

The Faceless Face of the New Mexican Revolution

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“The hope that flowers that die elsewhere, will flourish here.”

—Subcomandante Marcos, Aguascalientes, Chiapas, Mexico, August 1994

“When their sufferings, their tortures, their deprivation under their masters grew so intolerable that they came to the realization that it was better and more worthy of their human dignity to perish in a revolution than to live longer under such humiliations and torments, then they took action... firmly and decisively in order to make an end at last —either an end to their own lives, or an end to the lives of their tyrants.”

(General From the Jungle, by B. Traven, describing the oppressed Indians in Southern Mexico in the 1920s)

Eastern Europe’s velvet revolutions, inspired by the dissident poets, playwrights and writers of Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Hungary, have already grown dusty, passing into our memories as bright spots of optimism in the otherwise gloomy trajectory for human freedom. But the creative spirit that animated those revolutionary moments has reappeared in a new and distinctly Mexican form. Suddenly, surprisingly, and without any hint of its forthcoming, poetic revolution is rising in Mexico.

The brilliantly eloquent attacks on the system by the Zapatista National Liberation Army from behind the guns of revolution has accelerated the decomposition of the long-incumbent government party. The fissures in the one-party state and its crucial partner, the media monopoly of the Azcárraga group, have been artfully used to bring revolutionary arguments to the public’s attention. *La Jornada*, *El Financiero*, *Proceso* magazine, and *El Tiempo* of San Cristobal de Las Casas have published the wildly entertaining communiqués of the EZLN (Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional), largely written by the now famous Subcomandante Marcos, the mysterious masked poet and “public relations specialist” of the Zapatista National Liberation Army. Poetic and evocative, his appeals for the Jeffersonian ideals of democracy, liberty, and justice within a strong Mexican nationalism, along with a bevy of demands seeking to halt the economic rape of Chiapas, strike a chord with people across Mexico.

Marcos gives numbers in an semi-allegorical story written in 1992: “Of the 3.5 million people in Chiapas, 2/3 live and die in the countryside. Half of the people do not have potable water, and two-thirds have no sewage systems. Ninety percent of the people in rural areas have little or no income... Only one third of all Chiapan houses have electricity, and the state produces 55% of Mexico’s hydroelectric power, as well as 20% of Mexico’s electricity.”

A decade is a long time these days. The Zapatista core militants who moved to the jungle in 1984 (including, presumably, sup Marcos) may have carried a romantic vision of leading an heroic revolution. But ten years organizing and working among the profoundly democratic indigenous people of the Chiapas highlands has apparently led to a healthy resistance to leader worship among the EZLN.

In *Love & Rage*, August 1994, Marcos defined the Zapatista concept of democracy as direct, not representative, democracy. This often produces days of discussion and consultation before a vote is taken, but the process is deeply rooted in the Zapatista base communities. “You’re voting for your life or death as an organization... You can’t leave decisions of this magnitude to a group of leaders no matter how collective they are or how large the group is. Not even the Clandestine Revolutionary Indigenous Committee can decide these things.” [Marcos]

The Zapatistas pay attention to the world situation and learn from it. These are not isolated, self-referential zealots. They've seen the collapse of the Soviet Union and the eastern bloc, the failure of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, the stalemate and defeats in El Salvador and Guatemala, the tireless U.S. squeeze on Cuba as it struggles under its own authoritarian structures, the Chinese nightmare. Mexico, too, was largely industrialized by its state-run economy, similarly to the Soviet bloc. Like the anti-Bolshevik left of the 1910's, the Zapatistas seek a bottom-up form of direct democracy. Authoritarian solutions are considered counterproductive and anti-human.

The Zapatistas are less bent on seizing power than they are in breaking down the authoritarian social relations which have frozen Mexican politics for so long. They don't demand that they become the new leaders, but that a radical democracy comes to life. The EZLN understands that a healthy society has a democratic space in which the direction of society can be truly debated, various needs and perspectives can be accommodated, and so on. In *Love & Rage* Marcos explains: "...this revolution will only be a first step... We are proposing a space, an equilibrium between the different political forces in order that each position has the same opportunity to influence the political direction of this country—not by backroom deals, corruption or blackmail, but by convincing the majority of the people that their position is best... We are talking about a democratic space where the political parties, or groups that aren't parties, can air and discuss their social proposals."

Marcos himself speaks in favor of a peaceful path to serious change, and sees no role for an armed soldier as a leader of a peaceful social movement, hence the EZLN's early August decision to "step aside for a while, but not disappear." Moreover, the EZLN has radically broadened the revolutionary campaign.

The Zapatista call for a peaceful transition to real democracy led by a broad-based movement of "civil society" echoes the same call by the Charter 77 group in Czechoslovakia, or Solidarity in Poland, groups that also squared off against one-party states. Civil society is precisely what is diminished under a one-party dictatorship. Such regimes cannot handle the give and take of politics, public debate and criticism, and do their best to provide the questions and answers for everyone, while buying off dissent whenever possible. At the least, an engaged civil society acts as a check on untrammelled abuse of power.†

Civil society is made up of the vibrant networks of daily life that seek to determine their own fate. As civil society develops in the shadow of an authoritarian regime, it begins to undermine the ruling structure and lay the basis for a new kind of life. Eventually the dictatorship begins to rot from within, lacking any animating purpose beyond the knee-jerk exercise and retention of power for its own sake and its associated pecuniary rewards. Also, as society becomes more industrialized and complex, a clunky top-down administrative structure becomes a hindrance, which is part of the explanation for the collapse of the Soviet bloc. Even modern capitalism works at its best with the enthusiastic, self-managed participation of its cogs, not through old-style coercion.

In armed defense of their own dignity, the Tzotzils, Tzeltals, Tojolabals and Choles and others in the EZLN have addressed their political attention to the form of the state, questions of autonomy and self-determination, equality and participation. As a largely indigenous army, we expect the special demands of local populations to be an urgent part of their agenda. In fact, point nine of the EZLN's rejection/rebuttal to the government's peace proposal emphasized the demands for a radio station broadcasting in each of the local languages, run by the indigenous people themselves. They demanded a full course of free public education for all; that all languages be

granted official status, with instruction in each language mandatory in the schools; that all cultures and traditions be respected; that all discrimination and racism be ended; “cultural, political and judicial autonomy” be granted; respect for the right to freedom and a dignified life for the indigenous communities; economic and social support for indigenous women. Interestingly, these are not the most traditional indigenous communities. The strongest Zapatista towns are ethnically heterodox and have been for several generations due to the century-long invasion of the market, exploiting Chiapas’s natural resources. (See “Why Chiapas? Why Now?” sidebar)

The Marcos Mystique

May 1994: “Marcos is gay in San Francisco, black in South Africa, Asian in Europe, Chicano in San Ysidro, Anarchist in Spain, Palestinian in Israel, Indigenous in the streets of San Cristóbal, bad boy in Nezuahuacoyotl, rocker in CU, Jew in Germany, ombudsman in the Sedena, feminist in political parties, communist in the post-Cold War era, prisoner in Cintalapa, pacifist in Bosnia, Mapuche in the Andes, teacher in the CNTE, artist without gallery or portfolio, housewife on any given Saturday night in any neighborhood of any city of any Mexico, guerrillero in Mexico at the end of the 20th century, striker in the CTM, reporter assigned to filler stories for the back pages, sexist in the feminist movement, woman alone in the metro at 10 p.m., retired person in plantón in the Zocalo, campesino without land, fringe editor, unemployed worker, doctor without a practice, rebellious student, dissident in neoliberalism, writer without books or readers, and, to be sure, Zapatista in the Mexican southeast. In sum, Marcos is a human being, any human being, in this world. Marcos is all the minorities who are untolerated, oppressed, resisting, exploding, saying “Enough.” All the minorities at the moment they begin to speak and the majorities at the moment they fall silent and put up with it. All the untolerated people searching for a word, their word, which will return the majority to the eternally fragmented, us; all that makes power and good consciences uncomfortable, that is Marcos. You’re welcome, gentlemen of the secret police, I am here to serve you... with lead.”

—Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos

Marcos’ role within the EZLN is difficult to define. He claims to be subordinate to the Clandestine Indigenous Revolutionary Committee, Central Command of the Zapatista National Liberation Army, which is led by Commandante Tacho, Commandante Ramona, and other indigenous leaders, many of whom speak little, if any Spanish. During the 30 hour press bus ride to the National Democratic Convention (CND—its Spanish acronym) in Chiapas on August 7, 1994, many jokes were made about making a pilgrimage to visit St. Marcos and other allusions to his cult star status. It’s very hard not to see in Marcos the roots of the cult of personality that has sprung up around other revolutionaries.

He adeptly at presents the EZLN case to modern media, even appearing on the Internet a couple of days after the January 1st uprising. He stays focused on a basic message: democracy, liberty, justice, and dignity. His ski-mask is an alluring and mysterious trademark, attracting as much erotic interest as political; a 60-Minutes interviewee compared him to Zorro or Robin Hood in his appeal as defender of the downtrodden. His media skills appeared spontaneously

when an Italian journalist just happened to be in San Cristobal de las Casas on January 1st. He went up to Marcos and asked him for an interview and Marcos went off to seek permission from his commanders, which they granted.

Marcos and the EZLN use the iconography of guerrilla revolution to attract the heat-seeking press, but use that attention to assert rights on behalf of a civil society in which no group or class exercises dominant power. The Zapatistas refuse to pit a new totalizing truth against the false totality promoted by the state and its mouthpieces. Marcos and his associates become spectacle-busters, breaking down the assumptions that conveniently accompany any “box” the media erects around you. By emphasizing the plurality of opposition and refusing to occupy the “center,” the Zapatistas have initiated a rebellion which escapes the hierarchical trajectory of other uprisings.

The grassroots use of new media like e-mail and satellite-phones puts the Zapatistas in a different information sphere than previous revolutionaries. They challenge the assumption that you cannot subvert the mass media, but if they are silenced by violence their appearance will ultimately become grist for the spectacular media’s mill. Even though their use of new technologies has given them an undiluted revolutionary voice unique in the modern era, their appearance and role as objects of media attention still tends to reinforce the hold of the spectacle itself. The Zapatistas have been more successful than any other insurgency in getting their own version of reality out over the media, but that very communication process is fraught with perilous contradictions, paradoxes that no one can control in the end.

Marcos has been identified as the military strategist of the EZLN and admitted to studying U.S. military manuals along with the stories of Pancho Villa and Zapata during the past 10 years of organizing the guerrilla army in the mountains. Military conquests, even those with revolutionary intentions, have often led to a new authoritarianism, sometimes worse than its predecessor, making it is easy to balk at the militarism of the resistance in Chiapas. But when you consider the extreme brutality of the local oligarchy and military occupiers, an armed response seems only logical and frankly, necessary.

The resistance to the barbaric tortures routinely carried out by the U.S. and U.S.-trained militaries was palpable among the Zapatista troops we met. Though we were frisked and checked at least three or four times as we got closer to the actual convention area, the searchers always seemed a bit uncomfortable with their role, with having to intrude on other people’s privacy like that.

The EZLN is a departure from traditional leftist insurgencies. After a 12-day war, the EZLN participated in a month-long dialogue with the Mexican government, arriving at a series of government proposals. They then retired to their mountains to poll each community on the proposals, which led to a sound rejection by early June. In a June 10 communiqué, the EZLN offered a detailed critique of the government’s proposals, concluding in most cases that they were only offering more studies, more “projects,” and more lies. Most government proposals sought to isolate the problem and the response to specific areas in Chiapas, rather than applying them to the entire country as the EZLN demanded. Moreover, the national demands regarding the resignation of the Salinas government, repudiation of all debts, cancellation of NAFTA and so on, were completely ignored.

The EZLN then called for a national democratic convention to organize civil society to combat the one-party state of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). Six thousand delegates, some more democratically selected than others, mostly leftist, converged on San Cristóbal de las Casas on August 6, 1994 to convene in pursuit of an authentic Mexican democracy.

The National Democratic Convention at Aguascalientes, Chiapas August 1994

A ghostly white revival tent rose out of a gulley in the mountains near the Guatemalan border in the Lacandón jungle of Chiapas, Mexico. A place with no name, it was christened “Aguascalientes”* by the EZLN army that built it. Beneath the tent a cross-section of Mexican civil society, from hardline leftist parties to squatter groups, human rights monitors and electoral gradualists, gathered at the call of the EZLN because “it is our absurd wish to have a civil movement in dialogue with an armed movement.” Intellectuals and famous writers mingled with peasant leaders from Guerrero and Michoacán, politicians, hippies, artists, journalists, activists of every stripe met and discussed the possibilities for peaceful resistance.

Steeped in the magic realism of contemporary Latin American authors like Garcia Marquez, Carlos Fuentes, and others, the Zapatistas manufactured a mythologically resonant convention center named after an historical antecedent. In his remarks, Marcos described this tidy, well-designed jungle clearing (shaded by a huge white tarp draped over a very long steel cable strung across the canyon), as a “Tower of Babel, Noah’s Ark, Fitzcarraldo’s jungle boat, a neozapatista delirium, a pirate ship.”

But it was real, an amazing logistical feat. The EZLN spent a solid month building Aguascalientes [all for the recovery of] “old and spent words: democracy, liberty, justice.”

“Before Aguascalientes, we said that yes, it was crazy, that since we opened fire and donned skimasks, we could hardly call a national meeting on the eve of elections and have it work out... Do you want a mirror?” Marcos asked the assembled delegates.

The mythological Aguascalientes ark floated in the green ocean that first day under the blistering sun, tempers and tensions rising, years of pent-up sectarian rage between leftist sects seethed below the surface, contentious caucuses met in clusters around the campground, but finally all were riveted by the arrival of the EZLN Command, Comman-dante Tacho and Subcommandante Marcos. The show began when Tacho introduced the Zapatista support communities, the men and women, boys and girls who sustained the EZLN in their clandestine struggle. The weather-beaten people of the southern Chiapan mountains marched by three and four-abreast, as thousands cheered. Then Marcos welcomed all the “delegates, guests, observers, journalists, sponges, nutcases, gatecrashers, spooks and lost souls” with an egalitarian flourish, reporting that the official count had determined that there was “a fuck of a lot” of people there, and so for the press, the official attendance for the event was “a fuck of a lot [un chingo].”

A parade of motley Zapatista troops, not really an army but a militia of local farmers and diverse revolutionaries from all over, marched past. The old weapons and sticks of the troops were nearly as poignant as the lone Chinese protestor who stood in front of a row of tanks during Tiananmen Square on live international TV. The EZLN vetoed the presence of a number of large Mexican media outlets at the CND on the grounds that they were propaganda organs of the state. In a post-convention article in the August 10 Reforma of Mexico City it was reported that the delegates to the convention had voted 3 to 1 in favor of allowing all media organs to come, but this was overridden by the EZLN. They also disallowed satellite transmission from the event, preventing any “live” TV feeds creeping into anyone’s news, ostensibly to level the field for journalists from both large and small outfits. Also, as Marcos maintained in the post-convention

press conference, the EZLN would not be complicit in the manufacturing of false news, which, they argued convincingly, was the major product of the large Mexican TV networks.

In his CND speech, Marcos spoke against vanguardism and the typical leadership role of leftist revolutionaries: “we say to everyone that we do not want nor can we occupy the place that some hope we will, the place from which emanate all the opinions, all the routes, all the answers, all the truths—we won’t do it.” In fact, the self-proclaimed National Democratic Convention was in many respects not very democratic, and Marcos emphasized this when he admonished the assembled delegates to understand that they wouldn’t earn the right to claim themselves representative of the nation as a result of a vote or even a consensus. They still had to earn it directly “in the slums, the ejidos [communal lands], the neighborhoods, the indigenous communities, the schools and universities, the factories, the offices, the science labs, the artistic and cultural centers, in every corner of this country.”

“And before Aguascalientes we said that you couldn’t oppose the celebration of the National Democratic Convention because that is precisely what it would be, a celebration, the celebration of broken fear, of the first tentative step of offering the nation an “Enough Already!”, not only in the voice of the indigenous peasants, but one that adds up, that multiplies, that reproduces, that wins, that can be the celebration of a discovery: that we know we don’t have the habit of losing, and already can imagine the possibility of victory for our side...

“For this thousands of men and women with masked faces, the vast majority indigenous, built this tower, the tower of hope, and so we will step aside, for a while, our guns and anger, our pain for our dead, our commitment to war, our armed past. We constructed this place for a meeting that if it comes out well will be the first step in eliminating us as an alternative. We built this place to host a meeting which if it fails will oblige us again to go forward with war, the right of everyone to a place in history.” [emphasis added]

The Zapatistas are hardly an imposing military force. By embracing the embryonic organization of civil society as gathered in the CND, they’ve cleverly broadened their own political strength by solidly linking it with oppositional groups throughout the country. More-over, by participating in the process with civil society, the EZLN managed to isolate the hard-line traditional left, while ensuring their participation. When asked what the EZLN would tell other armed groups in Mexico, Marcos explained at a press conference the next day that they felt these groups were mature enough to realize that they should not rise up violently against the people, and that Mexican civil society needed time to consolidate itself in pursuit of a peaceful transition to democracy.

In his CND speech, Marcos invoked “la patria” as the best answer to a military patrol’s query: “who goes there?!” This kind of nationalism is fraught with brutal contradictions, especially when ostensibly defending the rights of indigenous communities. His ardent invocation of Mexican nationalism made me consider the power and function of the flag and homeland as political motivation. On one hand, by using these symbols Marcos was reclaiming them from the corrupt PRI-dominated state and its apparatus, previously the only “legitimate” claimant to them. The EZLN also places itself on an equal footing with the state, and makes clear that the Mexican state is considered an oppressor from elsewhere. But the sordid history of nationalism, still spilling its guts on our front pages and TV screens every night, gives me little enthusiasm for this symbolic choice.

Queried on the role of nationalism by the anti-nationalists of Love & Rage, Marcos rejects the typical anarchist argument against nationalism and explains: “When we speak of the nation we

are necessarily speaking of a history of common struggle with historical references that make us brothers to one group of people without distancing us from other groups... We believe that it is possible to have the same Mexico with a different project, a project that recognizes that it is a multi-ethnic state—in fact, multi-national.”

Some demands made in the dialogue with the government seem really naive, like “decent jobs with fair salaries for all rural and urban workers throughout the Mexican republic... the Federal Labor Law shall be applied to rural and urban workers, complete with bonuses, benefits, vacations, and the real right to strike,” coupled with the call “to halt the plunder of our Mexico and above all of Chiapas.” There are no examples of full employment in a thriving capitalist economy, and certainly none where natural resource exploitation isn’t a major employment category. The implications of a radically different form of economic life aren’t really examined in Zapatista literature. Certainly the capitalist order doesn’t meet their demands.

In keeping with the magic realism which seemed to hover over the whole event, after Marcos finished his speech, he gave the symbolic national flag to the president of the presidium, Rosario Ibarra, long-time activist for the disappeared in Mexico (including her own son). She gave a rousing speech, and within minutes a torrential downpour descended. Everyone scrambled for cover, many under the large tarp hanging overhead. Then the wildly gusting winds and rain brought down the tarp on everyone’s head, just moments after the electricity went out and everything went dark. Thousands of delegates, observers and journalists were soaked within five minutes, only a few hundred escaping to the relatively dry cabins built by the EZLN. After a few minutes of near panic and rapid regrouping, people gradually found their way through the night, and got up with the sun to dry off and finish the convention. The rain, completely normal in that region, was a problem only for the many middle-class urban attendees. The many campesinos and indigenes were accustomed to it and actually enjoyed the way the rain was a big equalizer: A Chol indian camped next to us under the press platform told us the next morning “we are all equal” under the rain. It also cooled off a lot of tempers which had been flaring earlier during the convention and its numerous meetings. By mid-day, most of the 6000 people had packed up, leaving behind a substantial pile of tents, sleeping bags, goods of all sorts, and money, and were headed back to San Cristóbal de las Casas, marvelling at the unlikelihood of a peaceful national convention staged by a guerrilla army in its liberated territory going so well.

After the Elections

Unsurprisingly, the ruling party’s candidate Ernesto Zedillo “won” the presidential election of August 21, 1994. Prior to the election many observers questioned the accuracy of the polls which predicted another PRI victory, and assumed that the only way they would win again would be through massive fraud. The Convention itself, held just two weeks before the election, endorsed a peaceful transition to democracy, but by doing so reinforced the popular focus on the election. By declaring its intention to organize civil disobedience and stoppages in the event of “fraud” the convention narrowed its short-term agenda in a way that seems to have undercut the momentum it established, since the election “fraud” was achieved differently than the obvious theft of ballots and ballot box stuffing utilized in 1988 and earlier.

This time the PRI just bought it outright: payments were given to peasants in hundreds of small towns, promising that there would be no more such payments in the event of a PRI loss. This was

backed up by coercive threats regarding burial plots in cemeteries (controlled by the local PRI politicians), school enrollments and so on. The Civic Alliance, the grassroots monitoring group created to oversee the election's cleanliness, reported that 34% of voters were not able to cast their ballots secretly (NY Times 8/25/94). Meanwhile, the media monopoly controlling the major TV networks covered the PRI campaign at a ratio of 5 or 6 to 1 compared to the other parties, and the PRI and its wealthy supporters spent millions more than any other party promoting their slate.

Considering the financial and media advantages enjoyed by the ruling PRI and the still widespread illiteracy in rural Mexico, it's not surprising that they managed to grind out another machine victory. But another contributing factor was the wooden and uninspiring leadership of Cuauhtémoc Cardenas (son of the famous Mexican president who nationalized the oil industry in 1938), head of the popular left opposition, the Revolutionary Democratic Party (Spanish initials: PRD), who didn't inspire much confidence and just didn't get that much electoral support. Mexicans, like their counterparts in Europe and the U.S., just wouldn't vote for a vague statist alternative that recent history showed would be a failure, and played it safe by voting for the status quo (the known evil), or the right wing National Action Party (PAN). In fact, none of the contenders really promised a major break with the current direction of Mexican economic policy, and a lot of Mexicans weren't ready to abandon entirely the meager patronage benefits that occasionally trickle out of the PRI machine. On the other hand, a 50% vote for a 65-year incumbent party with a long-entrenched patronage machine doesn't look all that good either. Clearly its sway is diminishing.

The Zapatistas have called for civil disobedience, and there have been some demonstrations in Mexico City and Chiapas opposing the skewed results (especially in Chiapas, where the PRI gubernatorial candidate won handily over a popular opposition candidate, even though the PRI is so widely hated that no one can believe the results... in Zapatista-controlled territory, the leftist PRD won 78% of the vote). But the demise of Mexico's one-party state is still in the future. How far, remains to be seen. The grassroots movements in Mexico share a predicament with grassroots movements everywhere. How do we clarify our vision, and then pursue it with new creativity and resources that exist among our day-to-day communities? How do we move beyond the parochialism of local issues and tactics to confront broader national and even international issues? How do we overcome well-armed, brutal repression?

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