we heard the faint sounds of a band and could see pricks of light. A procession slowly approached and, as it finally arrived among us, we saw that it was simply hundreds of civilian men and women of all ages, veterans of the fighting in 1994. It was an important lesson: the strength of the EZLN is a communal strength.

In the Indigenous town of San Juan Chamula, a stiff new statue stands in the market square. As part of their campaign to blunt opposition by making token concessions, the authorities have erected this representation of an Indigenous man in ceremonial dress. A plaque bears the inscription, 'Monumento a mi Raza'. This single, isolated aesthetic and political statement, high on its plinth, is made for, not by, the people. The Zapatistas say of such efforts, 'Our dignity is held captive in statues and museums'.⁴



Zapatista images are seen not only in the Aguascalientes but also in street graffiti in San Cristóbal, where it employs the same recurrent themes. They are the product of a culture, open to all, which does not gain distinction by elitist exclusion. That culture, in turn, is part of a society which has long been a participatory democracy. Everyone

⁴ 'Morelos Declaration', *La Jornada*, 13 April 1994; in *Shadows of Tender Fury. The Letters and Communiqués of Subcommandante Marcos and the Zapatista Army of National Liberation*, New York 1995, p. 202.

has a say over every decision, and issues are discussed until near unanimity is reached. Our own periodically elected authoritarian governments stand at the opposite end of that wide spectrum called ‘democracy’ from this hands-on, universal involvement in decision-making.



There is a phrase, ‘the dead, our dead’, which Zapatista proclamations insistently repeat. It indicates strong awareness of a 500-year history of oppression, from those barely believable atrocities first described by Bartolomé de las Casas (after whom San Cristóbal is named) through generations of exploitation, uprisings and suppressions, to the current dawning of a much bloodied hope.⁵ At one point in the long negotiations which followed the uprising, the government offered the Zapatistas a pardon. Their response was to ask for what should they ask forgiveness—and from whom. Should it be from ‘those who for have years and years satiated themselves at full tables, while death sat beside us so regularly that we finally stopped being afraid of it?’ Or

⁵ Bartolomé de las Casas, *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*, trans. Nigel Green, London 1992.

... should we ask pardon from the dead, our dead, those who died ‘natural’ deaths of ‘natural’ causes like measles, whooping cough, breakbone fever, cholera, typhoid, mononucleosis, tetanus, pneumonia, malaria, and other lovely gastrointestinal and lung diseases? Our dead, the majority dead, the democratically dead, dying from sorrow because no one did anything, because the dead, our dead, went just like that, without anyone even counting them, without anyone saying, ‘ENOUGH!’ which would have at least given some meaning to their deaths, a meaning which no one ever sought for them, the forever dead, who are now dying again, but this time in order to live?⁶

The Zapatistas are clear that they have nothing to lose, that in their previous lives they and, worse, their children were already condemned to death, and that now they are living on time snatched from death. In murals and graffiti, ghostly Zapatistas float and turn in the sky, while in the painting made on the front of the meeting hall at Oventic, Zapata’s troops appear from tongues of flame. ‘Die to live’, the Zapatistas say, when asked about means and ends.⁷



⁶ ‘Who Must Ask for Pardon and Who Can Grant It?’, 18 January 1994; in *Shadows of Tender Fury*, pp. 81-2.

⁷ See Olivia Gall, ‘Mexico’s Difficult Futures’, *Against the Current*, vol. ix, no. 2 (new series), May-June 1994, p. 32.

For the Zapatistas the mountain is a complex and ambiguous symbol. It is a territory beyond the law, and a symbol of the community, and of the weight of that community's history and memory. It is also a place of solitude and even terror, its immense complexities, in which it is so easy to become lost, a symbol of the sea of neoliberal platitudes and powers in which the Zapatistas are immersed. Our very presence in those remote places was of some comfort to the Zapatista communities, continually faced with a blow that could fall at any moment, and with many feints. The mountain is also, though, the home of ghosts, where armed figures are spirited from trees and hills which seem a part of them, masses of anonymous male and female fighters, with crossed bandoleers and ski-masks, or Zapata-style sombreros.

The Zapatistas explicitly state that they act not just for Indigenous people, but that their movement has a universal dimension. Again, a passage from the opening address:

The tomorrow that is harvested in the past.

Behind our black mask.

Behind our armed voice.

Behind our unnameable name.

Behind what you see of us.

Behind this, we are you.

Behind this, we are the simple and ordinary men and women that are repeated in all races, painted in all colours, speak in all languages and live in all places.

The same forgotten men and women.

The painting which shows these anonymous figures, then, is part of a project of active remembrance, of bringing to consciousness a sense of all those expired and not fully lived lives over generations and centuries, but to raise them in a manner that speaks to the present, and inspires action.

Banners also optimistically depict the harmony of a truly democratic life, without inequality, sexism or racism. Swayed by the novelty of its organisation, its means and

its openness, the EZLN has sometimes been described as a postmodern movement. Nothing could be further from the truth. The *Encuentro* was, after all, devoted to the defence of universal humanism and against a system which, while it tries to divide its enemies, gives them global common cause, cutting across distinctions of gender, race, nation and religion. The cause of the rebellion is the very un-postmodern matter of hunger, for the 'reform' to Article 27 and the NAFTA accords threatens to starve these people who refer to themselves as the 'Voice of Maize'. In one mural, corn cobs sprout Zapatista stars. While in Zapatista writing and art the boundaries between the living and the dead may be porous, there is no questioning of a reality which bears all too insistently upon Indigenous lives, nor that there is a meaningful distinction between the truth, and those lies which aid the system of oppression.⁸

The *Encuentro* was meant to provide a forum for the exchange of views and experiences of neoliberalism: to give an example of a single link, Britain and much of Latin America served as laboratories for the early testing of this strain of capitalism, though the latter, of course, suffered from it far more. By bringing opponents of neoliberalism together, the *Encuentro* strengthened awareness of the problems and reinforced international connections between those looking for solutions. It also had a practical role in keeping the military off the backs of the EZLN and in attempting to break the media black-out to which the movement has been subjected. Lastly, it was intended as a cultural exchange for the Zapatistas laid on music, as well as visual art, and one of the tables of discussion, at the Morelia Aguascalientes, was devoted to the issue of culture.

⁸ Aside from the collections of Zapatista writings already referred to *¡Zapatistas! Documents of the New Mexican Revolution*, Brooklyn, New York 1994 gathers some material not found elsewhere including some very interesting interviews with Marcos. More recent Zapatista communiqués can be found in many sites on the World Wide Web. A good place to start is <http://www.peak.org/~justin/ezln> Documents of the *Encuentro* can be found at <http://planet.com.mx/~chiapas/index.html>



Most of the guests at the *Encuentro* were committed to working against the system which starves those at the bottom of the pile to give those at the top the trivial accoutrements of a consumer lifestyle. Most are prepared to, or already have, made sacrifices as a result. Yet none, certainly of those from the West, can escape implication in that system. In one of his best-known essays, Marcos has written of the tourists who come to Chiapas, ironically urging them to do what they already do—to ignore the many signs of injustice around them. After a week of sleeping on the ground, and living without hot showers or flush toilets, my travelling companions and I did what anyone would do (given the funds), and found a hotel. Yet, as we enjoyed its comforts, we could read in Marcos's text 'while there are seven hotel rooms for every 1,000 tourists [visiting Chiapas annually], there are 0.3 hospital beds for every 1,000 Chiapans.'⁹

In a curious banner displayed on the stage at Oventic and reading 'Por la Unidad', members of various groups and races come together bearing in their hands symbols of industry and agriculture. There is a white man pictured on the far left of the banner,

⁹ Marcos, 'Chiapas: The Southeast in Two Winds, a Storm, and a Prophecy', August 1992; in *Shadows of Tender Fury*, p. 38.

who raises his empty fist in solidarity. What he will bring to the struggle has yet to be determined.*



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