

# Readers respond (II)

## Marcos: The Zapatistas' Unknown Icon

Naomi Klein

2002

"We do not want others, more or less of the right, center or left, to decide for us. We want to participate directly in the decisions which concern us, to control those who govern us, without regard to their political affiliation, and oblige them to "rule by obeying." We do not struggle to take power, we struggle for democracy, liberty, and justice. Our political proposal is the most radical in Mexico (perhaps in the world, but it is still too soon to say). It is so radical that all the traditional political spectrum (right, center left and those of one or the other extreme) criticize us and walk away from our delirium.

"It is not our arms which make us radical; it is the new political practice which we propose and in which we are immersed with thousands of men and women in Mexico and the world: the construction of a political practice which does not seek the taking of power but the organization of society. Intellectuals and political leadership, of all sizes, of the ultra-right, of the right, the center, of the left and the ultra-left, national and international criticize our proposal. We are so radical that we do not fit in the parameters of "modern political science." We are not bragging...we are pointing out the facts. Is there anything more radical than to propose to change the world? You know this because you share this dream with us, and because, though the truth be repeated, we dream it together."

—Subcomandante Marcos, 1995

Subcomandante Marcos, masked man, is the faceless face of Mexico's Zapatista National Liberation Army. In 1994, the summer after the Zapatista rebellion, caravans to Chiapas, in Mexico, were all the rage in North American left-wing activist circles: friends got together, raised money for second-hand vans, filled them up with supplies, then drove south to San Cristobal de la Casas and left the vans behind. Back then, Zapatista-mania looked suspiciously like just another cause for guilt-ridden "Lefties" with a Latin American fetish: just another "Marxist" rebel army with another macho leader—another chance to go South and buy some cheap colorful textiles.

Hadn't we heard this story before; hadn't it ended badly?

A few days ago, there was another caravan in Chiapas; but this one was different. For one thing, it didn't end in San Cristobal de las Casas—it started there and has since crisscrossed the Mexican countryside before the planned grand entrance into Mexico City on March 11. This caravan is led by the council of 24 Zapatista commanders wearing full uniforms and black facemasks (but no weapons), including Subcomandante Marcos himself. Because it is unheard of for the Zapatista command to travel outside Chiapas—there are vigilantes threatening deadly duels with Marcos all along the way—the "Zapatour," as the Mexican press calls it, needs tight security. Since the Red Cross refused to do the job, protection is provided by several hundred anarchists from Italy, who call themselves "Ya Basta!" ("Enough is enough!") after the defiant phrase used in the Zapatistas' declaration of war. Hundreds of students, small farmers, and activists have joined this "roadshow": thousands greet them on the way. Unlike the previous visitors to Chiapas, these travelers say they are there, not because they are "in solidarity" with the Zapatistas, but because they are Zapatistas. Some even claim to be Subcomandante Marcos himself, saying, "we are all Marcos."

These are people who have learned to steer clear of charismatic leaders with one-size-fits-all ideologies. They aren't party loyalists; they are members of groups who pride themselves on their complete autonomy and absence of hierarchy. Marcos is an anti-leader just right for this highly critical and suspicious band of rebels. Not only does he refuse to show his face, undercutting—and simultaneously enhancing—his own celebrity, but his story is that of someone who came to prominence, not through any swaggering, self-importance, or certainty, but by coming to terms with political uncertainty, by learning to listen and follow.

Although there is no confirmation of Marcos' real identity, the most common legend surrounding him says that beginning as an urban, "Marxist" intellectual and activist, he was wanted by the state and was no longer safe in the cities. He then fled to the mountains of Chiapas in southeast Mexico—filled with revolutionary rhetoric and certainty—to convert the impoverished indigenous masses to the cause of armed proletarian revolution against the Mexican bourgeoisie. He told the Mayan Indians that the world's workers must unite—but they just stared. They said they weren't workers and besides, land wasn't property but the heart of their community.

Having failed as a "Marxist missionary" (he was never a real Marxist at all, needless to say), Marcos immersed himself in Mayan culture. But the more he learned, the less he knew. Out of this process, a new, unique sort of army emerged: the EZLN, the Zapatista National Liberation Army, which wasn't controlled by an elite of guerrilla commanders but by the communities themselves, through both clandestine councils and open committees. Marcos wasn't a commander barking orders but a conduit for the will of the councils. Today, he says that a Zapatista is "anyone anywhere who is fighting injustice," that "we are you." He once stated:

"Marcos is a gay in San Francisco, a black in South Africa, an Asian in Europe, a Chicano in San Ysidro, an anarchist in Spain, a Palestinian in Israel, a Mayan Indian in the streets of San Cristobal, a Jew in Germany, a gypsy in Poland, a Mohawk in Quebec, a pacifist in Bosnia, a single woman on the Metro at 10 PM, a peasant without land, a gang member in the slums, an unemployed worker, an unhappy student..."

Juana Ponce de Leon, the collector and editor of Marcos' writings in *Our Word is Our Weapon* (published by Serpent's Tail in hardcover), wrote that "This non-self makes it possible for Marcos to become the spokesperson for indigenous communities. He is transparent, and he is iconographic."

Yet, the paradox of Marcos and the Zapatistas is that despite their masks, mystery, and anonymity, their whole struggle is about the opposite of anonymity—the right to be seen and heard. In a statement, the EZLN declared: "Below in the cities, we did not exist. Our lives were worth less than those of machines or animals. We were like stones, like weeds in the road. We were silenced. We were faceless."

The Zapatistas are "the voice that arms itself to be heard; the face that hides itself to be seen." In *Our Word is Our Weapon*, we read manifestos and war cries that are also poems and legends. A character emerges from the black mask: a real person.

It is rumored that when in a few days' time the 24-strong Zapatista command arrive in Mexico City, they intend to ride downtown on horseback; there will be a massive rally and concerts, and they will ask to address the Congress. There, they will demand the legislators pass an Indigenous Bill of Rights.

What is clear now is that there has been a radical change in the balance of power in Mexico. The Zapatistas are calling the shots now (although they have lost the habit of firing shots). What began as a small, armed insurrection has, in the last seven years, grown into a more peaceful mass movement. It helped to topple the 71-year reign of the so-called Institutional Revolutionary Party, and has placed indigenous rights at the center of Mexico's political agenda.

Marcos gets angry when anyone regards him as just another guy with a gun. He asks, "What other guerrilla force has convened a national democratic movement, civic and peaceful, so that armed struggle becomes useless? What other guerrilla force asks its base of support what it should do before doing it? What other guerrilla force has struggled to achieve a democratic space and not take power? What other guerrilla force has relied more on words than on bullets?"

When the rebels called themselves Zapatistas, they took the name from Emiliano Zapata, the slain hero of the 1910 Mexican Revolution, who, with a rag-tag peasant army, fought for land held by large capitalist landowners to be returned to indigenous and peasant farmers. Today, the Zapatistas are more than only a rebellion against grinding poverty and humiliation; they have become theorists of a new movement—another way of thinking about power,

resistance, and globalization. This theory, called “Zapatismo,” turns not only classic guerrilla tactics inside out, but a lot of Left-wing ideology on its head (an achievement long overdue!).

Marcos spreads the Zapatista word through riddles: revolutionaries who do not want power; people who must hide their faces to be seen; a world with many worlds within it. In places like Canada and the United States, indigenous uprising has always been symbolized by the blockade—a physical barrier to stop a golf course from being built on a native burial ground, or to block construction of a hydroelectric dam, or to keep an old growth forest from being logged. This Zapatista uprising, in contrast, is a new way to protect land and culture: rather than locking out the world, the Zapatistas have flung open the doors and invited the world inside. Despite its poverty and despite being under continual military siege, Chiapas has been transformed into a global gathering place for radical activists, intellectuals and indigenous groups.

Marcos is a one-man web: a compulsive communicator, constantly reaching out, drawing connections between many different issues and struggles. He writes to political prisoners such as Mumia Abu Jamal and Leonard Peltier. He addresses letters to “The People of the World.”

When the uprising began, the Mexican government tried to play down the incident as a “local problem”—an ethnic dispute easily contained. But the Zapatistas’ strategic victory changed the terms, insisting that what was going on in Chiapas couldn’t be written off as merely a narrow “ethnic” struggle and that it was in reality universal. They did so by clearly naming their enemy not only as the Mexican State but as the set of economic policies known as neoliberalism. Marcos insisted that the poverty and desperation in Chiapas was actually a more advanced example of something happening all over the planet. He referred to the enormous numbers of people who were left behind by prosperity, whose land and labor made that prosperity possible. “The new distribution of the world excludes ‘minorities,’” says Marcos: “the indigenous, youth, women, homosexuals, lesbians, people of colour, immigrants, workers, peasants: the majority who make up the world basements are presented...as disposable. The distribution of the world excludes majorities...”

According to conservative estimates, there are now about 45,000 Zapatista-related web sites on the Internet, based in 26 countries. Marcos’ communiqués are available in at least 14 different languages. Many who attended the first encuentros (“big meetings”) went on to play key roles in the mass protests against the World Trade Organization in Seattle and against the IMF and World Bank in Washington DC. They came up with a taste for collective decision-making and decentralized organization. When the insurrection began, the Mexican military were convinced they would be able to squash the Zapatistas’ jungle uprising “like a bug.” They sent in heavy artillery, carried out air raids, and mobilized thousands of troops. Instead of standing on a squashed bug, the state found itself surrounded by a great swarm of international activists, buzzing around Chiapas.

In a study commissioned by the US military from the Rand Corporation, the EZLN was seen as “a new mode of conflict—‘netwar’—in which the protagonists depend on using network forms of organization, doctrine, strategy, and technology.” This is “dangerous,” according to Rand, because what begins as a “war of the flea” quickly becomes “a war of the swarm.”

Quite so, quite so! Viva Zapata!—Brighton, Sussex, England, March 2001

**FE note:** Write us at PO Box 6, Liberty, TN 37095 or 4632 Second Ave., Detroit, MI 48201 or [fifthstatenewspaper@yahoo.com](mailto:fifthstatenewspaper@yahoo.com)

## Correction

The original print version of this article was erroneously attributed to David E. Findlay. It should have been credited to Naomi Klein, author, theoretician and anti-globalization activist. Through an editing error we failed to do this.

The article, “Rebellion in Chiapas,” originally appeared in the UK newspaper, *The Guardian*, March 3, 2001. It now is available in a collection of Klein’s essays, *Fences and Windows*, available from Picador publications.

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Fifth Estate #357, Summer 2002

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