

ZAPATISMO HOY

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WORKSHOP TOOK PLACE

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ORIGINAL TITLE

Reports from the Escuelita:
A discussion of the Zapatistas' Epistemology

This essay describes the Zapatistas' self-transformation from being an army to becoming a vast experiment in living as much as possible autonomously, outside the sway of state and market. This epistemological effort has led to thousands of trials and errors as well as the daily testing of the principles developed in the experiences of "war" Zapatismo and in the five hundred years of indigenous resistance. My aim is to inform the reader about the remarkable intellectual and pedagogical work being done on a mass basis in Zapatista territory.

01 THE STRENGTH AND LIMITS OF THE EZLN

In order to understand the present situation (achievements and problematics) of the Zapatistas we must remember their origin. The Zapatistas first appeared to the world as an "army"—that is indisputable—but often it is forgotten what the Zapatistas understood an army to be. It is worth going back to the Zapatistas' *Declaration of War* (a document distributed by the EZLN on January 1, 1994), where there is a commitment to refuse the status of a guerilla entity, i.e., an irregular armed band that claims no control over the actions of its compartments, that goes into battle without uniforms, that kills its prisoners, and that lives on robberies, kidnappings and extortion. Choosing to be an army also includes a particular type of command structure, with the Indigenous Revolutionary Clandestine Committee-General Command taking the top rank of the military decision-making.

The Zapatistas identified themselves not only as an army, but also as an army subject to the Geneva Accords: "We declare now and always that we are subject to the Geneva Accord, forming the EZLN as the fighting arm of our liberation struggle."¹ This is not just rhetoric; for abiding by the Geneva Accord committed and commits the

1 → Editorial Collective, *Zapatista! Documents of the New Mexican Revolution* (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 1994), 50.

Zapatista Army for National Liberation to a stringent code of conduct. First and foremost, it meant/means taking responsibility for prisoners of war. The first test of this commitment happened during the revolution's early days. The Zapatistas arrested General (as well as former governor of Chiapas) Absalom Castellanos at his ranch and charged him with a variety of crimes. The Zapatista tribunal found him guilty of responsibility for horrible acts against the people of Chiapas, but instead of imprisoning him or executing him, the Zapatistas released him. Castellanos' punishment being his having to bear the knowledge that those he had harmed had given him back his life and liberty.

02 THE PROBLEMATIC OF QUASI-PEACE

What followed the revolutionary appearance of the Zapatistas in 1994 was ongoing insurgency warfare, sometimes hitting peaks of violence (e.g., the Mexican government's 1995 attempt to wipe out the Zapatistas militarily) as well as moments of negotiation (e.g., the San Andreas Accords) that went on until the year 2000 when the PRI's hold on electoral political power was finally broken and the PAN regime of Vicente Fox was voted in. There followed a period of quasi-peace. The Zapatista leaders were able to leave their enclaves without fear of arrest and the threat of another attempt to militarily eliminate them (as in 1995 and in the paramilitary's massacre of non-violent supporters of the Zapatistas at Acteal in December of 1997) was considerably reduced.

This major turning point in the struggle that took place in 2000 was a great victory but it also posed a political challenge to the Zapatistas. This was the problematic. The prime Zapatista organization was the EZLN, i.e., an army that had ranks as well as a General Command, the Indigenous Revolutionary Clandestine Committee. The army had issued a series of Revolutionary Laws from the famous "Women's Revolutionary Law" to the less well-known ones like "the War Tax Law" and the "Revolutionary Agrarian Law." But these were presented in the form of decrees with the following explanation: "Revolutionary

Laws that will be enacted in the liberated territories in order to guarantee their revolutionary control and strengthen the bases so we can begin the process of building a new Mexico.”²

These laws were appropriate to what we might name “war Zapatismo” [similar to the period of “war communism” (1918-21) in the Soviet Union]. They constituted the revolution that would make a revolution possible.” But they can hardly be called a form of governance based upon freedom and autonomy appropriate for a territory of substantial size. For the most important legacy of the events of January 1994 was the recuperated land and the *ejidos* located in this territory that openly supported the Zapatistas.³

The geography and demography of this Zapatista realm are still something unclear to me, but it is substantial. For example, just judging the length of the arc of Zapatista *ejidos* from Roberto Barrios in the east to Oventic in the west is an arc of 100 miles plus. The number of *ejidos* in the vicinity of the arc are in the hundreds in jungle and mountains and the number of people (including children and youth in their early 20's who have lived all their lives in Zapatista territory) are in the tens of thousands.⁴

03 THE SOLUTION: GOBIERNO AUTÓNOMO

The process of beginning to create a non-military form of organization in the Zapatista territories was built upon the recognition that an army alone would not achieve what was demanded by the revolution in the first place: freedom and autonomy. There were simply too many questions simulated by pressing social forces that could not be handled by military logic. For example, with the beginning of the war in 1994 many people from other states in Mexico and from

- 2 → Translations of these laws can be found in Editorial Collective's *Zapatista! Documents of the New Mexican Revolution* (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 1994).
- 3 → “Ejido” refers to non-commodified land (i.e., it cannot be bought or sold) which is common property of a family or a village; it also refers to a village.
- 4 → These are geographical and demographic estimates that I have made on the basis of observation over many years.

outside the country came to different towns in Zapatista territory. However, these extra-territorials brought with them money and skills that created an uneven situation with respect to money and access to resources among the Zapatista *ejidos* (villages). As Doroteo wrote in *Gobierno Autonomo I*: “So the political and military leader compañeros realized that a disequilibrium was taking place among the towns, or rather that it was not level, they realized that as much with the aid, as well as in the work that was being organized in each municipality, was not level.”⁵

Who or what was to decide how to deal with this situation that might lead to tremendous tensions in Zapatista territory? It could not become a matter for the General Command or the EZLN Comandante in the area. These kinds of decisions need to have “consent of the governed” as a pre-condition for their permanence. This was especially true for “economic” and “reproductive” decisions like, for example, would there be a special Zapatista money, a Zapatista bank that makes loans and a prohibition against alcohol and illegal drugs backed by punishments? But who would decide and according to what principles? These questions became clear once the immediate “existential” threat was lifted. One of the first steps to begin this vital project was in 2003 with the formation of the *Juntas de buen gobierno*. But an immediate question arose: should the members of a *junta* be paid or not? Eventually it was decided otherwise, after a lengthy debate (AGI, p. 9). Similar problems arose with the tripartite structure of representation: Ejido, Municipality, and Caracol, while questions like “Where do the *Juntas* fit in?,” “what is the civil authorities’ relation with the Army and the Indigenous Clandestine Revolutionary Committee?” remain to be worked out.

For a clear division of authority, for example, I will quote Victor:

In our *zona* Altos de Chiapas the majority of our Zapatista communities have their autonomous agent and autonomous commissions, which are the direct authorities of the community, these government

5 → *Autonomous Government I: First-Grade Textbook for the course “Freedom According to the Zapatistas,”* 8. Accessed September 1, 2014 at <http://escuelitabooks.blogspot.co.uk/2014/03/first-book-available.html>

bodies are in charge of resolving the problems of the community, the autonomous commission is in charge of resolving the agrarian problems in the communities. If these government bodies do not find the solution to a problem they go to the autonomous municipality to which they belong; the autonomous authority of the municipality does everything possible to solve it, but if they cannot solve a problem they go to the *Junta de Buen Gobierno*, which is the final body of autonomous government.⁶

But there is no executive level like the General Command of the CCRI on the military side. There are hundreds of villages, dozens of municipalities, and five Caracols (made up of many municipalities) but no final arbiter, except the body of the whole (however that is defined).

Creating autonomous governance is hard work. For the Zapatistas must solve the fundamental problem of every revolution: who is to decide who is to decide? As Artemo writes:

We had many meetings and we made many agreements, not only was the agreement made, we saw that it is heavy work, it is not easy to do it. Why? Because we do not have a guide, we do not have a book to look at, to follow, we were working with our people in accordance with their necessities.⁷

This structure of governance is being developed very slowly and with many mistakes, as the Zapatistas openly admit. But it is a project that answers critiques of commons-centered politics (like David Harvey's) that point to the difficulty of "scaling them up," i.e., communal politics is o.k. for face-to-face organizations, but when they go beyond these intimate settings they breakdown. After all, the Zapatistas (both civic or military or both) have managed to preserve thousands of hectares of recuperated land for subsistence

6 → *Autonomous Government I: First-Grade Textbook for the course "Freedom According to the Zapatistas,"* 36 accessed September 1, 2014 at <http://escuelitabooks.blogspot.co.uk/2014/03/first-book-available.html>

7 → *Autonomous Government I: First-Grade Textbook for the course "Freedom According to the Zapatistas,"* 44 accessed September 1, 2014 at <http://escuelitabooks.blogspot.co.uk/2014/03/first-book-available.html>

agriculture and solved the problem of food, health, and education for tens of thousands of people.

The question that remains is: can the Zapatista project survive the crisis of Mexican narco- and petro-capitalism and thrive while its enemy, the *malgobierno*, disintegrates?

04 THE TWO HYPOTHESES

In order to answer this question, we should look to two conflicting hypotheses being tested in Chiapas today. The Mexican government officials, it seems, have largely come to believe that there is no need to directly repress the Zapatista movement because the huge economic and social forces at play in Chiapas will tempt the young to leave the Zapatista villages and their *milpas* and go to the cities of Mexico and the U.S. as they have done in the non-Zapatista regions of country. History is on their side, the Mexican government strategists think: it is just a matter of time when the Zapatista villages will be as empty as the thousands of other villages in the hinterlands of the world, without having to fire too many shots. At worst, they think perhaps, if the Zapatista villages do not disintegrate on their own, they will become closed and inward-looking places populated by the descendants of failed millenarians, like the Amish and Mennonites in the US.

There is, however, another hypothesis in the field, the Zapatista hypothesis which sees the “bad government” of Mexico rapidly disintegrating with its neoliberalism leading to the sell off of Mexico's resources (especially the petroleum reserves) and the development of a chronic civil war fought out by drug gangs with and against the biggest gang of all, the state. The peace and security the Zapatista communities’ “good government” emanate will become the pole of attraction that in time will lead to a rapid growth in their number, size, and geographical spread. The Zapatistas are clearly not concerned with all this happening tomorrow. On the contrary, the impression one gets is that their time horizon is counted in decades, but they are convinced that they are on the road.

The last year since the *Escuelita* has given strength to the Zapatista hypothesis.⁸ The most decisive event has been the nationwide movement in response to the disappearance of the 43 students from Ayotzinapa with the connivance of the local and national police forces who “handed over” the students to a narco-gang for execution. I cannot say that the disappeared Ayotzinapa 43 have led to an increase in the number of people settling in Zapatista *ejidos*. But it is simply logical to conclude that the Zaptista critique of the murderous state has become common knowledge in Mexico and now is shared across the political spectrum (whomever one voted for). ■

8 → The Escuelita was a pedagogical experiment the Zapatistas organized three times (in the summer of 2013, in December of 2013 and January of 2014). They invited thousands of interested people to come to Chiapas to live with a family in a Zapatista village for about a week and study the theme “Freedom According to the Zapatistas” with the experts, the practitioners of “Freedom According to the Zapatistas.”