Zapatismo beyond Chiapas

By Manuel Callahan

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This essay is a meditation on the political uses of Zapatismo in contexts outside of Chiapas, Mexico, especially the challenges involved in the attempt to put it into action in sites of privilege. The goal is to focus on key elements that constitute a political practice that is ethical, creative, and disciplined, as well as relevant in local and global contexts. Zapatismo may be an “intuition,” as Subcomandante Marcos has suggested, but it also offers us a theoretical framework for political analysis, especially regarding encounter, dialogue, and difference, while establishing these concepts as explicit political practices and objectives.

The key elements of Zapatismo as a political and cultural practice that will be examined here include a politics of refusal, space, and listening, articulated in the statements Ya Basta! (enough); dignidad y esperanza.
(dignity and hope); mandar obedeciendo (to lead by following); nunca jamás un mundo sin nosotros (never again a world without us); and todo para todos y nada para nosotros (everything for everyone and nothing for ourselves). The Zapatista intervention invites us to be clear about what we actually mean by these concepts, and to collectively arrive at an agreement of what they should look like in practice. We want to avoid approaches that rely on an authoritative, hierarchical apparatus or a uniquely “enlightened” system that directs, commands, or leads. We seek instead to arrive at a political practice that activates, a process that respects the agency, the voice, the creativity, and the engagement of an entire community. It is, as Marcos recently remarked, “an effort at encuentro,” an encounter noted for a number of “tendencies” with the goal of “building common points of discussion.” Thus, it is crucial that these tendencies be understood as something more than slogans.

The Zapatista intervention is not only a confrontation with the party-state or with the institutions of global capital and the cadres of intellectuals in their service, but it has generated controversy from within the Left. The Zapatistas’ proposal of a “revolution to make a revolution possible” presents tendencies that stand in contrast with the strategies, organizations, and formations of the Left of past generations. Zapatismo does not seek to impose an ideology, an organization, or a party line, and in this sense, the Zapatistas have made it clear that the old language and methods no longer function. However, they are not proposing new dogmas to replace the worn-out language and ideologies of previous movements. They refuse to do battle within a framework that allows for endless political and academic debate, a process that fosters hierarchy, authoritarianism, and elitism. The Zapatistas do not claim to provide answers but, as they argue, “pose questions.” “It is already known that our specialty is not in solving problems, but in creating them. ‘Creating them?’ No, that is too presumptuous, rather in proposing. Yes, our specialty is proposing problems.”

While we have come to know the Zapatistas through their public interventions and direct actions, we are still unfamiliar with their specific internal processes of organization, especially the link between the military and civil formations. On the other hand, Zapatismo is available to us as a political and cultural practice we can discuss, analyze, interpret, and enact within the context of a globally networked mobilization against neoliberalism. For analytical purposes it is important to distinguish between the Zapatistas and Zapatismo. The EZLN (the Zapatista Army for National Liberation) is the army that serves the base communities. Zapatistas are comprised of the EZLN and their supporters. Zapatismo is a political strategy, an ethos, a set of commitments claimed by those who
claim a political identity. Although the role of the EZLN as a catalyst has been critical, even Subcomandante Marcos has admitted, “the EZLN has reached a point where it has been overtaken by Zapatismo.”

**A Politics of Refusal**

The EZLN has on several occasions, and with remarkable consistency and sensitivity, presented their views to the world in the form of declarations and communiqués. “As they say in these mountains, the Zapatistas have a very powerful and indestructible weapon: the word.” Their word, offered to us in solidarity, brings with it an analysis of neoliberalism and an invitation to join in struggle.

The *Ya Basta!* or “Enough!,” of January 1, 1994, inaugurated the public phase of the EZLN’s struggle and introduced the world to Zapatismo. Although initially the Zapatistas declared war against the Mexican government and threatened to march on the capital in the hope of serving as a catalyst for a general uprising, they quickly broadened their agenda and shifted their focus to creating and developing the political space necessary for radical democratic practice. *Ya Basta!* does more than declare an opposition to oppressive forces; it also represents a direct action with specific goals and strategies and invokes a long history of struggle. The 500-year legacy of resistance and the more recent history of revolutionary struggle in Mexico coalesced into a prolonged “No!” on January 1. “And so, with singular joy we dedicated ourselves to resisting, to saying ‘no,’ to transforming our poverty into a weapon. The weapon of resistance.”

The Zapatistas’ direct action declared *Ya Basta!* to the neoliberal project: the increased globalization of capital that is to be achieved by opening markets to trade, privatizing natural resources and state-run services, eliminating workers’ rights, reducing the social wage and benefits, and homogenizing communities through consumerism, the commodification of everyday life, and the exaltation of private property and individualism.
The Zapatistas' first declaration was timed to coincide with the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), and it outlined a list of grievances and demands that spoke to the structural violence the indigenous peoples of Chiapas have endured for generations. The immediate goals stated in the eleven demands they put forward—including work, land, housing, food, health care, education, independence, liberty, democracy, justice, and peace—articulated the needs and rights being denied to growing portions of Mexico's indigenous population, as well as all peoples made miserable by neoliberal policies throughout the world. NAFTA provided no alternatives, making it "a death sentence for the indigenous people." Ya Basta! is a statement of refusal, rebellion, and survival in the face of a future denied. The "No" can be shared, and as Gustavo Esteva has eloquently phrased it, transformed into "many yeses!"

The challenge posed by the word spoken defiantly in resistance is to participate in a new political space (encounter), develop new political relationships or strategies of doing politics (dialogue), and collectively articulate a new political project (autonomy). The Zapatistas' commitment to creating political space and their selfless initiation of dialogue requires a response and participation by all parties. One response was heard in the Ya Basta! shouted by the "many-headed street movement" in Seattle and echoed in subsequent rumblings during the series of protests that followed.

A Politics of Space

Prior to Seattle, the Zapatistas hosted an astonished international Left in a series of encuentros, or encounters, which took place in the mountains of Chiapas. It has been through these gatherings, convened and hosted by the EZLN, that the Zapatistas have had the most profound impact. "The audacity of the Zapatistas," the Midnight Notes Collective reminds us, "was to open a clearing in the forest heavily patrolled by the Mexican Army and to allow others to come to speak to each other about capitalism and revolution." These gatherings established a crucial bridge between different worlds, and that bridge is manifest in a new "international"—not an international based on rigid party doctrines or the dogmas of competing organizations, but an "International of Hope," a web constituted by numerous autonomies, without a center or hierarchy, within which various coalitions of discontents can express themselves, in order to dismantle the forces and regimes oppressing all of them.

The Zapatistas have not organized beyond their own communities in Chiapas; rather they have animated and inspired countless numbers of
Zapatista communities mobilize to San Cristobal, Chiapas to celebrate anniversary of the uprising, 2003.

and respects, the contribution of everyone, each sharing their own work.

where a reader of participatory democracy realizes a system that respects, value and a common understanding of the political process and values that make up a unique system, such as the Zapataristas, have insisted that the experiences of the Zapataristas have punctuated their statements.

Throughout the struggle, the Zapataristas have punctuated their statements.

A Politics of Listening

The transgression of limits (creation) and the imposition of limits (definition) is a conflict between creative practice and its negation, or in Holloway’s own words, “not in the first place a conflict between two groups of people. It is a conflict between creative practice and its negation, or in Holloway’s own words, “not in the first place a conflict between two groups of people. It is a conflict in the people’s minds between the different ways of understanding and expressing the world.”

The new international is defined by the principles of solidarity, self-determination, and democracy. The first Zapatista insurrection, the EZLN, has succeeded in bringing the world to its knees, and in building a model of community in which people come together to learn from each other and work together towards a common goal.

Utilizing the strategies and tactics being shared by thousands of people who are united in their struggle against oppression, the Zapataristas have built a model of community in which people come together to learn from each other and work together towards a common goal.

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“Perhaps,” Subcomandante Marcos declares, “the new political morality is constructed in a new space that is not the taking or retention of power, but serves as the counterweight and opposition that contains it and obliges it to, for example, ‘lead by obeying.’”

The Zapatistas demonstrated that it is possible to organize collective action based on a communitywide dialogue, consensus, and commitment. Given that in any local context there is not simply one single, homogenous community, how do we determine who leads and who obeys? Mandar obedeciendo, or “lead by obeying,” suggests going beyond a system of hierarchy and rank where elites are conferred the duty and right to direct. The leadership of a community, the process from which it emerges and is articulated, requires clarification, such that mandar obedeciendo is not an excuse for a small coterie to direct, either out of cynicism or ambition. Mandar obedeciendo requires humility and a commitment to listening, neither of which can be taken for granted. It is an invitation to a profound transformation, collective and individual. Transformation is both necessary and integral to struggle as we provoke, incite, facilitate, inspire, listen, and work with one another with humility.

The emergence of the EZLN as a people’s army is a narrative of transformation. The small group of urban revolutionaries who traveled to Chiapas expecting to become a revolutionary vanguard abandoned their conceptions of revolution once they were “contaminated by and
subordinated to the communities.” In another move of transformation the community itself became armed. The Zapatistas emerged from a context of a variety of ethnic groups, political organizations, and economic interests. Early in the struggle, during the critical moment of the original EZLN’s transformation from a vanguardist guerrilla to a community in arms, the Zapatistas reflected not one single indigenous identity, but the interests of Tzeltal, Tolojobal, Tzotzil, Chol, and Mam peoples, to name just a few.

The political imperatives of *mandar obedeciendo* also challenge many of the assumptions and previously unexamined strategies of organizing associated with “solidarity” efforts that often rely on a singular model, plan, or program fostering paternalism and elitism. Solidarity campaigns too often focus on a single issue, developing networks of short-lived and fragile coalitions that can be resistant to crucial modifications and slow to adapt to shifting contexts. More important, solidarity projects that represent, define, and speak for the struggle(s) of others presuppose the progress or development of those being aided and not the transformation of those providing the aid. Unfortunately, they are too ill-prepared to acknowledge the transformations already taking place in targeted communities.

In the effort to go beyond solidarity, *mandar obedeciendo* begins with the premise that communities made up of diverse constituencies are, to varying and complex degrees, already organized. Taking our cues from the EZLN, we can imagine, in place of solidarity work, a politics of refusal, listening, and community-building in which people become part of “the struggle” in their own way, at their own pace, and without being measured by any specific model of “conscientization” or a political program specified by “the organization.” We must operate from the premise that a given community possesses the resources for its own transformation and has the collective genius to marshal those resources for political action. *Encuentro* as a model of political work presupposes individual and collective transformation that results from dialogue, and it allows for the possibility of individual and collective transformation into a community with purpose. Thus, the Zapatistas provide an important example of the possibilities for an unarmed guerrilla operating in sites of privilege, a resistance that makes direct action and disciplined formations central elements of their political practice without abandoning dialogue.

*Todo para todos, nada para nosotros,* “everything for everyone, nothing for ourselves,” underscores the commitment to define struggle not by taking state power, but imagining a new world, “a world where many
worlds fit.” Forsaking the desire to replace one elite with another, todo para todos, nada para nosotros invites us not to submit to individual needs but to elaborate collective ones. More important, it asserts that communities are driven by collectively articulated obligations, not by the competing interests of individual needs. Zapatista political proposals and strategy posit a “collective subject,” demanding the fundamental rights that emerge from collective identities and communal needs.

Caminamos preguntando, or “we walk asking,” challenges us to travel in dialogue with one another, always with a view of a shared horizon. We are often schooled to repress the fundamental impulse to question. A commitment to inquiry allows us to transcend the facade of ideology and the oppression of rigid institutions in favor of discovery. It contests a process in which we have been “educated” to accept being left out or rendered invisible to everyone, including ourselves. The violence of cultural homogenization produced through social fictions and the ideological maneuvers of a “democratic” system attempt to force us to deny ourselves as we deny the uniqueness and diversity of others. Processes of exclusion target specific communities, especially those groups who have chosen to resist, such as the communities who have taken up arms in Chiapas. Other groups, such as youth, women, communities of color, constituencies who craft diverse, often seemingly less obvious strategies of resistance, have also been marginalized as well and are threatened by relentless processes of homogenization.

Such exclusions could also be exerted in revolutionary movements, a history the Zapatistas have struggled not to repeat. Violence was not a means to dominate, or even convince others of the virtues of a Zapatista vision or program. Ideas asserted through the force of arms are always suspect, and as Marcos admits, “the task of an armed movement should be to present the problem, and then step aside.” Able to pursue and develop a “model of peace,” their change in strategy corresponds to Gandhi’s often misunderstood explanation of nonviolence as being an appropriate strategy of the strong, not the weak. They have not abandoned the “model of war” altogether, but have held it in abeyance, the two possibilities working in conjunction to expand their political project for Mexico and beyond. Zapatista strength derives not only from their mobilizations but from the way in which people have rallied to their banner, confident in their commitment not to take state power and impose themselves as a revolutionary vanguard. “For us it would be a failure. What would be a success for the politico-military organizations of the sixties or seventies which emerged with the national liberation movements would be a fiasco for us,” claims Marcos.
Nunca jamás un mundo sin nosotros, “never again a world without us,” seeks to reverse the history of marginalization in which communities have been systematically silenced. The nunca jamás is a declaration that recognizes that processes of marginalization and homogenization portend the extinction of a people, suggesting the necessity for action that must include cultural renewal. It proclaims the possibilities of a reimagined world, a world in which those in rebellion have responsibilities and obligations to one another. As a statement against elitism it reminds us that the struggle is not limited to the Zapatistas or those in the South, but must be reimagined to include multiple struggles in numerous sites.

Zapatismo offers a strategy of struggle on a variety of fronts, including cultural ones. Fundamental to the Zapatistas’ struggle to make themselves visible has been the claim that they narrate their own history and speak their own truths. The “not forgetting” reminds us to recover our past while we document our struggle. In asserting critical elements of a vibrant Mayan culture, the Zapatistas have successfully resisted market forces that seek to homogenize all people. Their struggle has been successful primarily because it has been rooted locally, a deliberate effort to maintain their commons by reclaiming their history, culture, and community.

We must also reclaim our histories and cultures as we reclaim our commons. In sites of privilege such as those found in the “the west,” a consumer culture fosters values, attitudes, and practices peculiar to a disposable, individualistic, and competitive society. If we begin with a definition of community that stresses sharing knowledge of what works locally between generations and fulfilling collectively determined obligations with one another, then we must ask ourselves how do we
collectively define obligations and acknowledge local wisdom in the face of cultural homegenization?

Notes in Conclusion

The Zapatistas’ commitment to difference rather than identity, dialogue over command, and autonomy in opposition to state or market control has revealed a radical new practice, a commitment to theoretical reflection and direct action that does not subordinate local struggles (issues in particular contexts), prioritize actions (strategies of resistance), or alternative practices (strategies for living outside of state and market forces) to any specific political formation, program, or ideology. The Zapatistas have refused to do battle within a framework of old organizational structures. Thus, they have insisted that they will not fall back into the past that, as Marcos suggests, was defined by the battle over ideologies. During the March for Indigenous Dignity the Zapatistas made it clear they were not trying to turn back the clock to a bucolic past of native harmony. “No,” proclaimed Marcos, “we Indian peoples have come in order to wind the clock and to thus ensure that the inclusive, tolerant, and plural tomorrow which is, incidentally, the only tomorrow possible, will arrive. In order to do that, in order for our march to make the clock of humanity march, we Indian peoples have resorted to the art of reading what has not yet been written. Because that is the dream which animates us as indigenous, as Mexicans and, above all, as human beings. With our struggle, we are reading the future which has already been sown yesterday, which is being cultivated today, and which can only be reaped if one fights, if, that is, one dreams.”