

Autonomy, Daily Life and Our Future

1 January 1994

Many know the story. At dawn of 1 January 1994, implementation day of the North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) between Canada, the United States and Mexico, a group of about 3,000 Tzotzil, Tzeltal, Tojolabal, Zoque, Chol and Ma'am Mayan people, faces covered with black balaclavas or red handkerchiefs and lightly armed (and some holding only sticks like rifles) attacked and occupied seven municipalities and townships in the southeastern Mexican state of Chiapas. The rebels called themselves the 'Zapatista Army for National Liberation' (the EZLN). They denounced the hundreds of years of oppression and exploitation of the indigenous populations, the crime of the global neoliberal system, and proclaimed their struggle for land, justice, freedom and democracy for all.

... do politics differently ...

The Zapatistas have always insisted that they don't want to take power from the Mexican state. The mainstream political class, journalists and ordinary citizens have long misunderstood this stance as naïve denial about the necessity of any system of rule, and simply left others in disbelief: what else does a national liberation movement want but power?

A communiqué from the 1997 Intergalactic Gathering for Humanity and against Neo-liberalism" states "*We think that if we can conceptualise a change in the premise of power, the problem of power, starting from the fact that we don't want to take it, that could produce another kind of politics and another kind of political actor, other human beings that do politics differently than the politicians we have today across the political spectrum*".

The Other Campaign/La Otra Campaña

In 2006 the Zapatistas launched 'the Other Campaign' (la Otra Campaña), which centres on connecting and strategising with whole communities, organizations, activists, and average citizens in Mexico and internationally living out daily struggles challenging neo-liberalism while simultaneously building the alternative.

Zapatista Milestones

1983 - EZLN begin organising in the Lacandon

1992 October - 10,000+ Mayans march through San Cristobal denouncing official celebrations commemorating 500 years since the Spanish conquest

1994 January - Zapatista uprising, 12 days of armed combat, followed by negotiated cease-fire and the beginning of low intensity warfare (paramilitary groups committing massacres and terrorizing Zapatistas, federal army displacing and destroying indigenous communities) and continuation of years of resistance, direct democracy, autonomous education, and international people-to-people gatherings

1995 February - Military offensive against the EZLN jeopardize dialogue and negotiations.

1996 - San Andres Larrainzar Agreements were reached between Zapatistas and the Mexican government granting autonomy, recognition, and rights to the indigenous population of Mexico

1997 - Acteal Massacre

1998 - The 5th (Quinta) Declaration - proposes a law protecting indigenous rights and cultures be resolved through a national consultation

1999 - emergence of Indy Media, activist communication tool

2000 - election of PAN Fox to president, end PRI 71-year hold on Mexican politics

2001 - Marcha del Color de la Tierra from Chiapas to the DF, Zapatistas speak address the national congress, establishment of caracoles

2003 - Official launch of the Juntas de Buen Gobierno

2005 the 6th (Sexta) Declaracion - La Otra Campaña, the Zapatistas say they will put down arms as their primary weapon and begin actively to build a new political class, *mandar obedeciendo*

2006 - Zapatistas' tour of Mexico as recorded in Viva Mexico, community exchange celebrating communities living out resistance to the dominant global model and building the constructive alternative

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The Empire of Money and New Struggles for Decolonisation

- Empire is no longer a geo-political term but a neo-liberal economic term representing the world financial markets. Global capital knows no boundaries, whereas people around the globe are limited/denied freedom of movement.
- The Empire of Money has moved centre-stage in our world, and the modern concept of the Nation-State sits to one side.
- The Zapatistas say 'We rose up against a national power only to realise it no longer existed ... What we have is a global power that produces local and uneven dominations.' New struggles for decolonisation must focus on overcoming the new structure of sovereignty imposed through the Empire of Money.
- National liberation movements against colonialism only succeeded in re-creating and re-asserting the dominant capitalist, hierarchical, violent model. Zapatistas call this signing up to 'Democracy Incorporated' and they invite us to think about 'politics' and the world order differently. Our current model is after all only since 1648 and if history tells us anything it that the political order is an ever-evolving entity and culture.

Autonomy (creating a new political class) in Zapatista communities

- The Zapatistas are building the alternative every day, living concrete autonomous experiments in well- and collectively-organized communities. Autonomous municipalities in Chiapas are not "free spaces" where everybody can do whatever they want, but democratic spaces where the community decides collectively what it wants and structures its relations accordingly. They have clear democratic processes for decision-making, delegating tasks, naming and revoking leadership positions, rotating and revolving responsibilities. Rather than "no rule" they practice *mandar obedeciendo*, or rule by obeying. You can certainly choose whether to be Zapatista or not, but this choice involves a commitment to a collective process of survival and self-making, not an individual voluntaristic participation in an "alternative" space. Zapatistas organized for 10 years before the 1994 uprising.
- ***mandar obedeciendo (lead by following)*** - the community practices self-organisation through assemblies, preventing any one person accumulating power; while some indigenous practices were conducive to building autonomy they weren't entirely enough to over tendencies of the domination culture, so the Zapatistas did what (scholars) call transduction - the EZLN took collective practices that already existed to a limited degree and began to work to intensify their the consistency, connectivity and truth content of these practices. They created a network of practices that would in effect self select for this 'other' type of power.
- the Zapatistas are searching, deciding and controlling who we want to become, they have not accepted or bought into being defined as 'another' movement seeking sub-sovereignty or secession, nor were they interested in knowing who the State thinks they are. They want and are building a radical experiment exploring a very different power relation.