

Subcomandante Marcos

A leading person in Zapatista Movements in Mexico

Biography:

Not much is known about the private life of Subcomandante Marcos. As the leading spokesperson and one of the leaders of the indigenous armed revolutionary group, Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN), he conceals his identity behind a balaclava for obvious security, as well as socio-political reasons. Although, conflicting sources have at times identified him as a disenchanted government official, a college or university professor, or a Jesuit priest (1), a general consensus in the literature points to the possibility that he is formally educated (with a Masters in Philosophy) and that he has worked as a professor at the Autonomous University of Mexico. In an interview with Gabriel García Márquez, Marcos acknowledges his urban, middle-class, and literary upbringing.

He reveals that both of his parents were teachers who taught him to become “conscious of language—not as a way of communicating, but of constructing something” (2). Indeed, most of his readers, along with Márquez, recognize that Marcos writes in a style that reveals an erudite familiarity with many literary genres.

In 1995 the Mexican government attempted to reveal Subcomandante Marcos’ identity by identifying him as Rafael Sebastián Guillén Vicente, a Mexican national from Tampico, Tamaulipas. Marcos and the EZLN denied this. In response Zapatista sympathisers across Mexico claimed “Todos Somos Marcos” (We Are All Marcos) (3). Such protests attest to the metapersona status that Marcos represents.

Subcomandante Marcos acknowledges that he is not indigenous, even though he is the highest military authority of an indigenous revolutionary group. Nevertheless, those in his ranks regard him as “‘a man of struggle, even if he is mestizo’ [read: of ‘mixed’ European and Indigenous heritage] (4). ” In short, Marcos’ biography, interesting as it may be, is irrelevant to the struggle at hand. As Marcos himself remarks: “At stake is what Subcomandante Marcos is, not who he was” (5).

History and Important Events:1968-1993

Numerous sources speculate that Subcomandante Marcos, like many in his generation, become radicalized by the events of 1968. It is also believed that he left his post at the university and joined the urban, Maoist, guerrilla group, National Liberation Front (FLN), although the exact date is not known. After the FLN was discovered and defeated, Subcomandante Marcos arrived in the jungles of Chiapas, in November 1983, to attempt to build a socialist movement along the familiar lines of Guevara-inspired guerrilla war.

He himself acknowledges that when the group of six would-be guerrillas first arrived they possessed a vertical conception of struggle, expressed in the belief: "What is necessary is a group of strong men and women, with ideological and physical strength, with the resistance to carry out this task" (6).

However, Marcos and his companions soon learned that importing a preconceived schema of revolution was neither feasible nor desirable. As the young EZLN carried out its work among the indigenous communities, a 'double-learning process' took shape. For the indigenous people, this involved learning from the EZLN things like military defence, Mexican history, mathematics, and reading and writing. While for the EZLN, lessons such as how to conserve one's food, wield a machete, and the world-view of the indigenous people were imparted. Eventually a relationship out of necessity began to form, with the result of "a confrontation between... modes of decision-making [which took place] until people from the communities began to join the EZLN and the indigenous form of decision-making began to take precedence" (7). As thousands joined, the line between the communities and the guerrillas became blurred.

This confrontation led Marcos and his companions to shed their former Maoist conception of an armed vanguard party, and to subordinate themselves to indigenous communal structures. As a result of adopting the democratic practices of the community, Marcos no longer spoke of the EZLN as "a guerrilla group, but an army, an army with territory, with troops, with a general strategic plan" (8), formulated by communities themselves. As one scholar on the subject notes: "The process of regionalizing the military structure clearly demonstrated the character of the EZLN as a federation of political/armed communes". Adopting, or rather evolving into a federate framework led Marcos to break with his earlier theoretical schemas and to emerge, after the 1994 uprising, as a spokesperson/theorist of what has become known as 'the first postmodern revolution.'

1994 - present

The EZLN gained the world's attention by occupying San Cristobal de las Casas, Las Margaritas, Altamirano and Ocosingo (10) on January 1st 1994. The date deliberately coincided with the inauguration of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in Mexico. The EZLN declared war on what it perceived as an unjust and illegitimate government, and made demands for the inclusion of indigenous people in decision-making processes and an end to the poverty that plagued (and plagues) the communities. In total, eleven demands were listed in the 1st Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle (11). A wave of military repression ensued as the armed forces attempted to recapture the towns and encircle the EZLN.

The 'military phase' lasted until the Mexican government declared a cease-fire on January 12, 1994. After this stage, the movement entered into a second phase, which has been regarded by some as 'language warfare'. It began with government proposals for peace, which after thorough deliberations the EZLN rejected on the grounds that "the central questions of democracy, freedom, and justice had not been resolved" (12), and

that the government continued to violate the cease fire, and lie about the process of the dialogue. In response, Subcomandante Marcos composed, and continues to compose, a fury of letters directed at the media, where he urges “civil society to take on once again the central role” (13).

Conventions were organized in the following years with the aims of drawing the world’s attention to the struggle in Chiapas and broadening the concept of participatory democracy. Thousands attended from abroad, and Marcos succeeded in establishing himself as a charismatic opponent (despite or perhaps because of the balaclava) of the anti-globalization movement. He was also accredited with having shifted revolutionary practice to a new theoretical level. As historian Antonio García de León notes, “Marcos and the Zapatistas have transformed political discourse into a mode of poetical discourse and have initiated a radically innovative use of language and information in the political struggle” (14). Words, as Marcos often remind us, are the arsenal in the conflict for justice, liberty, and democracy.

Major Concepts:

Command-Obeying - Although, command-obeying is nothing short of the designation of the democratic forms that have survived for centuries in the indigenous communities of Chiapas, Subcomandante Marcos can be accredited with bringing it to our attention. Command-obeying can be thought of not only as a way of community decision-making but also as a way to allow communities to maintain control over their appointed leaders.

The practice assures that community leaders must be able to listen to the communities (15), specifically because it rejects the impersonal politics of majority rule, so often associated with democratic practice in liberal-capitalist regimes. In the place of majority rule, command-obeying advocates consensus. Marcos notes:

“In any moment, if you hold a position in the community (first, the community has to have appointed you independent of your political affiliation), the community can remove you. There isn’t a fixed term that you have to complete. The moment that the community begins to see that you are failing in your duties, that you are having problems, they sit you down in front of the community and they begin to tell you what you have done wrong. You defend yourself and finally the community, the collective, the majority decides what they are going to do with you. Eventually, you will have to leave your position and another will take up your responsibilities”(16).

The nature of such debates allows us to conceptualize command-obeying as a germ of participatory democracy: its mechanisms place power directly into the hands of communities to the extent that the ‘organization’ that acts on behalf of the communities cannot decide which path it will take without consultation. Thus, in practice, the EZLN accepts or rejects the government’s proposals only after every child, woman, and man in the communities, has had the opportunity to speak and be heard.

Subversive Affinity - While Subcomandante Marcos often, to the dismay of the traditional Left, presents himself as a nationalist (17), his nationalism is best understood as an attempt to construct a 'subversive affinity,' (a term prescribed by Massimo De Angelis). Subversive affinity cannot be "defined by national borders or racial characteristics" (18) . To be certain, Marcos certainly claims that the EZLN "are patriots and our insurgent soldiers love and respect our tricolored flag" (19); however, Marcos also transgresses the limits of national boundaries when he suggests that the demands of the EZLN can be the demands of exploited people worldwide. The object of striving for universal values, such as justice, democracy, and liberty, is presented at conferences and in Marcos' communiqués as always a potentially international aspiration. The idea of 'nation' is thereby reformulated by subversive affinity as "the idea of struggling wherever one happens to live" (20).

Perhaps, nowhere does Marcos articulate subversive affinity better than when he proclaims:

"Marcos is gay in San Francisco, a black in South Africa, Asian in Europe, a Chicano in San Isidro, an anarchist in Spain, a Palestinian in Israel, an indigenous person in the streets of San Cristóbal, a gang member in Neza, a rocker on campus, a Jew in Germany, ombudsman in the sedana, feminist in political parties, Communist in the post-Cold War era, prisoner in Cinalapa, pacifist in Bosnia... Marcos is every undulated, oppressed, exploited minority that is resisting and saying 'Enough!' (21)"His border-transcending proclamation situates the Zapatistas' patriotism as an element in a multiplicity of struggles. By donning the balaclava and evoking the name of Zapata, Marcos constructs a metapersona that not only awakens the collective memory of insurrection, resulting in a "dramatic move in a general pan-Maya cultural affirmation movement (22)", but also, through its anonymity, opens the possibility for others to join in the struggle. Through subversive affinity, Mexican history is brought to life at the same time as its national particularism is overridden.

Language Warfare - Much like subversive affinity, language warfare is not something that Subcomandante Marcos coined, but something he does. Language Warfare emerged out of the shift from the first, 'military' phase of the Zapatista uprising to the second, 'dialogue' phase. It is characterized by the use of computer networks, conventions inviting participants from civil society, extensive letter and communiqué writing, interviews, and other means that suggest that words and not guns are the principle weapons in the struggle.

Language warfare also characterizes the attempt of the EZLN to break out of the isolation which the government attempts to impose upon Chiapan communities, in order to extend the struggle for justice, liberty, and democracy beyond Chiapas. It is thus an attempt to open up a new frontier where dialogue is allowed to take place. As Marcos explains, "We are saying, Let's destroy this State, this State system. Let's open up this space and confront the people with ideas, not with weapons" (23).

(Neo)Zapatismo - Zapatismo designates the Zapatistas' refusal to fit into former revolutionary schemas. As such, it represents a break with not only traditional Left theory (for example, theory of permanent revolution) but also with all theoretical frameworks that have hitherto attempted to account for revolutionary activity (for example, resource mobilization theory).

For many, Zapatismo represents a new way of doing politics. Ideologically, for example, it is impossible to situate Zapatismo, as Holloway and Peláez suggest, into any of the classical "pre-set moulds of Trotskyist, social democratic or anarchist thought. (24)" However, it is just as impossible to deny the anarchist character of command-obeying or the feminist orientation of the 'laws of women,' drafted by the Zapatista communities. Marcos acknowledges the origins of Zapatismo in the original confrontation between the Marxist guerrillas and the indigenous communities. As he puts it, "We arrived here and we were confronted by this reality, the indigenous reality... Ultimately the theoretical confronted the practical, and something happened - the result was the EZLN.

Therefore our combatants are right when they say, We are not Marxist- Leninists, we are Zapatistas. (25)" Zapatismo can, therefore, be thought of as a different type of revolutionary project; in place of revolutionary vanguards and historical necessity it offers command-obeying and subversive affinity.

According to Marcos, Zapatismo is not about the seizing of positions of power, but about the opening of spaces where dialogue can take place. As such, the capturing of the state with the aim of executing a program has no place in the vision of Zapatismo. On the contrary, inherent in the recognition of the need for dialogue is the recognition of the plural nature of Mexican society. As such, Marcos is careful to point out that the Zapatista revolution, despite of its clear indigenous content, is not an indigenous revolution: it is the attempt to create a space where different political forces have the opportunity to debate all proposals. "If there is a neoliberal proposal for the country," contends Marcos, "we shouldn't try to eliminate it but to confront it" (26). As such, Zapatismo may signal a departure from other political theories, but it does not exclude the need to seriously consider the political aspirations of neoliberal, anarchist, or Marxist perspectives.

Crucial to the survival of Zapatismo is its ability to withstand categorization. As has already been noted, Zapatismo utilizes language warfare in order to highlighting the demands of indigenous communities. Claims to 'dignity' and 'justice' are central to the nature of the Zapatista struggle. Dignity and justice, however, are empty signifiers: they have no content, but serve as the basis for claiming the right to have rights. The same can be said of Zapatismo. For Zapatismo to declare itself Marxist, with an already defined proposal of 'what is good for the country,' would not only be inaccurate but would also rob it of its attempt to function as "a first step, an antechamber that you enter before you enter this new country". As Marcos argues, an attempt to create a universal doctrine by Zapatismo would imply that Zapatismo would have to start defining itself, and "As it

tries to define itself, Zapatismo takes the risk of becoming just another organization” (28).

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Notes:

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2 G. G. Márquez & R. Pombo, “The Punch Card and the Hourglass.” *New Left Review*.

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3 C. Gray, “Book Review.” *Multinational Monitor*. Available at:

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4 M. Millan, “Zapatista Indigenous Women,” in J. Holloway & E. Peláez (Eds.), *Zapatista! Reinventing Revolution in Mexico*, (Sterling: Pluto Press, 1998), 73.

5 Márquez & Pombo, “The Punch Card and the Hourglass.”

6 P. S. Devereaux et al., “Interview with Subcomandante Marcos.” Available at:

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7 P. S. Devereaux et al., “Interview with Subcomandante Marcos.”

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9 L. Lorenzano, “Zapatismo: Recomposition of Labour, Radical Democracy and Revolutionary Project,” in J. Holloway & E. Peláez (Eds.), *Zapatista! Reinventing Revolution in Mexico*, (Sterling: Pluto Press, 1998), 143.

10 For a timeline of the events following January 1, 1994, consult H. Cleaver, “Zapatista Timeline.” *The War of Ink and Internet*. Available at: http://www.cs.utk.edu/~mituria/project/zapatista_timeline.html

11 Subcomandante Marcos, *Shadows of Tender Fury*, (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1995), 51.

12 Ibid., 234.

13 Ibid., 232.

14 J. Duchesne-Winter, “Marcos and the Zapatistas: Notes on anachronism and innovation in Latin American revolutionary culture.” Available at:

<http://www.prtc.net/~saturno/marcos.html>

15 “In adjusting to this culture, Marcos discovered the need to listen. He commented that the Latin American Left knew how to talk, but not always how to listen.

Learning the indigenous languages and understanding their own interpretations of their history and culture led to an appreciation of the political importance of patience.

Learning how to wait was, for Marcos, the most difficult exercise, but one that was now imposed by the indigenous leaders and their method of organization.” N. Harvey, *The Chiapas Rebellion: The Struggle for Land and Democracy*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 166.

16 P. S. Devereaux et al., “Interview with Subcomandante Marcos.”

17 “Patriotic nationalism constitutes the second pillar of the EZLN’s ideological edifice, alongside that of communitarian democracy.... How can people naively throw themselves into supporting a movement that acts as a vehicle for identity-based and patritic values, which are at the core of the most barbaric deviations in the world today?”

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23 P. S. Devereaux et al., “Interview with Subcomandante Marcos.”

24 J. Holloway & E. Peláez, “Preface,” in J. Holloway and E. Peláez (Eds.), *Zapatista! Reinventing Revolution in Mexico*, (Sterling: Pluto Press, 1998), viii.

25 P. S. Devereaux et al., “Interview with Subcomandante Marcos.”

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28 J. Womack, *Rebellion in Chiapas*, (New York: The New Press, 1999), 326.