

## The Indigenous Uprising in Chiapas as a Praxis of Liberation

by Diego Malquori

### English Abstract

In this paper I focus on the indigenous uprising in Chiapas trying to understand its originality as a result of several factors: from the historical process of confrontation between the indigenous people and the white elites; to the influence of the theology of liberation in the awakening of consciousness that generated the uprising; to the transformation of the original revolutionary model in favor of a movement of civil resistance, built around the goal of a multicultural democracy; to the ability to understand and adapt to the decisive changes that the world has experienced in the last four decades. In this sense, this fight can be seen as one of the several anticipations of the struggle against neoliberal globalization. In my view, then, it is the awareness of the concrete problems of the indigenous communities, along with the utopian horizon of their struggle, that molds the originality of the Zapatista movement.

### Resumen en español

En este artículo me centro en el levantamiento indígena en Chiapas tratando de entender su originalidad como resultado de varios factores: desde el proceso histórico de confrontación entre los pueblos indígenas y las élites blancas; a la influencia de la teología de la liberación en el despertar de conciencia que generó el levantamiento; a la transformación del modelo revolucionario original a favor de un movimiento de resistencia civil, construido alrededor del objetivo de una democracia multicultural; a la capacidad de comprender y adaptarse a los cambios decisivos que el mundo ha experimentado en las últimas cuatro décadas. En este sentido, esta lucha puede verse como una de las varias anticipaciones de la confrontación contra la globalización neoliberal. Desde mi punto de vista, entonces, es la conciencia de los problemas concretos de las comunidades indígenas, junto con el horizonte utópico de su lucha, lo que moldea la originalidad del movimiento zapatista.

### Resumo em português

Neste artigo, focalizo na revolta indígena em Chiapas tentando entender sua originalidade como resultado de vários fatores: desde o processo histórico de confronto entre os povos indígenas e as elites brancas; à influência da teologia da libertação no despertar da consciência que gerou o levante; à transformação do modelo revolucionário original em favor de um movimento de resistência civil, construído em torno do objetivo de uma democracia multicultural; à capacidade de entender e se adaptar às mudanças decisivas que o mundo experimentou nas últimas quatro décadas. Nesse sentido, essa luta pode ser vista como uma das várias antecipações do confronto contra a globalização neoliberal. Sendo assim, do meu ponto de vista, é a

conscientização dos problemas concretos das comunidades indígenas, juntamente com o horizonte utópico de suas lutas, que molda a originalidade do movimento zapatista.

---

## 1. Introduction

“There are many good people in Mexico and around the world who are watching you. In their gaze there is respect and hope. Respect, because you have advanced when everyone thought you were defeated, because despite armed persecution and lies, you have constructed a good government. And hope, because facing governments and politicians who only rob and cheat, you can be an example of governing by obeying.”[1] In this way Subcomandante Marcos addressed the indigenous communities gathered to celebrate the birth of the *Juntas de Buen Gobierno* (good-government councils), along with many people from Europe or the Americas who looked for inspiration in their struggle. These words express in a clear way the sentiment of hope that is still shared by those who look at Zapatismo as a concrete example of a movement of civil resistance, or a way to oppose the logic of neoliberal rationality. And this, despite the lack of solutions for the indigenous conflict in Chiapas—almost three decades after the beginning of the uprising—the perpetuation of the structural problems of injustice, and perhaps the diminution of interest for the utopian horizon of this movement, in a world that is still committed to systematic social and environmental destruction. Still, the Zapatistas keep walking, sometimes surrounded by a dense and meaningful silence, as in the march of December 2012, other times apparently hiding themselves in strategic retreats, and then newly attacking the political power through controversial yet always coherent communications.[2] In any case, they show a surprising ability to affirm the subject of their discourse and to communicate it beyond the mountains and the rainforest of Chiapas.

In this paper I analyze the elements that explain the originality of Zapatismo with respect to other indigenous movements, both in Mexico and in other regions of Latin America. In my view, to understand its novelty as well as its strong resonance it is necessary to look at the way in which this movement originated, considering not only the historical process of confrontation between the indigenous people and the white elites, but also the influence of external elements, in particular the role of the theology of liberation in the awakening of consciousness that generated the uprising. Moreover, the reconstruction of this process must be completed by analyzing the fundamental transformation that this movement experienced in the transition from an abstract revolutionary dimension to the concrete reality of Chiapas. Here, a central theme is the goal of an authentic democracy as a necessary condition for the construction of a

different model of society; a society where not only individual but also collective rights exist, thus opening the way to the acknowledgment of the indigenous culture (cf. Villoro 2015, 58). Finally, in order to appreciate the ability of the Zapatistas to communicate beyond their immediate context, as well as to understand the decisive changes that the world has experienced in the last four decades, we have to consider the capacity to adapt to the different scenarios that they have faced. I focus the three sections of the paper on these elements, according to a change of perspectives that overlaps with the temporal evolution of the struggle.

In this way, I try to comprehend the originality of Zapatismo from a plurality of views, in an attempt to integrate philosophical, theological, sociological, and grassroots perspectives. In fact, it has been my experience among the indigenous communities that has given rise to these reflections, which I have successively completed through various conversations with those who have tried to listen to these voices.[3] Among them, an important figure is that of Samuel Ruiz, the bishop of San Cristóbal de las Casas for forty years, both for his pastoral work among the indigenous communities of Chiapas and for his role as mediator in the conflict. From a similar perspective, I have discussed the transformation of Zapatismo—especially in the first stages—with Miguel Álvarez, who was also involved in the difficult dialogue between the Mexican Government and the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN).[4] Finally, I have analyzed the impact of the Zapatista uprising at the international level with the French sociologists Alain Touraine and Yvon Le Bot, who were among the first, at least from a Western perspective, to point out the democratic and multicultural horizon of this movement.[5]

On the other side, I have considered different theoretical frameworks to make sense of Zapatismo as one of the Latin American movements that have emerged as sociohistorical subjects. Among them, I have looked at Enrique Dussel's philosophy of liberation, and in particular at the view that the Argentinean philosopher develops in his later works, where he tries to construct a dialogue with other currents of thought (cf. Dussel 2013). In this context, Dussel develops a practical approach to ethics in a world where the basic conditions for the fulfillment of human life are seriously threatened, and in which the participation of those who suffer these conditions are systematically silenced by political, economic, and many times military domination. Although this approach is naturally exposed to the dangers of decolonial philosophies, in particular that of "speaking for the oppressed" in order to build "a grand metahistorical narrative about injustice" (Pappas 2017, 4), nevertheless it can be useful to understand Zapatismo not so much as a revolutionary struggle, but as an organized movement of civil resistance that opens the way to a different model of society, not just for Chiapas, but for the whole world. At the same time, I have tried to complete and to discuss this framework by considering the historical process that led to the uprising (cf. Benjamin 1989), and by proposing other views on the ideological, political, and strategic transformation of this movement (cf. Casanova 2009; Lea 2014; Villoro 2015). All these voices naturally overlap and respond to each other, in the attempt to integrate a plurality of views that makes sense to the complexity and originality of Zapatismo: a movement

that shares the utopian horizon of the struggle against neoliberal globalization while being rooted in the concrete problems of the indigenous communities of Chiapas. In this sense, it constitutes perhaps one of the clearest examples of praxis of liberation, as an aspiration that comes from below, from the social movements of the periphery, and which intrinsically aims to transform the whole system.

## 2. The Path of the Indigenous Awakening in Chiapas

In general terms, the roots of the indigenous uprising in Chiapas are the same structural conflicts that exist in other regions of Mexico—like Oaxaca or Guerrero—some of which trace back to the colonial period and to the Mexican Revolution. Still, though some of these conflicts have even generated violent revolts, they have not attained the objective and subjective conditions for an explosion, and therefore the resonance that the Zapatista uprising has been able to generate. In this sense, it is necessary to distinguish between the historical process of confrontation between the “faceless” indigenous people and a political system dominated by the white elites, and, on the other hand, the specific elements that have favored the birth of the Zapatista movement.

As shown by Benjamin (1989), Chiapas is a “rich land of poor people,” where the political system has perpetuated strong economic inequality. Even after the Revolution of 1910, though the agrarian reform initially improved the situation of the peasants, the official political party maintained the control of the agricultural system, often defending the interests of the landowners. In this way, the gap between the exploited peasants and the dominating elites, constituted by the landowners and their political counterpart, generated the conditions for the explosion of extensive violence. According to Benjamin, the intensification of this trend—which became manifest from the 1970s and even more from the 1980s, with the expansion of cattle ranching and export crops—was particularly evident in Chiapas, and would explain the socioeconomic crisis, the increase of violence, and ultimately the militarization of the conflict.

Benjamin’s reconstruction has the merit of showing that the poverty and underdevelopment of Chiapas does not constitute a natural state of immaturity in the path towards modernity, but rather is a direct consequence of a political system that has always defended the interests of the white elites—which in turn is heir to the political, economic, and cultural order created by European colonialism. Though this analysis is a necessary starting point for any attempt to understand the “indigenous question,” in Chiapas as in the whole Mexico, in my view it has to be completed by the acknowledgement of the external elements that favored this awakening of consciousness, as well as of the “revolutionary change” that the Zapatistas have experienced throughout their struggle.

On the other side, we have to remember that there have been many indigenous movements in Latin America, at least in countries where there is a significant indigenous

population: in Guatemala, in Ecuador, in Bolivia, in the south of Chile with the Mapuches. All these movements can be considered as expressions of a cultural or ethnic awareness of the indigenous communities. Yet what happened in Chiapas has a clear political or ideological peculiarity: the idea of “democratization” as a fundamental goal of the struggle. As Alain Touraine points out, “Zapatismo is the first non-guerrilla movement, or perhaps anti-guerrilla movement. It is the first real movement, with a very large impact on the national and international level, that has the courage and intelligence to define itself as ‘democratic.’”[6] On this fundamental element, which is developed in a wider context by Luis Villoro (2015), I will expand in the next section.

Coming back to the roots of the Zapatista movement, an important element to consider is the role of the theology of liberation in the awakening of consciousness that generated the uprising. Indeed, a fundamental change in the way of looking at the indigenous question came from the new understanding of the concept of “pueblo” that emerged in the Latin American Church, after the Vatican Council II (1962–1965) and the Latin American Bishops’ Conferences in Medellín, Colombia (1968) and Puebla, Mexico (1979). This critical reflection, in the Latin American context, gave rise to a different view of the Church’s role in a world of poverty, social inequalities, and economic exploitation, which ultimately redefined the relationship with indigenous cultures. The theology of liberation emerged from this critical effort, as a social movement that aimed to give a concrete meaning to the idea of a “preferential option for the poor,” fighting the structures of dispossession of which the poor are victims. As Scannone points out, the consequence of this new attitude was a shared awareness of the situation of underdevelopment, injustice, and dependence of Latin America, which was interpreted not only collectively and socially, but also *structurally*, that is, as a result of an unjust and oppressive social system (cf. Scannone 1983, 265). For this reason, he concludes, “the praxis of liberation that answers and corresponds to that word tends not only to alleviate the situation, but to structurally transform it to build a qualitatively new society” (ibid.).

This awareness, therefore, implied a clear denunciation of the structures of dispossession of which the poor were victims, and at the same time of the repression that they suffered when they tried to express their demands. All this was particularly evident in Chiapas, as Samuel Ruiz reminds us: “We saw clearly that any change required correction of a series of situations that had generated the conflict, and therefore there was a projection towards a social change.”[7] In this sense, the diocese of San Cristóbal de las Casas promoted the emergence of new social subjects that could be the actors in a world that they wanted to redefine. Indeed, initially the diocese was called on to speak for them, for those who did not have voice. But that situation was modified to the extent that the indigenous people generated their own organizations. They were recovering their voice, and the diocese became an actor that simply accompanied them, supporting their participation politically and socially. It is at that moment when, among other organizations, the EZLN appeared. Still, we should keep in mind the difference between participating actively in the creation of these organizations and, on the other hand, supporting the awakening of consciousness from

which they emerged. This was the diocese's role in that process. As Miguel Álvarez also points out, "at that time, when they lived through disorganization, repression, and attack, when they made enormous efforts to face their problems and were always systematically beaten and excluded, the diocese was very important in supporting their steps to become political and social subjects, assuming it as part of their historical, cultural, and also religious character." [8]

The result of this social awareness, then, was a renewed effort to defend the affirmation of the life and culture of the indigenous people. In this effort, we can read the actualization of that "material principle" with which Enrique Dussel grounds his ethics of liberation, since the situation of poverty and exploitation is the first manifestation of the impossibility of reproducing life (Cf. Dussel 2013, 101). It is not by chance that in the discourse on the reasons of the indigenous uprising, the claim of "dignity" and "justice" is always linked to concrete practical demands. We can find many examples of the narrative on "why we rose," especially in the first statements of the EZLN. I propose here the testimony of an old peasant, who preferred to show his "faceless" face and to speak in his Mayan language: "I know what it is to suffer, because we worked on the plantation. This is where our fathers and our grandfathers died. On the plantation the owner paid us very little, fifty cents a day. We were paid at the end of each week, but the owner kept our money because we had debts. We didn't even have enough to pay for food, clothes, or medicines... and we suffered from hunger. This is how we used to live." [9]

Hence, a younger peasant completes the logical and ethical connection of this claim: "This is what we are looking for with the Zapatista movement... Because the bad government still controls everything. We are poorly paid for our produce, and the things we need to buy are very expensive... For this we fight. Our hope is for change. If we don't see change ourselves, at least our children might see it." [10] Thus, the indigenous people of Chiapas implicitly assume in their narrative a critique of the capitalist system. They understand that their own misery means the wealth of a few, whose abundance is fed by the emptiness of their stomachs. [11] And they also understand that their claim for justice and dignity requires the denouncement of this situation. The narrative of Zapatismo, then, can be seen as a form of Marxism *beyond* Marx. As Villoro observes, in effect, this movement manifest itself not through an ideology, but through a collective attitude of rejection of an injustice, and this attitude is open to multiple conceptions—including, of course, Marxism (cf. Villoro 2015, 43).

The arms, therefore, were not a means to seize power, as in the usual revolutionary scheme, but a cry of rebellion, a way to remind the rest of the world that they also had the right to live on their land and to defend their culture. Samuel Ruiz, who accompanied the indigenous people in this manifestation of consciousness, reminds us of this important step: "This situation became very clear after the armed uprising, when the indigenous people, in a meeting called in the jungle to reflect on the neoliberal system, said clearly: 'You have told us, and we also know, that the path of



arms is not the most appropriate way to achieve peace. We didn't have another way. Don't leave us alone, make war impossible for us'. "[12 ]

### 3. The Transformation of the Zapatista Movement

*For over five hundred years we have been resisting. The time arrived for us to take up the struggle, for us as indigenous peoples. Before 1994 we were fighting in a peaceful way, but to the federal government we were nothing... For this reason the indigenous people began to organize themselves, and this led to a show of strength in '94. Although our situation is difficult, we have to follow this path, there is no alternative. We have to defend our rights. This is our objective as Zapatistas.*[13]

The Zapatista uprising officially began on January 1, 1994, giving rise to a short yet intense armed confrontation with the Mexican army. This initial phase ended quite quickly to make room for an attempt at dialogue, which, however, never achieved concrete results with respect to the main request of the Zapatistas: the acknowledgment of the rights of the indigenous culture. Yet this change of scenario transformed the strategy and the very nature of this movement. In effect, as Yvon Le Bot suggests, the EZLN initially had another scheme in mind. They thought that the Mexican army would crush them, and it would end there, or that the whole of Mexico would rise up. But neither happened; it was something else entirely. They found a Mexico very different from the one they had left behind when they went into the jungle. And they discovered a civil movement that supported the demands of the indigenous people, but that rejected the logic of the war. The strength of Zapatismo was to understand this change in society, and to be able to transform itself accordingly.[14]

The other element that is important to observe is that the choice of the uprising's date made immediately clear the connection between the local and the international level of the struggle, since that same day the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) came into effect. In this way, the indigenous people of Chiapas claimed the right to exist in the framework of the modern neoliberal world, defying the economic order that was the heir to European and North American colonialism.

We can understand, then, how the demand for an armed uprising went along with the aspiration to build a small fragment of a better world in the mountains of southeastern Mexico. Still, looking at it today, we can see that the Zapatista uprising is the result of multiple movements and of important transformations of the original idea. At the beginning, a group with a clear political background follows the same lines as the guerrillas of the sixties and seventies. But the group changes as it enters the indigenous communities. This encounter transforms the subject of the struggle, from a small, enlightened group to the "community." As Touraine points out "[The subject] is no longer a group of middle-class guerrillas coming from outside. It is the 'community,' a real social group, people of a given culture, Maya or otherwise, who have their economic and political problems." [15] The community is a subject with a common history, symbols,

and narrative, which collectively holds social and cultural rights. In the context of the Maya people in Chiapas, Dussel observes, this communal dimension is “very ancient, foundational, and non-negotiable” (Dussel 2003, 173). From here their idea of democracy originates, as a way to assure the participation with equal conditions in the decision that concern the community.

In fact, the initial group that formed the EZLN remained in hiding for ten years not only to prepare itself militarily, but to actually listen to the voice of the indigenous people in order to help project it to the nation and the world. As Dussel points out referring to this transformation, “an extended period of ‘shared living’ [was] necessary in order to start ‘understanding’ that which is revealed” (ibid., 180). The language itself adopted by the Zapatistas manifests such an evolution, revealing a new ethical concern. From the abstract political and military language of the first communications, they progressively assumed the speech of the Maya people as the language of their historical protest (ibid., 167-68).

When the uprising began, then, after ten years of shared living with the indigenous communities, even Subcomandante Marcos was no longer a professor of a Mexican university.[16] As Yishan Lea observes, “his political development is essentially a cultural and language education that was obtained from the Mayan communities, and as a result, his revolutionary praxis has evolved through a spiritual communion of being with and inside of the community” (Lea 2014, 31). Marcos himself acknowledges this process of transformation, speaking of a “defeat” inflicted by the indigenous communities to their initial conception of the struggle: “That is when the transformation process of the EZLN begins, from a revolutionary vanguard army into an army of indigenous communities, an army that is part of an indigenous resistance movement, within other forms of struggle... What allowed the EZLN to survive and develop was to accept this defeat” (Le Bot 1997, 130). For this reason, on a symbolic level, Marcos defined himself “sub-commander”: the real commander was the anonymous and collective voice of the indigenous people. This is the Mayan concept of democracy, and this is why those who govern should “govern by obeying.”

Thus, even coming from different directions, the transformation of that original group of *guerrilleros* recalls the process of “conversion” that Ruiz also experienced among the indigenous communities (cf. Ruiz 2003). “We really suffered a process of re-education, of remodeling,” Marcos continues. “As if they had disarmed us. As if they had dismantled all we were made up of—Marxism, Leninism, socialism, urban culture, poetry, literature—all that formed part of us... They disarmed us and then armed us again, but in a different way” (Le Bot 1997, 131). If the indigenous dimension had not been present, in fact, the group would have probably disappeared, because that period was not favorable to guerrilla movements. Yet coming into contact with the indigenous communities—which had already begun to fight for their rights—it became something different, even turning its back on what the old guerrillas had been. Indeed, as Álvarez observes, if before the uprising the main effort of the EZLN was to organize the different levels of the struggle, “after the uprising, without leaving the military character of the



rebellion, the EZLN has taken enormous steps as a political, social, and moral subject, and as a reference for alternative models of resistance.”[17]

In this sense, one of the key elements of Zapatismo has been to create a single movement of diverse movements, giving unity to their ethnic and cultural diversity. It is not only about demanding a new relationship between the “center” and the “periphery,” as in the initial scheme of the dependency theory. Before that, Zapatismo has assumed as its starting point the cultural plurality of the indigenous peoples. Thus, the dialogue among the different components of the “people,” including those who look at them from outside—whether they are the indigenous communities of other regions of Mexico, the bases of support of the civil society, or even the other alter-globalist movements that have been inspired in this struggle—has been based on a praxis of “multicultural democracy”. In the words of an indigenous woman who lived through the scourges of the war: “We don’t fight for just ourselves, but for everyone. We fight for the communities, for those from the cities, for those who are debased, for all those who need us...”[18] This is another element that brings Zapatismo closer to the concrete yet utopian horizon of a planetary conversation, as it is also envisaged by the philosophies of liberation. And at the same time, this attitude responds to the accusations of “culturalism” or “essentialism” that have been leveled against both movements.[19]

Zapatismo, then, is the path of real social movement that is rooted on the concrete problems of the indigenous people, and which at the same time establishes as a fundamental goal the theme of “democracy.” For Touraine, this is its most important element: “This movement, from the very beginning, establishes as a goal and a framework the issue of democracy in Mexico. The strategy, in the noblest sense of the word, is to directly link the personal defense of a grassroots community with the theme of democratization in general.”[20] As Villoro also points out, in effect, if the Zapatistas had to take up arms to make their voice heard, very soon they made their intention clear to fight for an authentic democracy; a “direct democracy” built from below, from the real communities, “in order to realize, against capitalism, universal communitarian values expressed in the indigenous communities” (Villoro 2015, 57).

One of the examples of this effort was the creation of the *Juntas de Buen Gobierno*, the social and political organization of the five autonomous regions governed by the Zapatistas. They express in a concrete way the attempt to create an authentic democracy, where the idea of “governing by obeying” has a real and practical meaning. Indeed, this new approach combines the construction of power by networks of autonomous communities and the integration of organs of self-governments as a way to fight for an alternative world. As Pablo González Casanova observes, the objective “is to create with the communities, by the communities, and for the communities, resistance organizations that... allow them to improve their capacity to make another world possible” (Casanova 2009, 338). In this way, those who govern are actually submitted to the communities in their effort to put in practice the general principles of the organization. This means, at a practical level, that the main task of the members of the councils is to listen to the demands of the communities, to coordinate the social

organization, and to mediate when a conflict occurs. They have no privileges and no remuneration—the community just take care to work their corn fields during their short and rotating terms. Thus, Villoro concludes, against individualism of Western society, the Zapatista communities propose new ethical values based on the idea of community or communality (cf. *ibid.*, 87).

For this reason, Villoro rejects the identification of Zapatismo with a revolutionary movement, which necessarily seeks a violent rupture. Instead, “a movement of civil resistance does not necessarily lead to a violent revolution,” but rather is open to the future, “to the possibility of a different society” (*ibid.*, 42-34). In this sense, it can be open to the acceptance of a plurality of ideology, but without following any preconceived doctrine. The only essential element is the rejection of the injustice that the people have suffered, and therefore of the domination of a system that divides between “those who are privileged and those who are excluded, between those who want everything and those who only defend their dignity” (*ibid.*, 43).

Thus, Zapatismo emerges as an attempt to reconstruct a political and social action, creating other meanings and other figures that are authentically rooted in their culture. And yet, this attitude is not a way of closing into themselves but keeps alive a principle of openness. As the Commander Esther said at the Congress of the Union, at the end of the “March of the Color of the Earth” of 2001, the Zapatistas seek a country in which they can live as indigenous *and* Mexicans, as different *and* equal.[21] This is very important, because the fundamentalist movements that already appear in this era are antidemocratic movements. On the contrary, the Zapatistas put democracy at the center of their demands; not only political democracy, but social and cultural democracy. This also means giving space to individual and collective subjects, breaking with the ideologies of the old Left in which there was no place for the individual. With Zapatismo, instead, the cultural expression, understood as the expression of individuals and groups, becomes fundamental. In this sense, culture is not at the service of politics, but is something political in itself; it is a redefinition of politics. In turn, politics is no longer the seizure of power, like for the other guerrilla movements that followed the traditional Marxist theory, as a fundamental rule for an anti-capitalist revolution. Politics is the creation and the expression of meaning. And this meaning does not come from an ideology, it comes from the people themselves.

Certainly, the concept of “people” has multiple components, which also include the Marxist tradition. Moreover, its meaning has changed to the extent that new forms of democratic participation have emerged, not only in Latin America but in the Global South. Dussel himself warns that the multi-faced category of people makes it difficult to clarify, among other questions, the role of the different sociohistorical subjects in Latin America. Still, even avoiding the simplistic identification of the “people” with the “poor,” he concludes that in Latin America “*the ‘people,’ rather than the country or the nation, is the chief protagonist of our current history, and this ‘people’ aspires, not so much to ‘freedom’ as to ‘justice’*” (Dussel 2003, 113; italics in the original). It is precisely this hierarchical inversion that has molded the path of Zapatismo, in its transformation from

a revolutionary group to a movement of civil resistance that aspires to create a different society: a multicultural society where the concept of “justice” also includes the indigenous people. As Dussel observes, then, “the irruption of the ‘victims’—as emergence ‘from nothingness,’ in the Chiapas rainforest and mountains, of the ‘faceless’ faces of Mayan Indians of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation in Mexico—may produce a crisis in the system legitimacy” (Dussel 2013, 408). This is the “complex event” brought about by the indigenous uprising in Chiapas.

#### 4. The Zapatista Movement in the International Context

The Zapatista movement has immediately had a great impact, well beyond the horizon of this struggle. Although the structural problems that generated the uprising are still present, this movement has succeeded in changing the awareness of the indigenous people, giving them the determination to fight for their rights and their culture. At the same time, it has been able to communicate very clearly with civil society, both nationally and internationally. The fire and the word, the silence and the action, the symbols coming from Mayan culture and the use of modern platforms like the Internet. All this has had a great importance in spreading the rationale of this movement. And a main factor in this achievement, of course, has been the clarity and originality of Marcos’s discourse. Indeed, Marcos has represented the link of this local movement with national and international politics, and at the same time with intellectual life. Yet we should also consider this capacity for communication in more than just one direction. Marcos himself has sometimes used the metaphor of the window, which can be used to see what is inside, for us who are outside, but also to allow those inside to see what is happening in the rest of the world. In this sense, Zapatismo is inscribed in a perspective of resonance, of correspondence with other social and political movements, inside and outside Mexico. This is what explains its impact at the international level.

At the same time, we have to consider the international context of the moment. It is after the fall of the Berlin Wall, there is a significant demobilization of all social or political movements. There is talk of a blissful globalization, as a harmonious realm of the market and of democracy. It is thought that this is the “end of history,” a time when the great historical conflicts are over, and with it the need for all metanarratives.[22] And it is against this liberal utopia that this call to “reality” appears.[23] It is a call to reality at the international level but also at the national level, because in 1994, with the NAFTA accord, Mexico thought that it was finally entering the first world. But the Mexican reality was quite different from this liberal utopia. Zapatismo, then, arose in a situation of social and political depression. As Touraine points out, “who speaks today of democracy? Who speaks of misery? There is some talk, let’s say, in forums, but within political life, who speaks about people? There are still some billions of people on the Earth who do not interest anyone.” Thus, if someone who is really concerned speaks, and if this voice has a certain strength, it certainly has a huge impact. “And it had a huge impact because it is a scream in the night, when everyone is asleep. And in the silence of the night, the scream is heard better.”[24]

All this, once again, recalls the importance of the signs and symbols of the indigenous culture, not just in terms of communication techniques, but of the ability to create images. In this sense, even the aspect of dream merges with the language of the rebellion: the use of the balaclava, while creating an aspect of mystery, symbolizes the sacrifice of individual identity in the name of a collective awareness, as a way to transform reality. Thus, as Dussel observes, “the people who have been faceless for the white *criollos*... now cover their faces to precisely emphasize their being deprived of dignity for five hundred years... consciously exposing their facelessness” (Dussel 2003, 182). Language, therefore, becomes a powerful weapon to fight the oppression suffered by the Mayan culture: in the dialectic between “the fire and the word,” the latter takes over. Indeed, as Lea also observes, “force refers to the power to destroy, whereas words create, perform, and model truth as well as dismantle falsity. The Zapatistas emphasize speaking the true words of their gods as a necessity in building their autonomy and restoring their Mayan indigenous history, myth, and cultural identity” (Lea 2014, 34).

In this way, by combining the original Marxist roots with the autochthonous elements of Mayan culture, the Zapatista movement has affirmed the need to fight for cultural and political diversity, in opposition to the homogenizing thought of neoliberal logic. Its goal, not by chance, is “a world in which many worlds fit.” Thus, the fight of the indigenous people in Chiapas can be seen as one of the several anticipations of the struggle against neoliberal globalization, undertaken here as well as in different parts of the Global South.[25] And they did so at a moment in which it seemed absurd or impossible to stand against it, even before the massive demonstrations of Seattle or Genova, and before the attempt to develop a coherent critique in Porto Alegre or in Mumbai. In fact, they have not been directly present in these movements, but the spirit of their struggle was there, and it can be seen in the way in these meetings many referred to the Zapatista movement. As for the reasons for their lack of direct involvement in these forums, an important factor is the willingness to maintain the roots of their struggle in the concrete problems of the indigenous people, escaping the risk of an ideological position.

On the other hand, we have to consider that the international conjuncture that emerged after the attacks of September 11, and the subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, was not favorable to the Zapatista movement. In that context, it was no longer the economy but the politico-military logic in charge in Washington. And in the logic of war, everything is polarized, there is no room for criticisms: “Either you’re with us, or you’re with the enemy,” as George W. Bush phrased his warning to the world to stand with “Operation Freedom.” The mobilization against neoliberal globalization, therefore, was displaced by a logic of war, and by the corresponding anti-war and anti-imperialist movements. All that was certainly not favorable for the development of what the Zapatista movement intended, which was to mobilize civil society.

Still, Zapatismo has shown that it does not want to return to a logic of war, as many predicted after 2001. That would be suicidal, and not only for them, but for the whole society, because the social destruction that happened in other countries, such as Guatemala or Peru, would happen again. And yet, in spite of the many provocations from the paramilitary groups and from the different Mexican governments—which still happen today, both in terms of aggressions and of reluctance to create the conditions for an authentic dialogue[26]—the Zapatistas have never entered into the game of provocation, and this, perhaps, has been their main strength.

## Conclusions

The Zapatista movement has been able to move forward through different national and international contexts, managing to respond to the changing situations of our time while keeping alive the aspiration to create a better world. In doing so, it has accepted the defeat of the original revolutionary model in favor of an organized movement of civil resistance, built around the demands of the indigenous communities and molded by their language and their cultural identity. Still, this movement has been able to communicate a message of rebellion and hope well beyond the mountains of Chiapas, and to become a source of inspiration for a different model of struggle: a non-revolutionary and anticapitalist struggle aiming at the construction of an authentic democracy. This ability to understand, interpret, and ultimately challenge the logic of domination of neoliberal rationality, constitutes perhaps one of the clearest examples of praxis of liberation. It shows the possibility of a social movement that originates from below, from the real problems of the indigenous people, and which intrinsically aims to transform the whole system.

In this manifestation of consciousness, the indigenous people of Chiapas have become the subject of their own history, giving a new meaning to the values of their culture. This struggle, then, indicates the possibility of a transformation that goes beyond the limits of place and moment. It is a path towards a different awareness of democracy, freedom, and justice, which offers new hope to those who fight for a different world. For there is no transformation, as Dussel reminds us, without the drive and enthusiasm, the wait and the hope, and even the mystique that inspires the attempt to build a new society.

Diego Malquori  
The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art  
41 Cooper Square,  
New York, NY 10003  
diego.malquori@cooper.edu

## Notes

[1] Audio message from Subcomandante Marcos on occasion of the inauguration of the *Juntas de Buen Gobierno* (good-government councils), held in Oventic, Chiapas, on August 9, 2003. This audio excerpt is included in *Zapata en las montañas de Chiapas* (2004), a documentary film by Cecilia Ricciarelli and Diego Malquori. Many of the primary sources of this article derive from the interviews conducted for this documentary film. Both the film and the audio recording of the interviews (in Tzotzil, Spanish, and French) are available from the author upon request.

[2] A valuable testimony of the silent march of December 2012, which includes a reflection on the transformation of Zapatismo after a period of apparent retreat, can be found in François Houtart, “Los zapatistas siguen existiendo,” *Rebelión*, April 20, 2013 (<http://www.rebelion.org/noticia.php?id=166989>). Regarding the controversy about the lack of dialogue with the new government of Andrés Manuel López Obrador, it is important to observe that the Zapatista position has remained coherent with its original principles, also considering the betrayal of the constitutional reform of 2001, which basically ignored the claims for the rights of the indigenous culture (cf. <http://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/2018/07/17/the-zapatista-army-of-national-liberation-denies-having-any-sort-of-contact-with-amlo-communicate-from-the-ccri-cg-of-ezln/>).

[3] Throughout my research, I spent above two months in the indigenous communities of Sakamch'en de los Pobres, San Pedro Polhó, Francisco Gómez, Ricardo Flores Magón, Unión Progreso, and Acteal. Among other collaborators, I was accompanied by Rogelio Rueda, a Mexican anthropologist who had spent a long period working in some of those communities. I wish to acknowledge his contribution to my approach and understanding of the Zapatista movement.

[4] Miguel Álvarez is the president and cofounder of Serapaz (Services and Consultancy for Peace). For his work as a mediator in various conflicts, in 2017 he obtained Mexico's National Prize for Human Rights.

[5] Alain Touraine was the founder of the Center for Analysis and Sociological Intervention at the School of Higher Studies in Social Sciences, Paris. He has dedicated many years of his life to the study of social movements in Latin America. Yvon Le Bot is the author of *Le rêve zapatiste* (1997), the result of a long interview with Subcomandante Marcos.

[6] Alain Touraine, interview with the author, recorded at the School of Higher Studies in Social Sciences, Paris, in January 2004. (Audio recording available from the author upon request.)

[7] Ibid.

[8] Miguel Álvarez, interview with the author, recorded at the main office of Serapaz, Mexico City, in May 2004. (Audio recording available from the author upon request.)

[9] Interview recorded at the Zapatista community San Pedro Polhó in August 2004, included in *Zapata en las montañas de Chiapas*, cit.



[10] Ibid.

[11] Cf. “Mensaje a la Coordinadora Nacional de Acción Cívica,” *La Jornada*, February 22, 1994, 8.

[12] Samuel Ruiz, interview with the author, recorded at the Fray Bartolomé de las Casas Center for Human Rights, San Cristóbal de las Casas, in July 2004. (Audio recording available from the author upon request.)

[13] Communication of the *Junta de Buen Gobierno* of the Zapatista autonomous region “Resistance and Rebellion for Humanity,” in the municipality of San Andrés Larrainzar, Chiapas, recorded in August 2004; included in *Zapata en las montañas de Chiapas*, cit.

[14] Cf. Le Bot 1997. Regarding this theme I had an interesting conversation with Yvon Le Bot at the School of Higher Studies in Social Sciences, in Paris, in January 2004. I wish to acknowledge his contribution to my understanding of the Zapatista movement.

[15] Alain Touraine, cit.

[16] Subcomandante Marcos was the military leader and spokesman of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation since its foundation in 1983. His identity was later revealed as Rafael Sebastián Guillén Vicente. He had a degree in philosophy and had been professor at the Autonomous Metropolitan University (UAM) until the early eighties. Although in 2014 he adopted the name of his dead comrade Galeano, in this paper I refer to him as Marcos, to maintain the way he is referred to by various authors.

[17] Miguel Álvarez, cit.

[18] Interview recorded at the Zapatista community Francisco Gómez in April 2004, included in *Zapata en las montañas de Chiapas*, cit.

[19] For a critical discussion on this issue and a possible response from the perspective of the philosophies of liberation, see Cincunegui 2019, particularly chapter 4.

[20] Alain Touraine, cit.

[21] Cf. <https://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/2001/03/28/discurso-de-la-comandanta-esther-en-la-tribuna-del-congreso-de-la-union/>

[22] A clear example of this interpretative framework is the work of Francis Fukuyama, who saw in the fall of the Soviet bloc the sign of the “end of history” and the consequent universalization of the Western liberal democracies.

[23] *La Realidad* (reality) was the headquarters of the EZLN. Later it became the center of the autonomous region “Mother of the Sea Snails of our Dreams.”

[24] Alain Touraine, cit.

[25] For an analysis of how the indigenous communities in various parts of Latin America anticipated the struggle against neoliberal globalization, see, for example, Hernandez Castillo 2016, particularly chapter 2.

[26] According to the Fray Bartolomé de las Casas Center for Human Rights, the aggressions against indigenous peoples in Chiapas have intensified since December 2018 (cf. <https://sipaz.wordpress.com/2019/05/30/chiapas-frayba-denuncia-intensificacion-de-agresiones-contra-pueblos-indigenas-desde-diciembre-de-2018/>). Regarding the difficulty of dialogue with the different Mexican governments, see note two.

## Works Cited

Benjamin, Thomas. *A Rich Land, A Poor People: Politics and Society in Modern Chiapas*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989.

González Casanova, Pablo. *De la sociología del poder a la sociología de la explotación: Pensar América Latina en el siglo XXI*. Edited by Marcos Roitman Rosenmann. Bogotá: Siglo del Hombre Editores, 2009.

Cincunegui, Juan Manuel. *Miseria planificada: Derechos humanos y neoliberalismo*. Madrid: Editorial Dado, 2019.

Dussel, Enrique. *Beyond Philosophy: Ethics, History, Marxism, and Liberation Theology*. Edited by Eduardo Mendieta. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Ethics of Liberation in the Age of Globalization and Exclusion*. Translated by Eduardo Mendieta, et al. Translation edited by Alejandro Vallega. Durham: Duke University Press, 2013.

Hernández Castillo, R. Aída. *Multiple Injustices: Indigenous Women, Law, and Political Struggle in Latin America*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2016.

Lea, YiShan. "Winds of Consciousness: An Analysis of Revolutionary Narratives and Praxis." *Theory in Action* 7, no. 2 (2014): 16-41.

Le Bot, Yvon. *Le rêve zapatiste*. Paris: Seuil, 1997.

Pappas, Gregory Fernando. "The Limitations and Dangers of Decolonial Philosophies." *Radical Philosophy Review* 20, no. 2 (2017): 265-95.

Ruiz, Samuel. *Cómo me convirtieron los indígenas*. Santander: Sal Terrae, 2003.

Scannone, Juan Carlos. "La Teología de la Liberación." *Revista Medellín* 9, no. 34 (1983): 259-88.

Villoro, Luis. *La alternativa: Perspectivas y posibilidades de cambio*. Ciudad de México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2015.

*Zapata en las montañas de Chiapas* (documentary film). Written and directed by Cecilia Ricciarelli and Diego Malquori. Les Films de l'Escargot, 2004. Presented at the 26 Festival del Nuevo Cine Latinoamericano, La Habana, Cuba.