

Chiapas, and the Meaning of Commitment

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Since coming to the United States in 1996 to continue my graduate studies at the University of Denver, I have followed with interest and restlessness the development of a complex and well-known conflict in the southern Mexican state of Chiapas. Currently, a number of Mexican and foreign analysts share a controversial opinion: that the Zapatista movement is dead. The media has played a key role in the formulation of such a conclusion, despite efforts from certain sectors of Mexican society to promote the opposite idea: that, more than ever, the movement is alive.

It is clear that Ernesto Zedillo's current administration has been working to ignore, as far as possible, not only the Zapatista Council, but also those who continue to support the movement. The current administration has tried to eliminate, by every means, the possibility of maintaining fair negotiations with the Zapatista Army; government officials want peace -- no doubt about it -- but peace based on their own conditions.

The result of all these official and mass-media manipulations is a dangerous, as well as complicated, "state of ignorance" in Mexican society that may evolve into a more dangerous, as well as more complicated, "state of disintegration" in the whole country. In other words, the conflict in Chiapas is far more complicated than the official interpretation or the "analytical" or "intellectual" understanding of some "experts" leads one to believe.

I admit that when the rebellion began in January 1994, I had my own doubts about the authenticity and honesty of the movement. For a time I had the impression that the leaders of the Zapatista movement "cashed their checks" in the Ministry of the Interior (*Gobernación*), or in the offices of some Jesuit catholic churches in Mexico City, promoters of the Theology of Liberation. As gloomy as sudden, Marcos' "unmasking" during the painful economic crisis of 1995, raised in me more doubts about the movement, now based on my own understanding of the problem.

At that time, I was working in Mexico for the Office of Social Communication at the Ministry of Finance and Public Credit (*Hacienda*) as deputy director of the Foreign Press Office. Due to my position, I had access to articles and reports on the movement published abroad (mainly in Europe) that made me want to know more about the problem. The articles and opinions that I used to read in order to satisfy my premature intellectuality, mainly those articles published locally at *La Jornada*, *El Reforma*, or *Nexos*, did not help me understand the conflict. Lacking true knowledge of the topic, I accepted an invitation from a France Press journalist who planned to attend the National Zapatista Convention that year and happened to have an extra media pass. I attended the convention and my impression of the movement changed dramatically.

While enjoying the privileges of my middle-class position: living in Mexico City; eating three times a day; growing among my friends at school and in *Lindavista*; being a member of a strong and close family with acceptable economic possibilities; I am a member of that Mexico which ignores the terrible lacks and the dying abandonment with which millions of families live in that other Mexico: the Mexico of *Los Altos de Chiapas* or *La Sierra Tarahumara*.

Our urban and upper-middle-class Mexico (a Mexico of private education, relatives with scholarships abroad, and successful businesses), ignores - and sometimes doesn't even want to know about - the existence, so distant as well as abundant, of the terrible vicious circles of misery throughout the country. The extreme poverty in Chiapas may only be similar to the misery of those millions of poor children that we can see walking with abandonment in the streets of large Mexican cities. The economic lacks in the *Sierra Lacandona* are nasty, solitary, anonymous, and insulting.

It is not enough to imagine it, and believe me - it is not enough to worry about it. It is necessary

to do something. Our generation has an ethical and moral commitment to those men and women, members as well of this generation, who are also human beings and who also have the right to enjoy essential things like access to a formal education, health services, job opportunities, and better conditions of life. It is not enough to save our hides and try to play the game of those who want to be treated in health. It can also be treated in health the one who, moved by the extreme poverty of one homeless child in Mexico City, takes out of his or her pocket a couple of coins so the child (it is assumed) can get something to eat. Charity helps, but it does not solve the problem. As anthropologists or political analysts, we may collaborate in the understanding of the problem, but if we do not transform that understanding into action, it will be as irrelevant as the proselytizing speech of any politician.

In order to act, we not only need will and organization; we need COMMITMENT. Commitment to Mexico and her people, to our history and our future, commitment to our identity and our families, commitment to the neighbor, the friend, the house, our schools, our country, and their institutions. Commitment to change together, each one of us contributing our "grains of sand," everything that stinks in Mexico. Commitment to a respect for Mexico and a love of her people. It is not enough to worry about the country's condition. It is not enough to say that we – as Mexicans – love Mexico because we have hung on the wall of the apartment we rent in some city of the United States a poster of some famous Mexican painter or a list of all the food we are going to eat as soon as we go back home. If we love Mexico, we have to demonstrate it. If we love Mexico, we have to commit to the cause of improving the country's current situation.

During the past three years I have had the opportunity to meet with many Mexicans who live on this side of the border. They tell me with sadness, but also with a certain selfishness, that it is no longer possible to live in Mexico, with so many robberies, assaults, and violence, with so much pollution, corruption, and problems of every type. My answer is always the same: what are we going to do to change that? Are we going to stay in the US? What are we going to do from here?

Are we going to return back home? What are we going to do back there?

It is clear, for example, that the Mexican people have lost confidence in their government, its institutions, and the country's political and judicial systems. However, I think it is a matter of honor to recover our dignity as citizens of Mexico. We have to fight against our own resignation and indifference. We have to believe in ourselves even if we are unable to share some basic economic or political thoughts. We have to deal with our differences and learn how to solve our problems.

Despite my interest in the movement, there are many things that I still don't understand about the origin and legitimacy of the Zapatista Army, and a lot of other things that I don't understand about such traditionally picturesque figures as *Subcomandante* Marcos, or the extraordinarily intelligent Jesuit, Samuel Ruiz. In my opinion, there are still too many things obscured behind the movement: strange events that my analytical and intellectual capabilities have not yet been able to completely clarify.

A simple vision of the problem will probably tell us that this conflict is nothing more than a pantomime written by the old wing of the official party (PRI) to recover power. When I feel depressed, I like to believe the Zapatistas are only the product of the short imagination of the left wing party (PRD), promoting a leftist *guerilla* movement as a means of political pressure. When I wake up in an optimistic mood, I believe that a couple of intelligent and revolutionary Jesuits were so deeply moved by the poverty and backwardness of the Indians in Chiapas that they committed themselves to demand, by any means, essential rights and better conditions of life for those people. Then my cynicism makes me dream that *Subcomandante* Marcos is having an electronic meeting with former president Carlos Salinas via the Internet, to decide from Dublin the strategy to follow in San Cristóbal. When I have useless ideas, I start to sin in thought, word, fact, and omission, and my weak flesh is seduced by the lustful force of a demon that reveals to me the dirtiness of the church-state relationship. But I am free of sin when I, Catholic by tradition, enter into the process of confessionist activism.

But no matter what the origin of the conflict is, no matter if it is a movement supported by the western powers to separate Chiapas and take possession of its uranium, no matter if it is the result of serious conflicts for the religious control in the area, or the logical consequence of more than 500 years of indigenous oppression, there is just one thing, one single thing, that the Zapatista movement has revealed by itself and transferred to the center of our political life: the terrible social injustice that exists in our country. The gap between social classes in Mexico is something many refuse to see, to accept, to believe, or even to consider. Be that as it may, the Zapatista Army would not have any relevance in my country at all if all Mexicans ate enough and lived worthily. No one would care about Marcos if 45 million human beings were not living down there in a fatal situation of extreme poverty. If everyone enjoyed justice and other essential rights in Mexico, the movement not only would be dead by now, it would never have been born. I certainly do not know who is behind all this, but whoever this person is, he or she has opened a Pandora's box that is no longer easy to close.

We must be careful; we should not try to cover the sun with one finger; we should not try to ignore the movement or worse, to give it up for dead. It is necessary to know how to listen to the voices of our time. Today, Mexican time demands changes, actions, commitment. In this new Mexican time (paraphrasing the title of one of the books of the Mexican writer, Carlos Fuentes) we can listen to the voices and screams of millions of Mexicans that continuously tell us, "It is enough." Enough of cynics, corrupt thieves, and jokers. Enough of nation betrayers, traitors, and neo-liberal pirates. Enough of a passive society, cowardly and conformist. Enough of our selfishness: "if I am doing fine, the world can collapse." Enough, it is enough!

It is time for us, the Mexicans who have had or are having the privilege of getting a college education in the United States, to assume the moral commitment, and the ethical and professional obligation, and do something to change things in Mexico. It is our historical duty to take "the bull by the horns" and commit ourselves to pull our country out of this deep pothole into which it has sunk. It is not enough for us to leave the problem behind. It is not enough for us to turn our backs on Mexico and abandon the ship now that it is sinking.

With a lot of work and some love to the cause, we can still save the ship. We all want to live well; to achieve such a goal is very thankful. However, it is a lot more thankful when we can use our abilities and knowledge so that other people can also live well. The opportunity to study abroad is something that many Mexicans of Chiapas cannot even imagine. They are worried by the kinds of things they will have to do if they want to eat this afternoon.

We have to do something. Mexico really needs us. We should not be the accomplices of corruption in a corrupt and corruptive system. Let us not forget our ideals and commitments when we start winning "first world salaries," whenever we work for the Mexican government, open our own business, or work for a transnational company on any side of the border. Let us be appropriate and faithful to ourselves. Let's respect and love Mexico. Let's dignify our lives like human beings and our social and political condition like citizens of one of the greatest and most wonderful countries in the world: Mexico.

Note

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