

# Propagating Popular Resistance

*The Poetics, Public Relations, and Fetish of Zapatismo*



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**T**he caravan of buses is miles long, draped with banners, painted with political slogans, filled with people from the poorest and most distant corners of Mexico—people the color of the earth, as they say—but also filled with people from dozens of other countries who find common cause here. The roads are lined with crowds, cheering, waving shirts and white flags of sheets and toilet paper, flashing victory signs and shouting: *Zapata Vive! La lucha sigue!* Zapata lives, the struggle continues! Police accompany the caravan, helicopters circle above, news teams and film crews race from the front of the caravan to the back, and in every town the newspapers shout their arrival: “The Zapatistas are coming!” In the lead bus, faces peer out at the crowds—but the faces are covered, hidden from view behind black ski masks. Not long ago, these masked figures were barred from leaving their villages; even now they represent a real threat, though they bear no arms and have committed no crime.

The caravan will follow a circuitous route through the country’s indigenous heartland, etching a snail-shell spiral on the map of Mexico, beginning in Chiapas to the far south; proceeding west through Oaxaca; north through Puebla, Tlaxcala, and Hidalgo; west again through Queretaro, Guanajuato, and Michoacan; south to Guerrero; east and north to Morelos; and then, finally, triumphantly over the Sierra de Chichinutzín and down into the urban heart of the country in the Valley of Mexico. In every city and many smaller towns, the caravan of motley vehicles stops and empties its cargo of ski-masked Zapatistas, Italians uniformed in white overalls, and sympathizers of all descriptions—young, old, brown, white, yellow, and red; university professors and union organizers; punks and hippies; grandmothers and young children. The *encapuchados*—the men and women without faces—speak to the crowds about democracy, liberty, justice; they tell jokes and offer metaphors about a wind from below, about an unstoppable force the color of the earth. They say: We are not here with answers, but with questions; we are not a spectacle to be gazed at but a window to be gazed through; we are you and you are us—tell us, where do we go from here?

This is the March for Indigenous Dignity, otherwise known as the March the Color of the Earth, otherwise known as the Zapatour. It is early 2001, and a new president has just been elected in Mexico—ousting a 60-year-old ruling party—making it necessary for the Zapatistas to descend on Mexico City to ensure their place at the center stage of Mexican politics. For almost two years, the Zapatistas have been nearly silent (as Subcomandante Marcos, the movement’s spokesman and military strategist later quipped, “Silence, too, is a weapon.”) The caravan marked such a

watershed in civil rights for Mexico's *indigenas* that it was likened to the US's 1963 March on Washington where Martin Luther King gave his "I have a dream" speech. Others called it a ridiculous bid for relevancy at a time when the popular movement in Chiapas was effectively over due to the universal success of neoliberalism (not to mention neoliberalism's effects in Chiapas, such as hunger, disease, poverty, fatigue).

This particular mass mobilization was neither the first nor the last time that the Zapatistas would take to the public stage, with thousands of their supporters, to demand recognition, rights, dignity, and justice. Nearly every year since August 1994—when they invited thousands of people to attend their National Democratic Convention deep inside rebel territory in the Lacandón Jungle—mass meetings and mobilizations have expanded the Zapatista support base and refined their political operation. Some of these *encuentros* have been organized by the Zapatistas themselves. Many more have arisen spontaneously through the efforts of solidarity networks and supporters worldwide.

These are not random gatherings, planned in reaction to world events, like antiwar rallies or protests to shut down the WTO. Each mobilization signifies a strategic leap, a reaching outward, and a question: "Where do we go from here?" In 1995 the Zapatistas organized a national popular vote, or *consulta*, in which they asked a series of questions regarding the basic goals of the movement; more than a million Mexicans voted. In 1996 they organized another mass meeting in the Lacandón Jungle, known as the Intergalactic Forum for Humanity and Against Neoliberalism. The *intergalactica* represented a deep bow to the diversity the movement needed to stay alive; as Subcomandante Marcos put it, it was a celebration of "all the worlds the world needs to really be the world." In 1997, rather than inviting outsiders into the jungle, the Zapatistas sent representatives out to meet with people in *pueblos* and cities across the country. The first of these pilgrimages was the march of 1,111: this many individual Zapatistas traveled to Mexico City wrapped in Mexican flags, "to show this country that we are Mexicans." Their buses were named after revolutionary heroes, and the head of the caravan flew a banner celebrating a hero more ancient still: the Mayan god of the wind, Ik.

These mass mobilizations, national and international gatherings, marches, caravans, and pilgrimages have been crucial to Zapatista strategy and the proliferation of the movement. And they have shaped other social movements. Renegade history tells us that a Zapatista solidarity *encuentro* in Spain in 1997 gave birth to a group called People's Global Action, which issued a call to expand the scope of *encuentros* to include social movements worldwide. Out of this call came the World Social Forum, which began in 2001 and is the largest annual gathering of progressive social movements in history. These gatherings do not in themselves solve the problems of hunger, poverty, and abandonment; but by collectively developing a political vocabulary that reveals the

unity of diverse struggles, and by forging creative alliances, the Zapatistas have helped to challenge the always-looming party line that There Is No Alternative.

## Branding popular resistance

Aside from countless converging historical factors, what has drawn people in such numbers to a movement beginning in the most obscure corner of Mexico has been a web of propaganda, stories, songs, murals, communiqués, symbols, and grand historical gestures: a ski-masked face and a rebel cry. A man on horseback, serenely smoking a pipe, with bullet belts marking a wide X across his chest. Crowds of miniscule women in flower-embroidered dresses shoving and screaming at a ragged platoon of worried soldiers. Since the mid-1990s, these images, seen worldwide, here evoked a global uprising against state and corporate capitalism, corrupt bureaucracy, and power wielded by the few against the interests of the many. *Zapatismo*, aside from creating a new kind of social movement that seeks to build local alternatives to power rather than to take the power of the state, has created an image and a mythic space—a poetics—that is unique among liberation movements, and which has allowed it to survive in the popular imagination, and therefore on the ground, for a dozen years now.

By taking early and strategic advantage of the internet and the news media, the Zapatistas have kept their story in the headlines. By using folktales, myths, jokes, and other ways of engaging an audience, they have filled what might best be described as a psycho-emotional need for stories of resistance among the international left. By framing themselves as sympathetic characters—Subcomandante Marcos the charismatic and self-effacing clown, Comandante Ramona the diminutive but strong female presence who overcame illiteracy to speak before millions, and the rest of the Zapatistas, the unbending will of popular resistance—they have created a living history that wins them press, solidarity, and the attention of international human rights organizations. And it prevents the Mexican government from attacking them outright.

To refer to the Zapatistas' careful image management as "branding" is cynical, but it is fair to say that just as the Nike swoosh calls to mind not only athletic equipment but also the fundamental ideology of predatory capitalism, just as Starbucks represents not only gourmet coffee but yuppie comfort and conformity, the ski mask and the other symbols of *Zapatismo* serve to deliver a dense package of information wrapped up in a single visual icon—and create name recognition for it. It is precisely this careful image management, along with a clear and consistent message, that prevented the Zapatistas from suffering the same fate as the slaughtered multitudes in neighboring Guatemala in the 1980s, and that has led them, instead, to inspire and represent global popular resistance.

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A century after his assassination, Emiliano Zapata lives on in indigenous Mexico.

In military terms, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) has never had the upper hand. Although local popular support is estimated in the tens of thousands, the number of *insurgentes*—the guerillas with guns living in the mountains—has been estimated at between 300 and 1,500. They are poorly equipped, poorly fed, and forced constantly to adapt their strategy to changing conditions. In contrast, the opposition—60,000 federal troops (fully a third of the Mexican army)—is regularly rotated through Chiapas. And yet, after 11 days of armed struggle in early 1994, the EZLN managed, in the words of border artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña:

to determine the terms of the cease-fire, to force the government to sit and negotiate in their own territory, to introduce into the spectrum of Mexican political forces a new vision of the future of the country, and above all, to create a new political mythology in a time when most political mythologies are bankrupt.

It is precisely the Zapatistas' political mythology, their framing of their own image and their use of "public relations," that has underpinned their survival and the propagation of their ideas, in one form or another, throughout much of the world.

### Little dolls bearing little guns

In the wide doorways along Real de Guadalupe and Avenida Insurgentes in San Cristóbal de las Casas, the colonial capital of highland Chiapas, small armies are gathered. They are dolls of the rebel forces dressed in wool coats and ski masks, carrying little wooden rifles, each with the trademark red bandana of the EZLN around its neck. Some sit astride horses, others are gathered in trucks as if heading into battle, still others hang delicately from key chains and hair ribbons.

As you pass by these doorways, women and girls sitting among the armies call out "*Comprame un Zapatista!*"—Buy a Zapatista! At the slightest sign of interest a woman stands, flattening out her black wool skirt, and holds forth a handful of the dolls: "Buy one! This is Marcos," presenting one on a horse. "This is Tacho," presenting one with a hat. "This is Ramona," presenting one with a white blouse and skirt. "Buy one," she continues, "Anna Maria, David, Marcos," intoning the names of the Zapatista command. These are the real thing, her voice demands, these are the people you read about in the papers, these are the heroes of the revolution. Ask her if she knows the Zapatistas and she might giggle and turn shy, looking away, but she will continue in her insistence—she works hard making these dolls from the scraps of clothes she weaves—"Buy one! Buy one!"

San Cristóbal is home to countless battalions of dolls, a monument to that New Year's Day when the Zapatistas flooded the city and tore apart the town hall. The Zapatista combatants have long since disappeared into their villages to tend their fields, to resume life under the threat of siege. But the dolls remain vigilant. To the owners of the town—the bankers, the businesspeople, and the military—these diminutive figures are hobgoblin terrorists threatening the security of their landholdings and investments. But like the dolls, the Zapatistas are everywhere. There are more of them than can be counted, and they blend in with the fields they tend, working with a bent back over a hoe or sitting on the ground in a stall in the artisans' market, weaving. Of course, the huge army presence, Humvees, troop transports, and soldiers walking the streets with their guns cause the rebels to blend in that much more. They are invisible because they are everywhere.

Masks are generally associated with bank robbers and other “common” criminals, as well as with “terrorists” or freedom fighters, all of whom have something to hide because they are breaking the moral, ethical, and legal codes of their societies. But the ski mask initially served a pragmatic function: On New Year's Eve in the high mountain town of San Cristóbal de las Casas, the wind burrows into your bone marrow, whips your face, and freezes your eyebrows. In winter in the *altiplano* of Chiapas, late at night and in the early morning hours, it is common to see people wearing ski masks to protect their faces from frostbite.

What's not so common is to see people wearing ski masks, brown shirts, black pants, and brown caps with little red five-pointed stars, and carrying assault weapons, rifles, and hand-carved wooden imitation guns. The practical aspects of the masks—for covering a warrior's face, protecting her from recognition and

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But it is not only the Zapatistas who sell these dolls; they quickly became the most sought-after souvenir in the markets of San Cristóbal, and even women from villages that do not support the EZLN have been found earning their profit from them. In this sense, the dolls' mythology is so effective that even the enemy has been bedeviled into propagating it; and yet, in outlying towns less protected by international witnesses and more penetrated by military and paramilitary forces, the dolls are virtually absent. What makes these dolls any different from the sold-out image of Che Guevara or other revolutionary icons? Perhaps it is the fact that, in Mexico, at least, the Zapatistas still present a threat, while *el Che* is long gone; perhaps the fact that this is not merely a cult of personality (Marcos aside) but a generalized symbol of resistance. These dolls illuminate the shadows to reveal an invisible mass movement. Their very presence signals the historical inevitability of revolution.

### “We cover our faces in order to be seen”

**I**mmediately after the appearance of the EZLN in 1994, the ski mask bloomed like a dark flower across the cultural landscape. In December 2000, when the Zapatistas declared that they would march to the capital of Mexico to speak before congress, the chief concern among opposition leaders was not that the rebels would bear arms, but that they would wear masks. An almost pathological terror of the masks has been evident among the ruling class, mirroring, in its way, the fetish that surrounds the masks among youth and the left.

from the cold—do not belie their more profound, ritual functions. Commenting on the use of masks in the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua, Salman Rushdie wrote, “The true purpose of masks, as any actor will tell you, is not concealment, but transformation. A culture of masks is one that understands a good deal about the processes of metamorphosis.”

Masked processions and carnivals are used in Catholic ceremonies throughout the Americas. But when masks and dramatic theater come out into the streets in marches, vigils, blockades, and acts of civil disobedience, this process of metamorphosis takes on a political significance—open resistance pointing towards revolution.

In a letter to Adolfo Gilly, Subcomandante Marcos wrote, “The case is that the ski mask is a symbol of rebellion. Just yesterday it was a symbol of criminality or terrorism. Why? Certainly not because we intended it to be.”

The masks have the perhaps unintended effect of conjuring a sort of “radical otherness.” Like Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, indigenous people have long remained almost unseen in modern Mexico. As Octavio Paz poignantly described, “The Indian blends into the landscape until he is an indistinguishable part of the white wall against which he leans at twilight, of the dark earth on which he stretches out to rest at midday, of the silence that surrounds him.”

So the mask became the symbol of all those whose identities are dismissed by the dominant culture. Anonymity—facelessness—was claimed with a ferocity that turned it from a handicap into a source of power and a threat. Overnight it came to represent not

only the indigenous people of Chiapas in their struggle for justice, but all peoples rejected by corporate globalization. For the Mexican neoliberal establishment and the international powers supporting it, the mask invokes a terrifying vision, a sort of Frankenstein's monster confronting his creator: "You made me what I am. Now look at me!"

After January 1, 1994, any one of the millions of dispossessed could simply don a ski mask and step out into the public square of her town or village and her political intentions, her story, her struggle would be made known. By establishing a collective identity, the wearer of the ski mask achieves, perhaps, one of the main symbolic victories of the underdog rebel: She disdains and dismisses the class which had previously disdained and dismissed her.

By donning the ski mask along with the bandoliers and horse evocative of Emiliano Zapata, Marcos made himself into a modern

their movement. Chief among these historical figures is Emiliano Zapata. The primary people's leader who propelled the Mexican Revolution of 1910–1919 to overthrow the dictatorship of Porfirio Diaz and establish the founding constitution of modern Mexico, Zapata's presence is everywhere in the country; his name is attached to everything from barbershops and taco stands to agricultural unions and, of course, rebel armies. By evoking Zapata, a claim is laid for the "true" meaning of the Mexican Revolution: a struggle for a united peasantry and for the practical ideals of land and liberty. Historians Enrique S. Rajchenberg, and Catherine Héau-Lambert have noted that, of all of the Latin American leaders of the 20th century, perhaps the only ones who remain popular across classes are Emiliano Zapata, Pancho Villa, and possibly Che Guevara:

**Marcos' ski-masked image appeared, and continues to appear, on balloons and t-shirts, cigarette lighters and buttons, bumper stickers, clocks, pencils, condoms, and anything else that can be sold for 10 pesos at a street-side post or a rock concert. The Marcos fetish—*Marcotrafficking*—has managed to keep the Zapatista struggle in the public arena.**

Mexican superhero, a cross between Zapata, Che Guevara, and Superman; the *New York Times* called him "the first postmodern guerilla leader." (Marcos wears crossed bandoliers of shotgun shells; yet his weapon of choice, for battle and for public posturing, is an automatic rifle, which uses entirely different ammunition. This could not have gone unnoticed by the press, and yet the theatrical effect is absolute.) The effect on Mexican youth was also immediate, identifying the Zapatistas as "cool" and earning Marcos respect as part of the *banda*, the gang. Marcos' machismo is tempered, in appearance, at least, by his righteousness, and as his presence proliferated a sort of revolutionary chic overtook Mexico.

Marcos' status as fetish ensured him a safe haven among civil society. The Mexican government quickly sought to unmask him, but once this myth took hold, Mexican civil society had no desire to know who he really was; even when his identity was revealed, the myth held its power. His ski-masked image appeared, and continues to appear, on balloons and t-shirts, cigarette lighters and buttons, bumper stickers, clocks, pencils, condoms, and anything else that can be sold for 10 pesos at a street-side post or a rock concert. The Marcos fetish—*Marcotrafficking*—has managed to keep the Zapatista struggle in the public arena.

### The uses of history: Zapata lives, the struggle continues

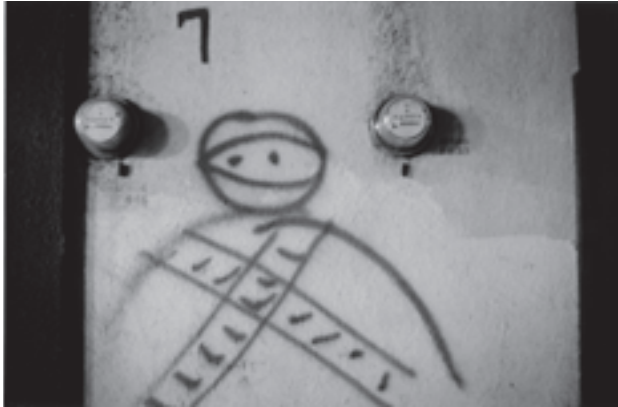
**A**nother way in which the Zapatistas have captured the popular imagination is by invoking historical figures, names, and dates to give context to their actions and historical drama to

Lenin, Mao and Tito have been knocked from their pedestals in recent years, while [Villa and Zapata] have not only conserved their positions, their power has multiplied. The reason for their continued relevance, and also that of Che Guevara, springs from, among other things, the fact that they were foreign to power. In other words, it is not enough for an individual to embrace popular causes, but it is crucial that they maintain distance from that which contaminates whoever touches it: power and its symbols.

The power of Zapata as a symbol of ongoing revolution is particularly potent in Chiapas, because, as has been noted extensively, the Mexican revolution and the reforms it gained never quite arrived in Chiapas. Neither the rebel army nor the agricultural reforms carried out in the 1930s under President Lazaro Cardenas ever arrived in the villages of the Chiapan altiplano or the Selva Lacandona, where *caciquismo* (local rule by armed strongmen who generally serve the state party) and the system of *encomenderos* (large plots of land owned by *Ladinos*, or whites) have persisted virtually to the present day.

Mexican historian Carlos Montemayor has shown how the figure of Zapata belongs not only to Mexican historical reality, but to the indigenous oral tradition that does not distinguish between myth and history. In 1997's *Chiapas: La Rebelion indigena de Mexico*, he writes:

For the occident the calendar of history is obvious: we believe that what happened once happened only in this moment, and that it has nothing to do with the subsequent moment. For indigenous



Graffiti in San Cristóbal evokes the iconic Zapatista with ski mask and bandoliers.

culture time has another nature, another speed, and is one of the secrets of the cultural resistance and combative capacity of these people. For them the past is found in another dimension which continues coexisting with the present. The indigenous memory is a process of revitalization of the past. The festivals, dances, prayers, the oral tradition, are the force of a memory that communicates with this other dimension in which things remain alive. This is why, when they speak of Emiliano Zapata (or of heroes from the remote conquest, from the independence or from the nineteenth century) they are speaking of a living force.

When described as “neo-zapatistas,” Marcos has replied, to paraphrase, “We are not ‘neo,’ we are the continuation of the revolution of 1910.” *Zapata vive, la lucha sigue*—Zapata lives, the struggle continues.

### Armed diplomacy

The Zapatistas have said time and again that their goal is not to take state power but to “open a space for democracy.” Many times they have extended an invitation to “global civil society” to meet, debate, and generate visions of “a world in which many worlds fit.” They talk repeatedly of “walking by asking questions.” Yet amidst the question marks is a single exclamation point that demands that the questions be taken seriously: the fact that the Zapatistas carry guns, and do not put them down lightly.

In Mexico, as in much of Latin America, seeing peasants with guns is not unusual. When things get especially bad for *el pueblo*, when the balance of power and the land base shifts too much into the hands of the few, people speak of “going to the mountains,” meaning taking up arms to defend their collective rights. Thus, the Zapatistas’ use of weapons is certainly not a new phenomenon in Mexico, though their reasons for carrying them are.

The EZLN has made many public statements explaining why they bear arms. Among the clearest (and most sensible) is Marcos’ statement that they would rather be killed in public battle than die unseen and unheard of diarrhea, dysentery, malaria or other preventable diseases of poverty.

Yet the EZLN, in reality if not in theory, are largely nonviolent, strategically maintaining what they call an “offensive ceasefire” even in the midst of constant low-intensity conflict.

They have not fired their weapons offensively since the 11-day war in January 1994, when they first declared war on the Mexican state. In those few days, there was a good deal of gunfire exchanged—when the EZLN attacked the Rancho Nuevo Military Base outside of San Cristóbal to eliminate the military threat and liberate a cache of weapons; when soldiers bore down on EZLN insurgents in the Ocosingo marketplace for two days; and at scattered ranches throughout Chiapas when ranchers fought to defend their lands against Zapatista occupancy. But even in these battles, most of the blood that ran was Zapatista blood, and if anything was proven it was that armed struggle could not be sustained. Only one incident—a firefight in which EZLN troops allegedly returned government fire in the village of El Bosque in 1998—calls into question the EZLN’s track record of “offensive ceasefire.”

The “symbolic” nature of violence is, of course, not entirely unique to the Zapatista movement; it may be seen as no more than a manifestation of a kind of propaganda that is all too common in global politics. When the US State Department uses this tactic in seeking to establish “meaningful dialogue” with its enemies, it calls this aggressive display “armed diplomacy.” The Zapatistas simply engage in armed diplomacy on a much smaller scale—and for self-defense. For the Zapatistas, the bearing of arms is largely about survival, but also carries with it a powerful message of defiance of state authority. By carrying weapons, the Zapatistas present themselves as subject to no laws but their own.

Without doubt the red soil of Chiapas has seen many deaths, tens of thousands of internal refugees, numerous massacres, several political assassinations, and countless disappeared, tortured, arrested, and expelled; there have been uncounted confrontations between Zapatista communities and military and paramilitary troops—and, in almost every case, the casualties are Zapatistas. This strategic nonviolence is not so much evidence of a pacifist ideology as it is a recognition that if they fire a single shot back at the Mexican military, they will be massacred with impunity. They have said, “We are soldiers so that after us no one will have to be soldiers.” Even as they stand silent, the guns have served them well in attracting media attention and bringing about opportunities for meaningful dialogue with the government.

### A jovial image: the revolutionary ethics of good humor and good sportsmanship

Firearms aside, the chief weapon of the Zapatistas remains the word, and, more precisely, the wisecrack. From the beginning the Zapatistas have been tricksters, ridiculing everyone, even themselves. When it was noted that their takeover of San Cristóbal on the day NAFTA went into effect began “a few minutes after midnight,” Marcos commented, “We were late as usual.” Many of the stories Marcos has written take the form of comic fables, and many of their gestures serve to turn revolution into a battle of wits. A typical Marcos joke looks like this:

Once upon a time there were two feet. The two feet were together but not united. One was cold and the other was hot. So the cold foot said to the hot foot, “You are very hot.” And the hot foot said to the cold foot, “You are very cold.” And there they were, fighting like this, when Hernán Cortes showed up and burned them both alive.

Get it?

Some of the most beloved early communiqués centered around a little beetle named Durito—Little Tough Guy. Durito takes offense at Marcos' big clumsy boots and his simplistic analysis of globalization, and takes it upon himself to lecture about neoliberalism and war, ultimately suggesting that the Zapatistas are fighting for nothing because the capitalists are so stupid they will run themselves into the ground. Durito takes on the persona of Sherlock Holmes to Marcos' Watson and of Don Quixote to Marcos' Sancho Panza, injecting a shock of profound literary humor, and giving historical context and intellectual weight to the Zapatista cause. At the same time, the use of humor disarms and delights, further reinforcing the sense of these ski-masked, gun-toting rebels as sympathetic characters.

In December 2002, Fernando Baltasar Garzón Real—the Spanish judge responsible, on the one hand, for arresting Augusto Pinochet of Chile on charges of murder and human rights abuses and on the other for issuing indictments against members of the Basque separatist group Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA)—challenged Subcomandante Marcos to a debate. Marcos accepted, but demanded that he set the terms:

Señor Baltasar Garzón...

I am informing you that I accept the challenge and (as mandated by the laws of knight-errantry), given that I am the man challenged, it is up to me to set the conditions of the meeting....

FIRST. The debate will be held in the Canary Islands, more specifically on Lanzarote, from April 3 to 10, 2003.

SECOND. Señor Fernando Baltasar Garzón Real shall secure the necessary and sufficient guarantees and safe-conduct, from the Spanish government as well as from the Mexican, so that the knight who has been challenged and six of his gallants can attend the duel and return home safely. The expenses for the trip and accommodations for Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos and his delegation will be borne by the EZLN, which are *coyucos*, tostadas, beans and pozol. In addition, insofar as spending the night, the knight-errant (or seafaring-knight) will need no roof other than the dignified Canary sky.

THIRD. In the same place as the debate, parallel to but not simultaneously, a meeting will be held between all the political, social and cultural actors in the Basque problem who so desire. The theme of the meeting will be "The Basque Country: Paths."

Following these opening shots across the bow, Marcos lays out a series of demands that amount to calling for a truce between the Spanish government and the Basque separatists. Marcos does not reserve his strong words for Garzón and the Mexican government, but takes ETA to task for having recently engaged in violent acts that resulted in the deaths of several innocent civilians: "Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos shall, in addition, address the ETA, asking them for a unilateral truce for 177 days, during which time the ETA shall not carry out any offensive military actions."

After asking ETA for a truce—a bold move for an armed revolutionary actor on the global stage—Marcos sets the terms of victory and defeat:

If Señor Fernando Baltasar Garzón Real defeats Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos fairly and squarely, he will have the right to

unmask him once, in front of whomever he wishes. Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos shall, in addition, publicly apologize and will be subjected to the actions of Spanish justice so that they may torture him (just like they torture the Basques when they are detained)....

If, on the other hand, Señor Fernando Baltasar Garzón Real is fairly defeated, he will commit himself to legally advising the EZLN on the charges which—as perhaps the last peaceful Zapatista recourse, and in front of international legal bodies—will be presented in order to demand the recognition of indigenous rights and culture, which, in violation of international laws and common sense, have not been recognized by the three branches of the Mexican government.

Charges will also be presented for crimes against humanity by Señor Ernesto Zedillo Ponce de Leon, responsible for the Acteal killing (perpetrated in the mountains of the Mexican southeast in December of 1997), where 45 indigenous children, women, men and old ones were executed....

Charges will similarly be presented against the heads of state of the Spanish government who, during Señor Zedillo's administration in Mexico, were his accomplices in that, and other, attacks against the Mexican Indian peoples.

Of course, the debate never happened. But by publicly engaging the well-known and controversial judge with his barbed wit, Marcos reveals the hypocrisy of a human rights discourse that allows the state to perpetrate violence (as in Acteal and Basque Country) while condemning the violence of "extremists" such as ETA and the EZLN. And by turning the debate into a duel and the discourse of human rights into a question of honor between knights errant (invoking again Spanish literature's great dreamer, fool, and madman, Don Quixote), Marcos turns revolution into postmodern slapstick comedy. Using humor, literary reference, and a well-calibrated ethical compass, Marcos saw in the challenge a grand public relations opportunity—and came off looking like a good-natured half-time clown, and a good sport to boot.

In a more recent bout of such global sportsmanship, the EZLN accepted a challenge to play a match against an Italian soccer team. In a letter to Massimo Moratti, President of the Milan International Football Club, dated May 25, 2005, Marcos writes:

Don Massimo,

I am letting you know that, in addition to being spokesperson for the EZLN, I have been unanimously designated Head Coach and put in charge of Intergalactic Relations for the Zapatista football team (well, in truth no one else wanted to accept the job)....

Perhaps...I might suggest that, instead of the football game being limited to one match, there could be 2. One in Mexico and another in Italy. Or one going and one on return. And the trophy known the world over as "The Pozol of Mud" would be fought for.

And perhaps I might propose to you that the [revenue from the] game in Mexico...would be for the indigenous displaced by paramilitaries in Los Altos of Chiapas.

Rushing headlong now, we might play another game in Los Angeles, in California, the US, where their governor (who substitutes steroids for his lack of neurons) is carrying out a criminal policy against Latin migrants. All the receipts from that match would be earmarked for legal advice for the undocumented in the USA and to jail the thugs from the "Minuteman Project." In addition, the

Zapatista “dream team” would carry a large banner saying “Freedom for Mumia Abu Jamal and Leonard Peltier.”

It is quite likely that Bush would not allow our spring-summer model ski masks to create a sensation in Hollywood, so the meeting could be moved to the dignified Cuban soil, in front of the military base which the US government maintains, illegally and illegitimately, in Guantánamo. In this case each delegation (from the Inter and from the Ezeta) would commit themselves to taking at least one kilo of food and medicines for each of their members, as a symbol of protest against the blockade the Cuban people are suffering.

As in the letter to Judge Garzón, Marcos uses the terms of sport to describe the playing field of global justice. By avoiding the kind of rhetoric normally associated with “vanguard revolution,” “popular uprising,” or “anticapitalist resistance,” Marcos gets beyond narrow ideologies to appeal to a universal sense of ethics that bespeaks not only anarchist revolutionaries, but *futbol* fans (who no doubt represent a far larger constituency than the aforementioned anarchist revolutionaries). Ever the strategic populist, Marcos goes to great lengths to show that he is not just an elite literary scholar and student of revolution, but an all-around sporting kind of guy whose struggle is broad enough to include immigrants’ rights, illegal detentions, and political prisoners.

### One no and many yeses: The struggle continues

In June 2005, the Zapatistas issued a red alert in Chiapas, asking foreigners to leave the villages for an indefinite time, and called all of their communities together to consult on a question whose outcome, as Marcos put it, “would risk the little that we have gained.” No one knows exactly what the question was, but the outcome of the consulta was the Sixth Declaration of the Lacandón Jungle, which promises a “new political direction” for the movement. It begins with a lengthy history of 12 years of struggle, an analysis of global capitalism, a description of the Zapatistas’ goals, and then, toward the end of its many pages, offers the diligent reader the longed-for new direction:

In the world, we are going to join together more with the resistance struggles against neoliberalism and for humanity.

And we are going to support, even if it’s but little, those struggles. As far as we are able, we will send material aid such as food and handicrafts for those brothers and sisters who are struggling all over the world.

And we are going to exchange, with mutual respect, experiences, histories, ideas, dreams.... We are going to seek, from La Realidad to Tijuana, those who want to organize, struggle and build what may perhaps be the last hope this Nation—which has been going on at


least since the time when an eagle alighted on a nopal in order to devour a snake—has of not dying.

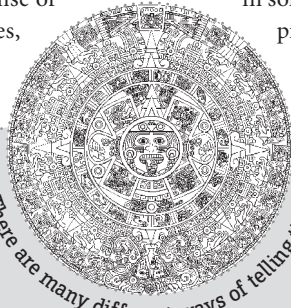
We are going for democracy, liberty and justice for those of us who have been denied it.... We are inviting all indigenous, workers, campesinos, teachers, students, housewives, neighbors, small businesspersons, small shop owners, micro-businesspersons, pensioners, handicapped persons, religious men and women, scientists, artists, intellectuals, young persons, women, old persons, homosexuals and lesbians, boys and girls to participate, whether individually or collectively, directly with the Zapatistas in this NATIONAL CAMPAIGN for building another way of doing politics, for a program of national struggle of the left, and for a new Constitution.

Despite the pronouncements, there is much about this new initiative that is not new at all. The Zapatistas have always struggled in solidarity with other movements, and the nature of their program has been, if anything, shockingly inclusive for a revolutionary armed movement: If you dream of a just world for your community and everyone else, there is space for you within the movement.

This inclusivity allows people from all corners of civil society to project their ideals and aspirations onto Zapatismo. This, of course, is the genius of their strategy, though these projections do not always fit: A movement that attracts both hardened proponents of armed struggle and enlightened philosophers of nonviolence is bound to ruffle some feathers. Feminists, anarchists, progressives, environmentalists, even libertarians all project ideals onto the movement, and yet, amidst the rhetoric, the movement and those within it may at times be sexist, be not terribly ecological, slip into drinking, insult the wrong people—may even provoke, permit, or foment violence. Disillusion, disappointment, and loss of faith can ensue. But somehow the jokes, the fables, the talk of dignity and hope, the masks, the dolls, the songs and murals serve to reinforce the values that drive the insurrection, and leave behind the occasional betrayal or frustration.

After 12 years of shifting struggle and what is arguably the international left’s most innovative and effective public relations campaign, the Zapatista movement—and the global anticapitalist movement of which it forms

a part—has more adherents than ever before. And despite the divisions that may exist and the near-hopeless task at hand, one tiny lesson comes through that has changed progressive politics forever. In the absence of a strict ideology—and in the interest of creating a world in which many words fit—the road to democracy, liberty, and justice is made by walking. 



#### Items of Action & Possible Interest

##### Chiapas Indymedia

*The latest news from Chiapas. Mostly in Spanish; some English translation.*  
[chiapas.mediosindependientes.org](http://chiapas.mediosindependientes.org)

##### Our Word is Our Weapon

*A collection of writings from Subcomandante Marcos.*  
[Seven Stories Press, 2002]

##### The War Against Oblivion

*John Ross' excellent history of the Zapatista movement covers the struggle from 1994-2000..*  
[Common Courage Press, 2000]

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Author’s note: Excerpts from scholarship published in Spanish were translated by the author. All excerpts from the communiqués, including the Sixth Declaration of the Lacandón Jungle, were translated by